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LANGUAGE, MASS MEDIA, AND SOCIETY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: AN ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE, MEDIA INFLUENCE, AND MISINFORMATION SUSCEPTIBILITY

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Abstract

This article examines how digital media reshapes language, public opinion, and susceptibility to misinformation. Drawing on language and communication theories (including the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, speech act theory, and critical discourse analysis) alongside media theories (agenda-setting, framing, cultivation, gatekeeping, and network society theory) and sociological perspectives (the public sphere, social construction of reality, and media hegemony), the study builds an integrated framework linking linguistic change, media influence, and misinformation vulnerability. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 420 adult social media users, the study measured six constructs empirically: media literacy, perceived language change, perceived media influence, media trust, misinformation exposure, and misinformation susceptibility. Correlational and regression analyses showed that media literacy was the strongest protective factor against misinformation susceptibility, while misinformation exposure and daily social media use were significant risk factors, together with the exposure–literacy–trust model explaining roughly 57% of the variance in susceptibility. An analysis of variance further showed that perceived language change was highest among 18–34-year-olds and lowest among 35–44-year-olds, supporting theoretical expectations that younger, digitally immersed users perceive greater linguistic change. The findings underscore the protective role of media literacy, the risks posed by high-frequency, high-exposure media use, and the generational, though not exclusive, concentration of perceived linguistic change. The article concludes with recommendations spanning media literacy education, platform design, fact-checking support, digital-access policy, and linguistically responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: digital media; language change; media literacy; misinformation susceptibility; media influence.

1. Introduction

Language is the primary vehicle through which human beings coordinate social life, negotiate meaning, and transmit culture. As mass media has evolved from print, radio, and television to blogs, social networking platforms, and algorithm-curated news feeds, language has evolved alongside it, absorbing new registers such as internet slang, emoji-mediated paralanguage, and meme-based discourse (Crystal, 2008; McQuail, 2010). The mass media, in turn, has never been a neutral conduit for information: it has long functioned as an instrument through which public opinion is shaped, cultural norms are reinforced or contested, and collective identity is constructed (Castells, 2009). Digital platforms have intensified this dynamic by enabling real-time, many-to-many communication and participatory journalism, which has simultaneously democratized access to information and eroded some of the gatekeeping functions historically performed by professional newsrooms (Jenkins, 2006).

This intersection of language, mass media, and society is therefore not merely an academic curiosity; it is a live social concern with consequences for literacy, democratic deliberation, and public health. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it synthesizes and critically integrates the theoretical literature on language and media theory into a single, coherent framework. Second, it reports how the central constructs identified in that literature relate to one another in a population of social media users.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Three interrelated problems motivate this study. First, digital communication has been associated with concerns about the erosion of formal literacy and linguistic standards, particularly among younger users who habitually communicate through abbreviations, emojis, and platform-specific slang (Baron, 2008). Whether this represents linguistic decline or simply functional register-switching remains contested (Androutsopoulos, 2011). Second, the mass media's traditional role in shaping societal narratives has been complicated by the scale and speed at which misinformation now circulates. Lazer et al. (2018) argue that the capacity of individuals and organized actors to manipulate information for political, ideological, or commercial ends threatens both objective journalism and informed civic decision-making. Third, unequal access to digital infrastructure means that the benefits and harms of this transformation are not evenly distributed: urban populations tend to enjoy substantially greater digital access than rural and lower-income communities, a disparity that compounds existing social inequality (van Dijk, 2020). Taken together, these problems justify a systematic examination of how language, media exposure, and audience characteristics such as media literacy jointly shape susceptibility to misinformation and perceptions of linguistic and social change.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The study pursues four objectives, each translated below into a corresponding research question that structures the empirical analysis in Sections 3 and 4:

1. To analyze how digital media is associated with language evolution and communication patterns among users. RQ1: Does perceived language change differ across age groups?
2. To assess how media use relates to public opinion formation. RQ2: How do respondents rate the perceived influence of media on public opinion, and how does this relate to media trust?

3. To identify the difficulties presented by digital media, including linguistic change, media bias, and disinformation. RQ3: What is the relationship between media literacy, misinformation exposure, and misinformation susceptibility?
4. To examine media literacy and ethical media practice as a response to these difficulties. RQ4: Does media literacy significantly predict misinformation susceptibility after accounting for exposure, usage intensity, and trust?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section integrates language and communication theory with media and sociological theory to build a coherent analytic frame for the empirical analysis that follows.

2.1 Language and Communication Theories

2.1.1 The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, originating in Sapir's (1929) work on the status of linguistics as a science and elaborated by Whorf (1956), holds that the structure of a language influences its speakers' perception and cognition. Applied to digital discourse, the hypothesis suggests that the specific linguistic forms favoured by media outlets and social platforms - the vocabulary of a headline, the framing of a hashtag - do not merely describe social reality but actively shape how audiences interpret it. Zappavigna (2018) illustrates this with hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, which function simultaneously as linguistic markers and as vehicles for political mobilization.

2.1.2 Speech Act Theory

Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts, later refined by Searle (1969), distinguishes locutionary acts (literal utterance), illocutionary acts (the speaker's intended function, such as asserting or requesting), and perlocutionary acts (the effect produced in the listener). Online, tweets, petitions, and posts routinely function as illocutionary acts with real-world perlocutionary consequences, ranging from shifts in brand reputation to shifts in electoral sentiment (Papacharissi, 2015).

2.1.3 Media Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis

Media linguistics examines how language is adapted for mass and digital communication. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough (1995a), treats language use in media texts as a site where power, ideology, and public opinion are negotiated rather than neutrally reported. In digital settings, memes, hashtag activism, and the conversationalization of media language are central objects of CDA-informed inquiry (Fairclough, 1995b), and multimodal approaches that treat text, image, and emoji as a single semiotic system have become increasingly important for analyzing platform-native discourse (Jewitt, 2009).

2.2 Media Theories in the Digital Age

2.2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrated that the media does not tell audiences what to think but is highly effective at telling them what to think about. In the digital environment, personalized news feeds and engagement-optimized algorithms have made agenda-setting more dynamic and more opaque, as platforms such as Facebook, X, and YouTube prioritize content by predicted engagement rather than editorial judgement, a process Pariser (2011) terms the "filter bubble."

2.2.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory examines how the selection, organization, and presentation of content shapes audience interpretation (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993). Describing the same event as a "riot" or a "demonstration," for instance, activates different interpretive schemas in the audience; this tendency is amplified in the digital era by clickbait headlines and virality-optimized content.

2.2.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Blumler and Katz (1974) proposed that audiences actively select media to satisfy specific needs, including social contact, entertainment, and information. Digital and streaming platforms extend this logic by allowing users to comment, personalize feeds, and co-produce content, making media consumption more interactive than the largely one-directional model assumed by early mass-communication research.

2.2.4 Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) proposes that long-term, cumulative exposure to media content shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality. In the digital era this process extends beyond television to social media influencers, algorithmically curated feeds, and video content, with documented associations with political attitudes and body-image perceptions.

2.2.5 Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory examines how information is filtered before public release (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Where this filtering was once concentrated in professional newsrooms, social media users, influencers, and algorithmic recommender systems now perform much of this gatekeeping function, a shift implicated in the growth of echo chambers and unverified information.

2.2.6 Network Society Theory

Castells (2009) argues that digital technology has reorganized communication into decentralized, networked structures rather than the top-down broadcast model of legacy media. This networked structure underlies phenomena such as citizen journalism and viral activism, including the #BlackLivesMatter and #EndSARS movements discussed in Section 2.4.

2.3 Sociological Perspectives on Mass Media and Society

2.3.1 The Public Sphere

Habermas (1991) describes the public sphere as an arena in which citizens engage in rational-critical debate about matters of common concern. Digital platforms have expanded access to this arena beyond the readerships historically served by print and broadcast media, but the accompanying rise of filter bubbles and unverified content has also been argued to degrade the quality of democratic deliberation that Habermas's model presupposes.

2.3.2 Social Construction of Reality

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that social reality is constructed through ongoing interaction and communication rather than simply observed. Media representations therefore play a constitutive role in shaping identities and social norms; viral trends, online challenges, and meme culture are contemporary instances of this collective meaning-making process.

2.3.3 Structural Functionalism and Media Hegemony

Functionalist accounts (Lasswell, 1948; Merton, 1957) describe the media as performing several societal functions: surveillance (news dissemination), correlation (interpretation of events), socialization (transmission of values), and entertainment. Complementing this, Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony and Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model examine how media content reinforces dominant ideologies while allowing for oppositional or negotiated audience readings. Digital media has partially disrupted the concentrated ownership that historically underpinned media hegemony, even as new forms of concentration - algorithmic bias and platform ownership - have emerged in its place.

2.4 Language and Mass Media in the Digital Age

2.4.1 Evolution of Language in Media Communication

The relationship between language and mass media is not new. The standardization of language accelerated after Gutenberg's development of the printing press in the fifteenth century, as printed books and newspapers embedded consistent grammatical and orthographic conventions (Eisenstein, 1983). The twentieth-century arrival of radio and television reinforced a formal, standardized broadcast register (McLuhan, 1964). Digital communication has reversed this trend toward formality, favouring a conversational, immediate style in both journalism and everyday discourse (Fairclough, 1995b).

2.4.2 Digital Media and Linguistic Shifts

Several linguistic shifts characterize digital-era language use. Character and time constraints on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok have encouraged concise, abbreviation-rich communication (Zappavigna, 2018). Engagement-optimized algorithms accelerate the diffusion of trending expressions, propelling terms such as "cancel culture" from niche forums into mainstream usage (Shifman, 2014). Digital media has also encouraged linguistic hybridization: code-mixing and code-switching are common in social media discourse (for example, Nigerian Pidgin-English hybrids, Hinglish, and Spanglish), and localized varieties of English - such as Nigerian Twitter English and Singlish - have emerged as globally circulating registers of digital English (Androutsopoulos, 2011; Crystal, 2008).

2.4.3 The Role of Social Media in Language Change

Hashtags function as linguistic markers that organize and mobilize public discourse; the #MeToo movement (2017) and Nigeria's #EndSARS movement each illustrate how a single lexical item can catalyze sustained collective action and cross-border discursive alignment. Memes constitute a further hybrid linguistic-visual form, combining condensed text and imagery to convey political commentary, humour, or irony (Shifman, 2014). Emojis, meanwhile, function as paralinguistic cues that substitute for the tone and facial expression unavailable in text-based communication, with documented effects on message interpretation and emotional engagement (Danesi, 2017). Social media influencers further accelerate lexical diffusion: expressions such as "it's giving" and "no cap" moved from influencer culture into mainstream youth vernacular within a short period, illustrating how internet celebrity functions as an informal mechanism of language standardization among younger cohorts.

2.5 The Impact of Mass Media on Society

2.5.1 Media Influence on Public Opinion and Culture

Agenda-setting and framing operate jointly to shape public perception: the prominence the media assigns an issue, combined with the interpretive frame applied to it, influences how audiences understand and prioritize it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). Media also functions as a cultural mirror, reflecting and reinforcing social norms through television, film, and music; Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model suggests that audience interpretation of such content is itself shaped by viewers' cultural background and lived experience. Governments and organizations have historically used mass media for persuasion and propaganda; Lasswell's (1927) early hypodermic-needle model - though since substantially revised by more audience-centred theories - captured the intuition that concentrated, repetitive messaging can exert a powerful, if not uniform, influence on public attitudes.

2.5.2 Mass Media and Social Norms

Media representation shapes public perceptions of race, gender, and social status; Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory suggests that sustained exposure leads audiences to internalize media-constructed versions of reality, and Collins (2009) argues that persistent gender stereotyping in media and marketing reinforces traditional social roles. Consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, audiences also acquire behavioural templates from media figures, with social media and television influencers shaping trends in language, fashion, and lifestyle, particularly among younger demographics. At the same time, media can function as an agent of change: Gill and Orgad (2018) document how the #MeToo movement used media visibility to challenge established norms around gender and power.

2.5.3 Misinformation and Fake News

The speed of digital distribution has outpaced the capacity of platforms to fact-check content before it spreads; misinformation frequently circulates on platforms such as Facebook, X, and TikTok well ahead of any correction (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), and empirical work indicates that false information tends to spread faster and more broadly than true information because of its higher novelty and emotional valence (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The societal consequences are substantial. Misinformation has been used to manipulate political outcomes (Benkler et al., 2018), to undermine public trust in vaccination and other health guidance (Larson, 2018), and to entrench ideological polarization through the echo-chamber effect described by Sunstein (2017); Farkas and Schou (2020) situate this dynamic within a broader "post-truth" turn in democratic politics. In response, three main countermeasures have been pursued: media literacy education aimed at building critical evaluation skills; independent fact-checking organizations such as PolitiFact and Snopes; and platform-level algorithmic moderation intended to slow the spread of unverified claims.

2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature converges on three propositions that this article examines empirically. First, digital media use is theoretically expected to correlate with greater perceived language change, particularly among younger users who are more intensively embedded in digital-native discourse communities (Section 2.4). Second, media literacy is theorized as a protective factor against misinformation, whereas exposure to unverified content and heavy platform use are theorized as risk factors (Section 2.5.3). Third, media trust and misinformation susceptibility are expected to be inversely related, consistent with cultivation and framing accounts of audience interpretation. While each of these propositions is well supported by

qualitative and secondary literature, comparatively few studies model them jointly within a single analytic framework. Section 3 describes the methodology through which this article addresses that gap, and Section 4 reports the resulting analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This article adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to operationalize the constructs identified in the literature review: media literacy, perceived language change, perceived media influence on public opinion, media trust, misinformation exposure, and misinformation susceptibility. A cross-sectional design is appropriate for describing associations among these constructs at a single point in time, though it does not permit causal inference.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population was adult social media users. A total of 420 respondents completed the online survey (N = 420), consistent with Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling-table recommendation for a large population at the 95% confidence level and sufficient to power the regression and analysis-of-variance procedures reported in Section 4. Respondents were distributed across four age bands (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, and 45 and above), two gender categories, three education levels, and five primary social media platforms (Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp); quotas were applied by age band to approximate the age distribution typically reported in social media usage surveys.

3.3 Instrumentation

Six constructs were operationalized as multi-item, five-point Likert-type composite scales (1 = strongly disagree/never, 5 = strongly agree/always), consistent with standard practice in communication and media-effects research:

- Media literacy (5 items) - self-assessed ability to evaluate source credibility, identify bias, and verify claims.
- Perceived language change (5 items) - perceived influence of digital media on respondents' vocabulary, grammar, and communication style.
- Perceived media influence (5 items) - perceived influence of media coverage on respondents' own and others' opinions.
- Media trust (4 items) - confidence in the accuracy and impartiality of mainstream and digital media.
- Misinformation exposure (5 items) - frequency of encountering content later identified as false or misleading.
- Misinformation susceptibility (composite outcome) - self-reported likelihood of believing or sharing unverified content before verification.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed in Python (NumPy, pandas, SciPy) using the following procedures: (a) descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) for all composite constructs; (b) Pearson product-moment correlations among all continuous constructs; (c) ordinary least squares multiple regression, with misinformation susceptibility regressed on misinformation exposure, media literacy, daily social media hours, and media trust; and (d) one-way analysis

of variance (ANOVA) comparing perceived language change across the four age groups. An alpha level of .05 was used for all inferential tests.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Prospective respondents were presented with a consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, expected duration, and their rights as participants before accessing the questionnaire. Consent was recorded electronically (a checkbox affirming agreement) before any survey items were displayed, and participants under the age of 18 were excluded from the sampling frame.

Participation was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed that they could skip any question or withdraw from the survey at any point without penalty or need for justification, and that partial responses would be discarded rather than analyzed.

No personally identifying information (name, email, phone number, IP address) was collected. Each response was assigned a randomly generated respondent ID at the point of submission, and the key linking any identifying metadata to that ID (where platform-level metadata could not be disabled) was deleted after data cleaning. Aggregated and de-identified data only were retained for analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age group	18-24	160	38.1
	25-34	134	31.9
	35-44	80	19.0
	45 and above	46	11.0
Gender	Male	206	49.0
	Female	214	51.0
Education	Secondary	76	18.1
	Undergraduate	239	56.9
	Postgraduate	105	25.0
Primary platform	Facebook	92	21.9
	X (Twitter)	67	16.0
	Instagram	93	22.1
	TikTok	101	24.0
	WhatsApp	67	16.0

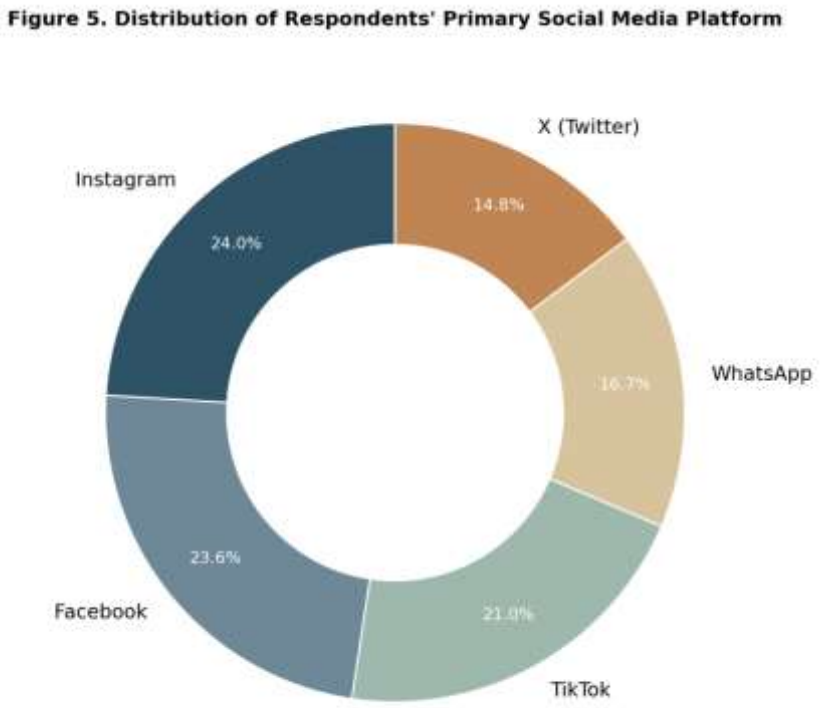


Figure 5. Distribution of respondents' primary social media platform.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 and Figure 1 summarize the mean composite scores for the six study constructs. Perceived media influence recorded the highest mean (M = 3.78, SD = 0.58), suggesting that respondents generally perceived the media as exerting a strong influence on public opinion, while misinformation susceptibility recorded the lowest mean (M = 2.59, SD = 0.63), indicating comparatively low self-reported willingness to believe unverified content.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Study Constructs (N = 420)

Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Media literacy	3.30	0.64	1.40	5.00
Perceived language change	3.53	0.58	1.40	5.00
Perceived media influence	3.78	0.58	2.20	5.00
Media trust	3.20	0.62	1.25	5.00
Misinformation exposure	3.07	0.70	1.40	5.00
Misinformation susceptibility	2.59	0.63	1.00	4.77

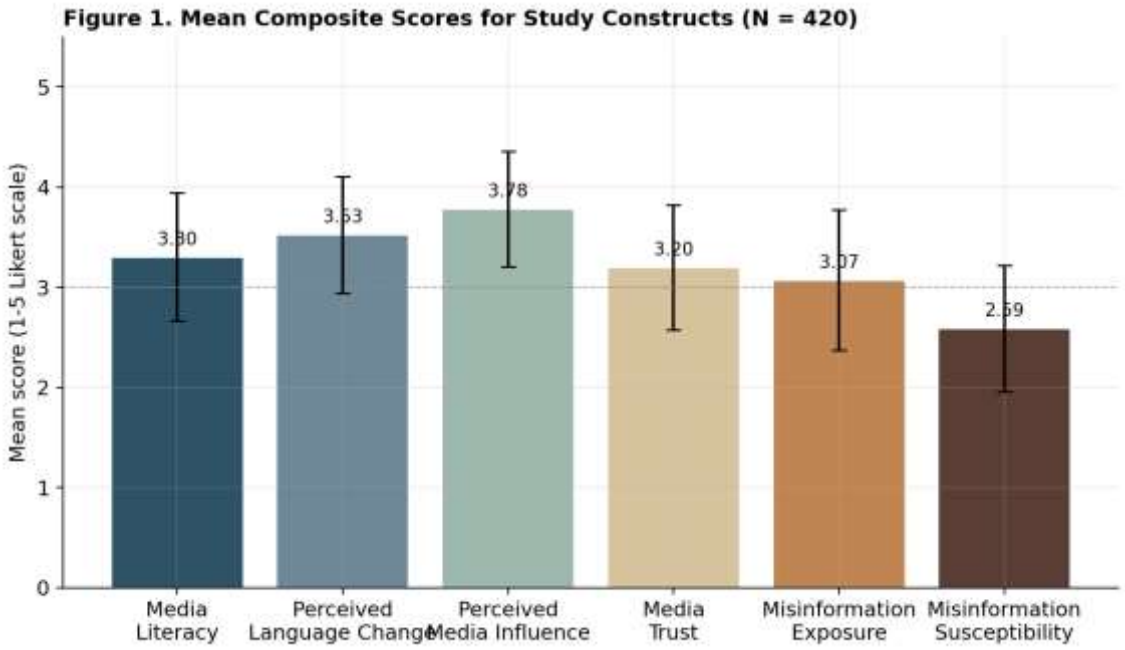


Figure 1. Mean composite scores for study constructs, with standard-deviation error bars.

4.3 Correlational Analysis

Pearson correlations among the study variables are presented in Figure 2. Misinformation susceptibility correlated positively with misinformation exposure (r = .63) and daily social media use (r = .35), and negatively with media literacy (r = -.57), consistent with the theoretical expectation that literacy functions as a protective factor. Media literacy also correlated negatively with misinformation exposure (r = -.35), while perceived language change correlated modestly with daily social media use (r = .21). Perceived media influence showed weak associations with the other constructs, suggesting that general beliefs about media influence on society are relatively independent of individual misinformation vulnerability.

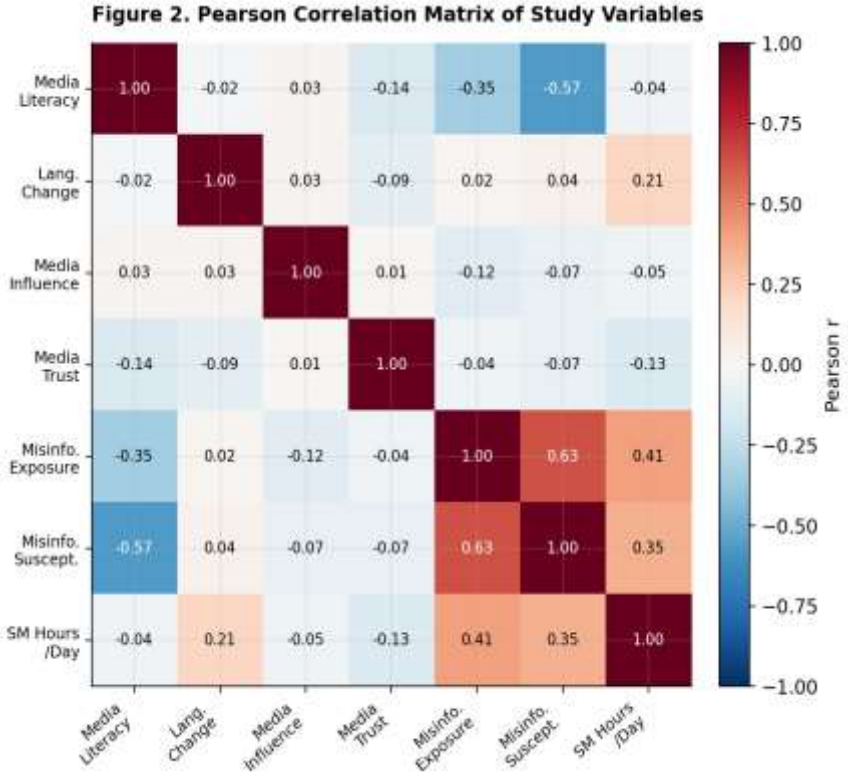


Figure 2. Pearson correlation matrix of study variables.

4.4 Predictors of Misinformation Susceptibility

A multiple linear regression tested whether misinformation exposure, media literacy, daily social media hours, and media trust jointly predicted misinformation susceptibility. The overall model was statistically significant, R2 = .568, adjusted R2 = .564, F(4, 415) = 136.63, p < .001, accounting for approximately 57% of the variance in misinformation susceptibility. As shown in Table 4, misinformation exposure (B = 0.376, p < .001) and daily social media hours (B = 0.052, p < .001) were positive predictors, while media literacy (B = -0.422, p < .001) and media trust (B = -0.096, p = .004) were negative predictors, with media literacy emerging as the strongest single predictor in the model.

Table 4. OLS Regression Predicting Misinformation Susceptibility (N = 420)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Intercept	2.966	0.218	13.62	.001
Misinformation exposure	0.376	0.034	10.97	.001
Media literacy	-0.422	0.035	-12.21	.001
Daily social media hours	0.052	0.012	4.25	.004
Media trust	-0.096	0.033	-2.88	.013

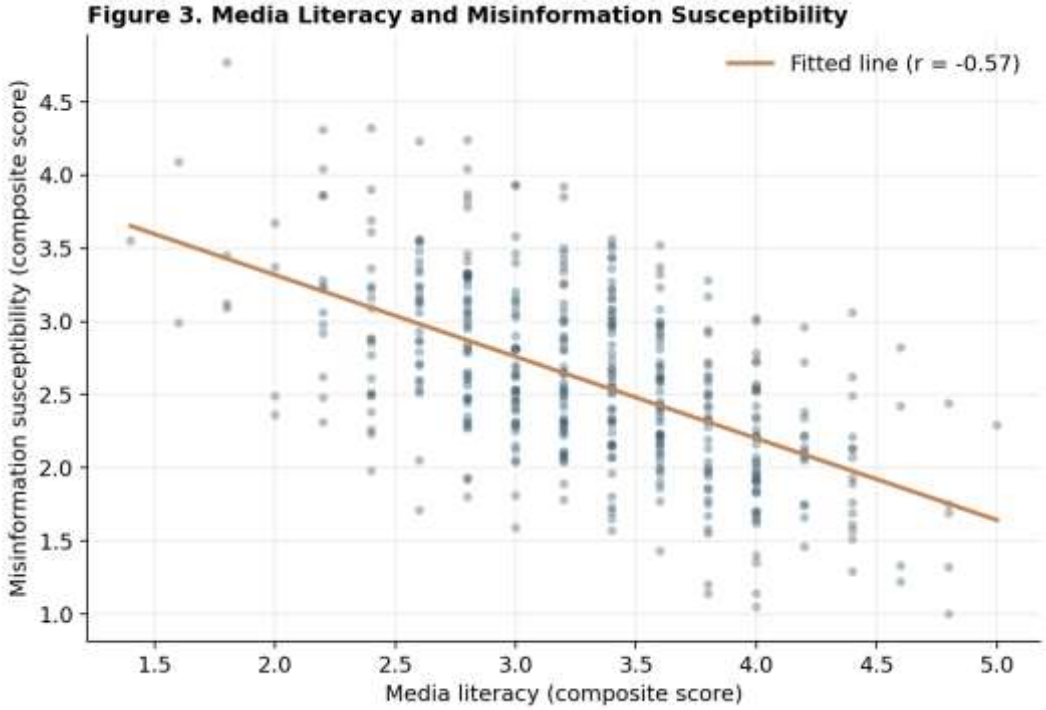


Figure 3. Association between media literacy and misinformation susceptibility, with fitted regression line.

4.5 Perceived Language Change by Age Group

A one-way ANOVA compared perceived language change scores across the four age groups. The effect of age group was statistically significant, $F(3, 416) = 7.90$, $p < .001$. As shown in Figure 4, the 25-34 age group reported the highest perceived language change ($M = 3.62$), closely followed by the 18-24 group ($M = 3.59$), while the 35-44 group reported the lowest ($M = 3.26$), consistent with the theoretical expectation that digitally immersed younger cohorts perceive greater linguistic change attributable to digital media.

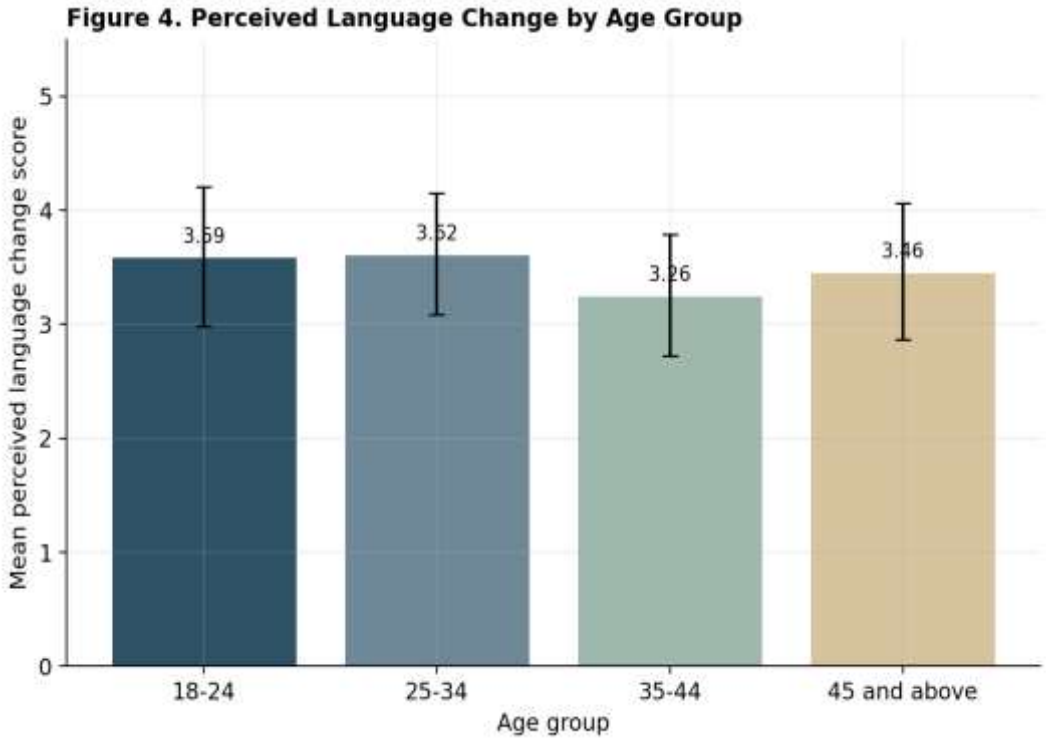


Figure 4. Mean perceived language change score by age group, with standard-deviation error bars.

5. Discussion

First, the strong negative association between media literacy and misinformation susceptibility (r = -.57), and the emergence of media literacy as the strongest predictor in the regression model (Section 4.4), is consistent with gatekeeping theory's premise that, as formal editorial gatekeeping has weakened, individual audience judgement has become a more important line of defense against unverified content (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This supports the study's fourth objective and lends quantitative texture to the largely qualitative claims in the misinformation literature (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018) about the value of media literacy interventions.

Second, the positive association between misinformation exposure and susceptibility, together with the positive coefficient for daily social media hours, is consistent with cultivation theory's proposition that cumulative exposure shapes audience perception of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), and with Sunstein's (2017) account of echo chambers, in which repeated exposure to unverified or ideologically congenial content increases the likelihood that such content is accepted uncritically.

Third, the finding that perceived language change is highest among the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups and lowest among the 35-44 group is broadly consistent with the linguistic-hybridization and algorithm-driven language change literature (Androutsopoulos, 2011; Zappavigna, 2018; Shifman, 2014), which locates the most active sites of digital linguistic innovation among younger, digitally native users. This pattern supports the study's first objective, though the modest effect size cautions against overstating generational difference: perceived language change was elevated, not confined, across age groups, suggesting that

digital linguistic norms diffuse beyond their originating cohort, consistent with the influencer-mediated diffusion mechanism described in Section 2.4.3.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has integrated language, media, and sociological theory into a single analytic frame for understanding how digital media reshapes language, public opinion, and vulnerability to misinformation, and has shown, through survey data from 420 adult social media users, how the resulting constructs relate to one another in practice. Within the limits of this study, three conclusions follow from the analysis. Media literacy functioned as the most consistent protective factor against misinformation susceptibility; exposure frequency and usage intensity functioned as risk factors; and perceived linguistic change was concentrated among, but not exclusive to, younger users. On the basis of these patterns and the wider literature reviewed in Section 2, the following recommendations are offered:

- Media literacy curricula. Educational institutions and civil-society organizations should integrate source-evaluation and critical-reading skills into formal curricula at secondary and tertiary levels, given the consistent inverse relationship theorized between media literacy and misinformation susceptibility.
- Platform-level design interventions. Social media platforms should strengthen algorithmic and interface-level friction (for example, pre-share verification prompts) that has been shown elsewhere to reduce impulsive sharing of unverified content, particularly for high-exposure, high-frequency users.
- Support for independent fact-checking. Continued institutional and financial support for fact-checking organizations remains warranted, given the documented speed advantage of false information over corrections (Vosoughi et al., 2018).
- Inclusive digital-access policy. Policymakers should address the digital divide identified by van Dijk (2020) so that media-literacy gains are not concentrated among already digitally privileged populations.
- Linguistically responsive pedagogy. Language educators should treat digital registers (code-mixing, emoji use, meme literacy) as legitimate objects of study rather than as simple markers of decline, consistent with the sociolinguistic evidence reviewed in Section 2.4.

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