

“Spill the Tea” as a Metaphor for Privacy Conflict and Truth Construction on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to reveal the clash between the public and private spheres in using the slang ‘spill the tea’ on Twitter. The theory used in this research is the theory of metaphor by Roman Jakobson. This research is qualitative in its nature in which the data are used in a various context if issue. The findings in this research show that the use of the slang 'spill the tea' establishes a conflict between the perceived privacy of specifically social media interactions on twitter and the reality of public exposure. This research reveals that the structure of Twitter can make untrue information true without making private information appear in public, or anonymous, spaces. In addition, the findings also emphasize how the metaphorical nature of gossip, embedded in slang, reflects larger social dynamics regarding truth in the context of gossip. The findings of this research indicate that the slang “spill the tea” serves as a metaphorical lens through which the tension between perceived privacy and actual public exposure on Twitter is revealed. This highlights how digital platforms transform social interactions by allowing users to engage in gossip under the illusion of anonymity, while the platform’s viral nature can rapidly shift private information into the public domain. Ultimately, the study concludes that language, particularly metaphor embedded in slang, plays a critical role in shaping narratives and social dynamics around truth and privacy in online spaces.

Article history:

Received 7 December 2024

Accepted 25 April 2025

Keyword:

Gen Z, Public Sphere, Private Sphere, Spill the Tea, Twitter.

INTRODUCTION

There is a term for the young age group born after 1996 called Generation Z (Gen Z). Parker (2020) states that this generation is the digital native generation. They were born in an era with a solid economic situation and many developments in sophisticated technological tools so that users and youth in Generation Z today easily use social media to spread messages, information, or other cultures, causing the rapid development of slang (Rezeki & Sagala, 2019). One phenomenon that occurs is the globalization and technological developments given to this generation. This generation uses a lot of technology in the field of information and communication such as Twitter / X, Instagram, Facebook, Discord, and other social media platforms that are often used to communicate (Afifi et al., 2018; Muslem et al., 2022; Muthalib et al., 2021).

Twitter is a popular social media site where users can share updates, news, links to other websites, pictures, videos, and information (Khalis & Rifhan, 2019). On Twitter, users are allowed to post a textual digital message limited to 280 characters per post, named a ‘tweet’. In 2019, Twitter has 336 million monthly active users with 500 million tweets posted every single day. This shows a huge number of interaction that happens on Twitter. An issue arises

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with the negativity that comes with the phrase 'spill the tea' (Khalis & Rifhan, 2019). Statistics show that one in five users have lost contact with somebody because of something that they said online (Maros & Rosli, 2017).

While previous studies have extensively explored privacy concerns (Visentin et al., 2021), cultural variations in privacy behavior (Liang et al., 2016), emotional dynamics on Twitter (Duncombe, 2019), metaphor use in argumentative discourse (Van Poppel & Pilgram, 2024), and the spread of true and false news (Vosoughi et al., 2018), none have specifically examined the intersection of metaphorical language, particularly slang like "spill the tea", and the tension between public and private spheres on Twitter. Prior research on privacy mainly focuses on user behaviors, cultural influences, or the psychological mechanisms behind privacy concerns and conspiracy theories, without delving into how language itself, especially metaphor embedded in slang, shapes perceptions of privacy and public exposure. Moreover, Van Poppel and Pilgram (2024) studies on metaphor exploitation and political discourse on Twitter have analyzed metaphor use in argumentative or emotional contexts but have not addressed how metaphors in gossip-related slang influence social dynamics and the transformation of private information into public knowledge. This gap highlights the need for qualitative research that investigates how metaphorical slang functions as a social tool reflecting broader conflicts between anonymity, privacy, and virality on digital platforms.

Researchers used Twitter as the most popular means of using 'spill the tea' because Twitter is one of the platforms that popularized this slang. The fast and concise character of Twitter is in accordance with the characteristics of Gen Z as Twitter users, which tend to be practical and instant. They do not like to linger over a long process of examining a problem (Bakti & Safitri, 2017). This also applies to the use of Twitter. The fast and concise character of Twitter matches the practical and instant character of Gen Z, so Gen Z uses Twitter to get information briefly but also in detail.

However, the use of the slang 'spill the tea' becomes a problem, as it often inappropriately blends the public and private spheres. This research contributes novel insights by applying Roman Jakobson's theory of metaphor to analyze the slang "spill the tea" as a linguistic and social phenomenon that encapsulates the clash between perceived privacy and actual public exposure on Twitter. The term, which originally referred to sharing gossip in a private environment or informal conversation, is now often used in the public space of Twitter. This is incongruous, as what should be a private or intimate conversation is instead open to mass consumption, which risks blurring the lines between private and public spaces. This metaphorical lens provides a fresh perspective on understanding the transformative impact of digital platforms on language use, privacy perceptions, and the social construction of truth in online gossip, thereby filling a critical gap in social media and linguistic research. Therefore, the researchers reveal the clash between the public and private spheres in using the slang 'spill the tea' on Twitter using Roman Jakobson's metaphor.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how the slang phrase “spill the tea” is used on Twitter, focusing on its metaphorical meaning related to gossip and privacy. The research is based on Roman Jakobson’s theory of metaphor, which explains how one idea is understood through its connection to another, allowing deeper meanings in language to emerge.

Data for this study were collected by finding tweets that include “spill the tea” in conversations about gossip or sharing information. These tweets were saved as screenshots to keep the original context. The data, there are 5 sources of data, were then organized and analyzed to see how the slang is used differently depending on the situation and how privacy is perceived in these online interactions. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in how the metaphor is used to frame gossip and reveal social meanings.

There are some limitations to this research. Because it only looks at one slang term on Twitter, the results may not apply to other social media or language use. The study only includes public tweets, so private or deleted posts are not considered. Also, the interpretation of metaphors is subjective and may be influenced by the researcher’s perspective. Despite these limits, the study offers important insights into how language shapes privacy and gossip on digital platforms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The slang “spill the tea” is often associated with high-class culture as it comes from the tradition of tea gathering, which has historically had high-class associations. Tea drinking was at first especially associated with socializing amongst elite women at the royal court. It retained a symbolic connection with refinement and elite women even after its consumption became common (Ellis, 2019).

Markman Ellis in his writing in the book ‘British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century’ in fourth chapter wrote:

“Of the structural social transformations that point to the emergence of the public sphere cited by Habermas, the most appropriate comparison for the tea-table may be with the salon in France. Habermas sees the salon as a social enclave of the town, in which the nobility, the bourgeois and the intellectuals could meet ‘on an equal footing’ for conversation and discussion. In the dominant account of the salon, these assemblies took place in the private home of an elite woman, to which invited guests, both men, and women, would gather in a spirit of equality for polite conversation addressed to political and philosophical topics, as well as the ebb and flow of social gossip and scandal.”

In contrast, the word ‘tea’ is now used on Twitter regardless of class or social status. Its use has become more widespread, as Twitter is a public sphere, but its use is still related to gossiping. Unlike the discreet, upper-class tradition, Twitter’s use of the phrase is fast-paced, informal, and direct, fitting into the platform’s emphasis on quick, digestible content. The social media platform allows users to share information, rumors, and gossip in real-time, making the act of “spilling the tea” far more immediate and accessible to the masses.

‘Spill the tea’ in the context of Twitter often operates within contextual boundaries due to the platform’s unique features. Twitter culture is shaped by the widespread use of anonymous accounts, where many users do not reveal their true identity. This anonymity

allows individuals to share gossip or comments freely without personal accountability. The person being talked about –the subject of the gossip– is often unaware of these ongoing discussions, especially if they are not tagged or directly referenced. This dynamic creates a culture where sharing ‘tea’ becomes easier and less confrontational as it minimizes direct personal impacts and maintains a sense of privacy for the gossipers.

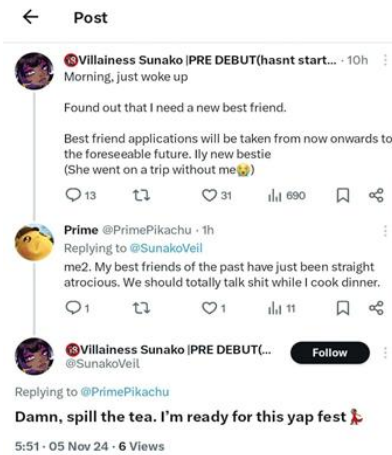


Figure 1 a tweet discussion about new best friend
Source: Twitter

In data 1, username @Sun***** made a thread that he/she needed a new friend because his/her old friend was traveling without him/her. This thread was responded to by username @Pri***** by saying that he needed a new best friend too, because his/her old best friend was starting to be 'terrible'. This thread was responded again by @Sun***** with the phrase, “damn, spill the tea. I'm ready for this yap fest.”

Here, the phrase ‘spilling the tea’ implies to the direct disclosure of a shocking fact. The gossip stays more anonymous and speculative by not knowing the subject in the post, which frequently creates a layer of intrigue and allows the two users to openly discuss the subject. This goes along with the idea that gossip in online spaces, particularly on Twitter, can be both public and private. Discussions can take place, but the target or subject of the gossip is unnamed or vague, which can protect users from responsibility while still sharing opinions or comments that may be interesting to others.

The use of anonymity on Twitter often creates a layer of separation between the source of gossip and the target, allowing users to comment freely without fear of immediate consequences or reactions from the individuals being talked about. This limitation allows information to spread quickly while maintaining emotional distance between those involved, strengthening Twitter's position as a platform that thrives on viral moments.

In data 2, username @ban***** made a thread that he/she triggered because of someone. He/she said that he/she wanted to spill the tea, but then he/she said that he/she was not like someone -who was the subject of this spill the tea- who has NPD (a narcissistic person (Caligor et al., 2015)), duality (researchers understand it as a two-faced person according to the context), and hypocritical behavior (an inconsistent (Laurent & Clark, 2019)). @ban***** then says what this person is doing, which is talking about something, then using it to gain popularity. Then @ban***** continued in the next thread indicating that the person was one

of his close friends. This can be seen from him using the sentence 'not to mention that we met in person, and how you treated me 'bestie'? Even my friends asked me why you acted like that. We're supposed to be in a 'good term'.



Figure 2 a gossiping tweet about bestie
Source: Twitter

Based on the data found, this Twitter user's post with the username @ban***** highlights the social aspects involved in the term spill the tea in the public domain. The user expresses a desire to spill the beans or convey information that is deemed important but chooses not to do so explicitly. The phrase is used in the context of criticizing someone who has the behavior of a "hypocrite," as well as an expression of dislike for the subject the user is talking about in a particular situation.

The post demonstrates the dynamics of public and private spaces on Twitter. While the user who shared his/her story may have felt safe speaking openly due to the semi-private nature of his/her account, in reality, this message could be seen by a wider audience. This illustrates how Twitter has become a public space where personal opinions can quickly become the subject of discussion for others.

In data 3, username @lan***** made a thread that he wants to know the 'tea' between George and Max and then he gotta go get ready for school. This thread was then replied by username @kdl***** by saying, "Max apparently said he was gonna purposefully crash and put George's head in the wall and then Max called him a liar or something."

This conversation is about George and Max, who could be public figures or well-known individuals in their community. The thread from username @lan***** explicitly asks someone to "spill the beans" about the two of them. This indicates that the user is curious about the conflict, but has no direct knowledge.



Figure 3 a tweet discussion about spilling a gossip
Source: Twitter

The thread was then replied to by a user with the username @kdl***** who stated that Max made an alarming statement, about him deliberately bumping and banging George's head against the wall. Max also added that George was a liar. This thread is a summary of an incident that appears confrontational. The situation depicted here suggests tension, but the focus remains on the third party's interpretation of the event.

In this context, it is important to consider that the objects of the gossip (George and Max) may not have known about this thread and the exchanges that took place between users. This gossip dynamic demonstrates the public nature of Twitter, where discussions about private disputes become public consumption. This suggests that individuals engage in passive consumption of others' conflicts, without their involvement or consent, thus shifting the power dynamics of the narrative.

In data 4, a username @avy*** tries to find information about who Kim Garam is by creating a thread "who is Kim Garam? And what did she do until she got kicked out from the idol group? Can someone spill the tea."

The topic of discussion in this issue is about an individual named Kim Garam. She was previously a member of an idol group from South Korea. This thread was then answered by @gen***** who said that the object of this gossip was kicked out of the group due to bullying allegations. Since Kim Garam is a public figure and the incident related to her was widespread, users felt it was legitimate to discuss this on an open social media platform, such as twitter. The use of the hashtag #KIMGARAM also shows @avy***'s attempt to invite public participation in the discussion, further opening up the issue to a wider audience.

In this case, allegations of bullying are a very sensitive issue and involve the privacy of individuals, especially the victim. This discussion may affect Kim Garam's reputation as a public figure who is accused of being a perpetrator personally and professionally, although if seen in this one perspective only, Kim Garam remains a perpetrator of bullying, which makes her a guilty person. This kind of discussion has the potential to create or reinforce public opinion without concrete evidence. In a legal or ethical context, it may violate privacy boundaries if the information shared is unverified or comes from unreliable sources.



Figure 4 a tweet discussion about a Korean idol
Source: Twitter

In data 5, Twitter user @Q4***** posted a thread that used the phrase spilling the tea. The user referred to a situation involving two celebrities, Cardi B and Nicki Minaj, alleging that Cardi B tried to recruit a blogger named Armon to take her side against Nicki Minaj. Users responding to the user's thread further dramatized the revelation, calling it tea or gossip worth sharing, emphasizing its significance with phrases like "it's tea" and "confirmation is crazy."

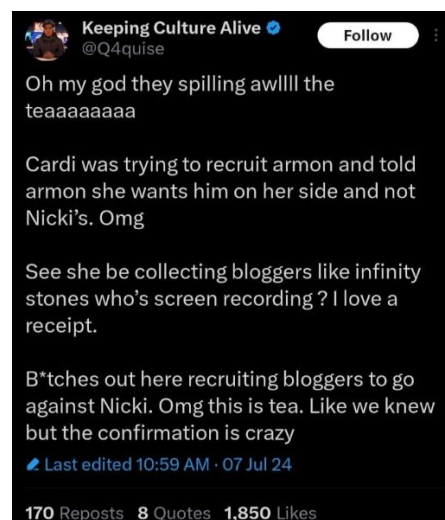


Figure 5 a gossiping tweet about an idol
Source: Twitter

The data illustrates the application of spill the tea as a metaphor for revealing secrets or inside information in public spaces. In Jakobson's metaphor theory, the phrase connects the act of spilling liquid (literal domain) with revealing hidden truths or gossip (figurative domain), thus creating a vivid image that resonates with the audience.

Jakobson argues that a metaphor expresses some kind of similarity between objects (Bredin, 1984). In Jakobson's model, metaphors involve replacing one term with another that shares a resemblance or association, effectively creating a new layer of meaning. This

linguistic process is key to understanding how slang operates and evolves. Based on Jakobson's metaphor theory, the use of this slang can be analyzed using the Jakobson theory because the word 'tea' is replaced meaning as truth or truth used for gossip.

In the context of 'spill the tea', the term is metaphorical as it does not refer to actual tea, but rather symbolizes the disclosure of gossip or sensitive information. The use of the "tea" metaphor has turned the phrase into a shortened term for sharing personal or scandalous information in social situations-especially online, where audiences are accustomed to this kind of informal and coded language. "Tea" in the expression is a metaphor for hidden truths or juicy information, which links back to its origins in the LGBTQ+ and African-American communities, where 'tea' originally meant 'truth'.

On Twitter, this metaphor is amplified due to the platform's emphasis on concise and viral communication. Twitter's unique environment encourages users to engage with trending topics, often using metaphorical expressions like "spill the tea" to participate in larger cultural conversations. This makes the "tea" metaphor not only about content (gossip) but also about social function-creating a shared space where users are invited to share and take part in the dissemination of information, often with humorous or sensational overtones. Its appeal lies in the ability of this metaphor to disguise curiosity under a humorous guise, thus allowing users to engage in gossip while keeping their distance.

On social media, more specifically on Twitter, many people believe that this platform provides a semi-private space where they can share gossip, opinions, and controversial statements with a large number of people. Therefore, many people use these platforms freely without thinking about future consequences as they hide behind "anonymous users" who mostly use fake identities. This assumption of privacy is rooted in a cognitive framework that equates anonymity with a safety principle summarized in phrases like "no face, no case" that many people use to take refuge in anonymous accounts. These phrases imply that without a real identity attached to the gossip, there is no risk of liability or exposure. Thus, Twitter users consciously share gossip, news, or arguments without thinking about the consequences, the information they share is exposed to a potentially large audience due to the social network's algorithms and mechanisms. Hashtags, retweets, and likes contribute to making seemingly private conversations go viral, pushing them into the public sphere.

This can relate to the comparison between the public sphere and the private sphere, and which one Twitter belongs to. This study will compare the two forms of the sphere in relation to the use of the slang spill the tea on Twitter in the context of spreading gossip.

Public sphere refers to an open and accessible space where individuals or groups can discuss matters of common interest, essentially creating a shared communication arena. On Twitter, public space is particularly prominent as tweets are often visible to a wide audience. Even without using real names, engagement through retweets, likes and hashtags can expand visibility beyond the post's followers. This public nature encourages participation and discussion on trending topics, including gossip and current affairs. In contrast to the private sphere on Twitter, the platform creates a borderless place between the realms of anonymous users who use fake identities to use social media. While users may feel like they are in the private sphere when they communicate with certain communities or through anonymous accounts, the way the platform is used makes it easy for content to become part of the public sphere due to its algorithms and viral nature. For example, a tweet intended as a private comment can quickly trend if it gets enough engagement, leading to wider

exposure. Some people even assume that if for example there is one post that gets a lot of engagement it is a good post to talk about face-to-face or user-to-user without thinking about the object of discussion because it uses the concept of "no face no case" behind an anonymous account.

This statement can be supported by a study by Naskar et al. (2020), titled "Emotional Dynamics of Public Opinion on Twitter". In this article, the researchers explored how the impact of the public sphere on social media, particularly Twitter. This is because of their deeper research of Twitter's role as a public sphere, they found that discussions of hot topics that originate as a personal opinion can quickly turn into public opinion because of the way the site is built and the algorithms that are formed can be even greater because of the platform's features that include likes, comments, retweets, and quoted tweets that can increase engagement even more. They found that individual users are heavily influenced by public sentiment on Twitter, which often results in changing viewpoints and emotional reactions to trending issues in society.

Discussion

This study reveals how the slang phrase "spill the tea" on Twitter metaphorically captures the tension between the perceived privacy of social media interactions and the reality of public exposure. The findings align with Jakobson's theory of metaphor by demonstrating that slang functions as a powerful tool shaping social meanings and interactions. The metaphorical framing of gossip through "spill the tea" allows users to navigate the blurred boundaries between private and public spheres, where anonymity provides an illusion of privacy, yet Twitter's viral structure can rapidly transform private information into public discourse. This dynamic reflects broader social processes in digital communication, where language not only conveys content but also constructs social realities.

Comparing these findings with previous research highlights both convergences and unique contributions. Visentin et al. (2021) emphasize how linguistic style and emotions influence privacy concerns and conspiracy theories on Twitter, underscoring the role of language in shaping user behavior and virality. Similarly, this study shows how metaphor embedded in slang influences perceptions of privacy and truth, but it extends this understanding by focusing specifically on metaphor's role in gossip and social negotiation on digital platforms. Liang et al. (2016) discuss cultural variations in privacy practices, yet this research centers on the linguistic mechanisms that mediate privacy perception regardless of cultural context, highlighting the universal impact of metaphorical language in online interactions. Furthermore, Vosoughi et al. (2018) reveal how false news spreads faster than truth on Twitter, often fueled by emotional and novel content. The metaphor "spill the tea" encapsulates this phenomenon by framing gossip, a form of informal information often unverified, as a vehicle for rapid dissemination, thus contributing to the social construction of truth and misinformation.

Additionally, this study complements the work of Van Poppel and Pilgram (2024) on metaphor exploitation by illustrating how metaphorical slang can both enable social bonding and expose users to public scrutiny, particularly when anonymity is compromised by platform features. The findings also resonate with Khalis and Rifhan's (2019) analysis of the lexical item "tea" among Malay Twitter users, which similarly highlights the appropriation of idiomatic expressions to reveal secrets and navigate sensitive topics in social media contexts. This research contributes a novel perspective by linking metaphor theory with the

sociolinguistic dynamics of privacy, truth, and viral communication on Twitter, demonstrating that metaphorical language is central to understanding how digital platforms transform social interaction and the negotiation of public and private boundaries.

In conclusion, the metaphorical use of “spill the tea” on Twitter exemplifies the complex interplay between language, privacy, and social dynamics in digital environments. This study underscores the importance of metaphor as a lens for analyzing how users frame and experience gossip, anonymity, and public exposure in online spaces. Future research could further explore cross-cultural variations in metaphor use or investigate other slang expressions to deepen understanding of language’s role in shaping digital social realities. Moreover, recognizing the power of metaphor in viral communication may inform strategies to address misinformation and privacy concerns on social media platforms.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the use of the slang phrase “spill the tea” on Twitter, highlighting its importance as a metaphorical expression that reveals the complex tension between private and public spheres in digital communication. Understanding this slang is crucial because it reflects how users navigate feelings of privacy and anonymity while engaging in gossip on a platform designed for public sharing. The research shows that although users often believe their identity is protected through anonymity, Twitter’s viral features and open algorithms can quickly transform private gossip into widely circulated public discourse. While some may argue that anonymity fully protects users and maintains privacy, this study demonstrates that the reality is more nuanced: the metaphorical use of “spill the tea” exposes how language shapes social perceptions and interactions, blurring the boundaries between private and public information. Readers should recognize that digital platforms are not neutral spaces but active environments where language and technology together influence what is shared and how it is perceived. From these findings, future research should further investigate how different slang terms and metaphors operate across various social media platforms and cultural contexts. Additionally, there is a need for greater awareness and strategies to address the risks of privacy breaches and misinformation spread through metaphorical language online. So, this study calls for continued examination of the evolving relationship between language, privacy, and social interaction in the digital age.

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