

From Nurturance to Dominance: Metaphorical Shifts of Kinship Terms in Digital Subcultures

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the metaphorical reappropriation of kinship terms such as “mother,” “daddy,” and “sister” within digital subcultures, including drag culture, fan communities, LGBTQ+ groups, and BDSM contexts. Drawing upon Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory, Bucholtz and Hall’s sociolinguistic identity construction framework, and Butler’s performativity theory, the research examines how familial terms undergo semantic shifts to signify authority, intimacy, dominance, and community solidarity. Specifically, “mother” transitions from traditional nurturing roles to symbolize charismatic leadership and authoritative mentorship. Similarly, “daddy” is recontextualized in BDSM and fan cultures to represent consensual dominance, sexual charisma, and ironic subversion of patriarchal norms, as illustrated by the term “zaddy.” Cross-cultural comparisons with Chinese fandom’s usage of “mother-fan” and “daddy-type idol” further highlight localized expressions of emotional care and protective authority, reflecting culturally specific values of collectivism and affective bonding. Ultimately, this paper argues that such linguistic innovations serve as performative acts, strategically negotiating and subverting traditional understandings of gender, sexuality, power, and kinship, thereby contributing

significantly to identity politics and community-building within contemporary digital spaces.

Keywords: *kinship terms, conceptual metaphor, digital subcultures, meaning shift*

1. Introduction

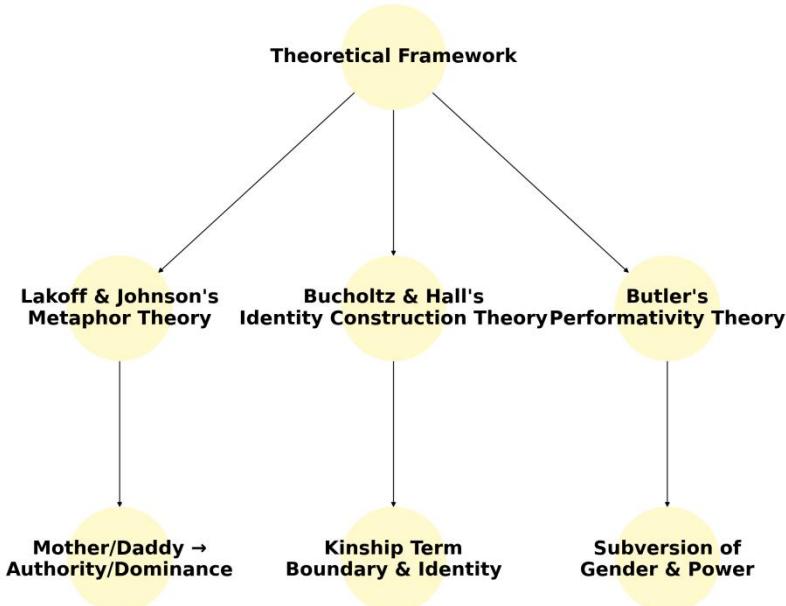
In recent years, internet subcultures such as fan communities, LGBTQ+ groups, and drag circles have notably reshaped linguistic practices, particularly through creative redefinitions of kinship terms. Terms traditionally denoting familial relationships, such as “mother” and “daddy,” have been reappropriated within digital discourse to express new forms of authority, intimacy, and community identity (Jones et al., 2015; Leap, 2019). Examples such as “mother is mothering” and the slang “zaddy” illustrate how these terms have evolved beyond their original family-related meanings, acquiring broader cultural resonance and symbolic power within online communities. Although fan communities, LGBTQ+ groups, and drag cultures each have distinct cultural characteristics, they share a common tendency toward linguistic innovation, particularly in redefining relationships and power structures.

The phenomenon raises critical questions: How and why have kinship terms become powerful metaphors within digital subcultures, and what do these semantic shifts reveal about identity politics and community building online? Existing research into semantic change has highlighted metaphor’s fundamental role in structuring conceptual understandings of abstract phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Sociolinguistic studies have also shown that language significantly shapes and reinforces group identities and boundaries (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Wilmot et al., 2024). Concurrently, queer linguistics foregrounds how marginalized groups creatively reclaim language to subvert normative social structures (Butler, 1990; Leap, 2019). To bridge these theoretical perspectives, this study employs a qualitative analysis of drag performances (e.g., RuPaul’s Drag Race), fan community interactions (e.g., Lady Gaga forums), and BDSM subcultural texts, examining how “mother”/“daddy” are reappropriated through: (1) Lakoff & Johnson’s metaphor theory (familial→authority mappings), (2) Bucholtz & Hall’s identity construction framework (group boundary-marking), and (3) Butler’s performativity lens

(subversive citations of kinship norms). Despite these advances, limited scholarship addresses how online linguistic practices transform traditional power/identity understandings through kinship metaphors.

Figure 1: Research Method Diagram

Research Method Diagram



Addressing this gap, this paper investigates how “mother” and “daddy” are metaphorically reinterpreted in distinct online culturally specific contexts. For instance, within drag culture, the term “mother” often transcends its traditional meaning of nurturing caregiver to signify charismatic leadership and authoritative mentorship, as famously exemplified by drag icons such as RuPaul (Moore, 2013). Similarly, in various fan communities and BDSM subcultures, “daddy” moves beyond paternal associations to signify attraction, dominance, and sexual charisma, as demonstrated by popular phrases like “zaddy,” often attributed to celebrities such as Idris Elba (Attwood, 2010; Weiss, 2011). These examples highlight the complex intersection between linguistic creativity and shifting social values, as internet subcultures continuously redefine the boundaries between traditional roles and contemporary identities.

Moreover, the appropriation of kinship terms can serve as a lens to examine broader processes of cultural globalization and digital media circulation. Online communities often engage in active cross-cultural dialogues, borrowing and adapting terminology to suit local contexts, illustrating the dynamic and fluid nature of digital identity construction (Thurlow & Mrocze, 2011). For example, similar linguistic phenomena can be observed in East Asian fan communities, where terms like “mom fans” or “dad-like idols” indicate nuanced expressions of fandom, reflecting localized cultural meanings while still participating in global discourse practices (Jones et al., 2015). These cross-cultural practices emphasize how digital media facilitates the rapid circulation and transformation of linguistic forms, further enriching the study of global digital culture.

To further illustrate these transformations, consider Lady Gaga’s iconic status among her fanbase, frequently characterized as embodying maternal strength through online expressions such as “Queen Mother” or “Mother Monster” during digital fan interactions. Such linguistic practices not only underscore her authoritative presence but also construct a cohesive group identity among her followers. Similarly, in LGBTQ+ communities, especially within drag culture, the phrase “drag mother” conveys deep emotional connections, mentorship, and protection, creating familial structures that subvert traditional definitions of kinship and gender roles.

Additionally, the usage of “daddy” within internet communities often exemplifies a complex interplay between power dynamics and sexual attraction. In fan contexts, labeling male celebrities as “daddy” or “zaddy” not only conveys admiration and sexual appeal but also ironically critiques and subverts traditional patriarchal authority by playfully appropriating its symbolic power.

By examining these linguistic practices, the study reveals how internet subcultures strategically use kinship terms to navigate and renegotiate traditional power structures and social identities. This linguistic innovation functions as a form of symbolic resistance, enabling communities to articulate nuanced and often subversive identities that challenge conventional social norms (Thurlow & Mrocze, 2011). Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates how online linguistic creativity contributes to broader discourses of identity politics, reflecting ongoing struggles for

recognition, representation, and community solidarity (Al Zidjaly, 2019). Importantly, these kinship metaphors serve as powerful rhetorical devices, enabling individuals and groups to establish meaningful bonds and affirm social alliances in digital spaces, thereby highlighting the practical and theoretical significance of this research.

Ultimately, the metaphorical reappropriation of kinship terminology within digital subcultures illustrates a significant shift in language's role in shaping contemporary identity practices. This paper not only deepens the understanding of linguistic creativity within digital spaces but also offers valuable insights into the dynamics of digital identity formation and the sociopolitical implications of language innovation.

2. Literature Review

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify several core concepts recurring throughout this study, specifically “authority,” “dominance,” “intimacy,” and “identity politics.” In this context, authority refers broadly to a recognized form of social power or influence characterized by legitimacy, expertise, or charisma, enabling individuals to guide or direct others’ behaviors and beliefs (Weber, 1978). Closely related yet distinct, dominance denotes relationships marked explicitly by hierarchical power dynamics, involving control or influence over others, often manifesting through communicative behaviors and social interactions (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The term intimacy encompasses emotional closeness, mutual trust, and interpersonal connection, ranging from familial affection to romantic and sexual bonding, emphasizing mutual disclosure and emotional investment (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Finally, identity politics describes collective actions or discourses through which marginalized groups articulate shared identities, pursue social recognition, and challenge existing structures of power and representation, often utilizing language strategically to foreground experiences of marginalization or exclusion (Bernstein, 2005). Clarifying these terms facilitates a deeper understanding of their interplay and nuanced usage within the analyses that follow.

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor and Semantic Transformation

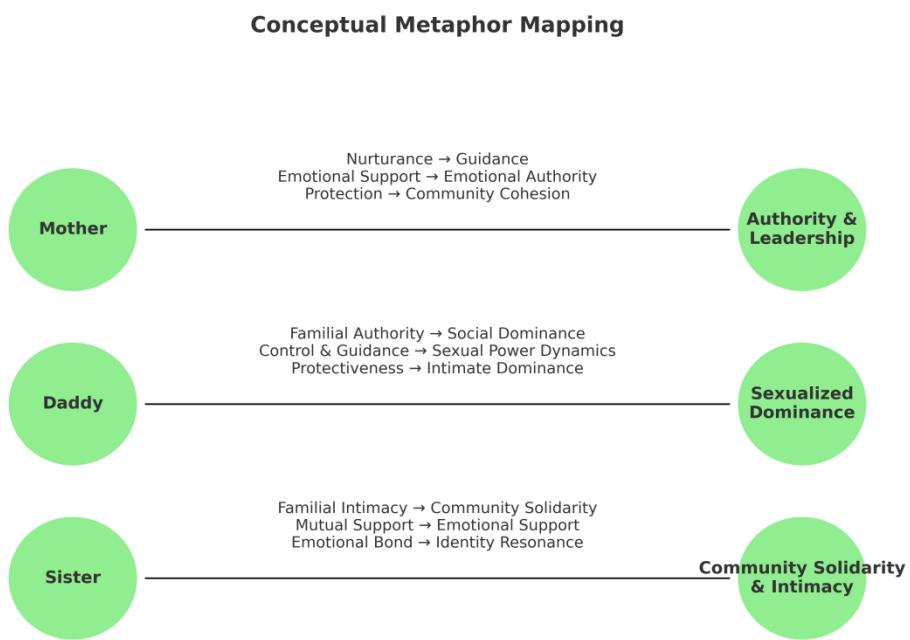
According to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors are fundamental cognitive tools that shape our understanding of abstract concepts by mapping them onto concrete experiences. Rather than being merely stylistic or decorative, metaphors structure human cognition, influencing perceptions, thought processes, and social behaviors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1994). This cognitive mechanism enables individuals and communities to interpret unfamiliar or intangible ideas by relating them to familiar, experiential domains. Metaphors thus provide the means to create, negotiate, and alter social realities through language, facilitating the emergence and reinforcement of new meanings and cultural values within communities (Kövecses, 2002). Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, shaping not only communication but also our underlying conceptual frameworks, which subsequently guide actions and interactions within social contexts. They further argue that metaphors operate largely at an unconscious level, influencing our reasoning and behaviors subtly yet profoundly, thus revealing deep-seated cultural norms and assumptions.

Applying this theoretical framework, the redefinition of kinship terms such as “mother” and “daddy” exemplifies a metaphorical shift from their original familial contexts to symbols of authority, leadership, and charisma. In this semantic transformation, the experiential and relational qualities traditionally associated with parental roles, such as nurturing, protection, and guidance, are metaphorically mapped onto broader social and cultural domains (Semino, 2008). Consequently, terms like “mother” and “daddy” become powerful linguistic vehicles through which internet subcultures express hierarchical relationships, social influence, and collective identity, effectively reshaping traditional understandings of kinship and authority. For instance, “mother” within drag communities often denotes not only care and guidance but also authoritative leadership and community cohesion. Similarly, “daddy” in fan cultures and BDSM contexts represents power, attractiveness, and a nuanced blend of authority and intimacy (Weiss, 2011). These linguistic adaptations reflect broader societal shifts wherein traditional structures of authority and familial roles are questioned, redefined, or reimagined. Thus, the

metaphorical use of kinship terms in digital communities illuminates the ongoing process through which metaphors facilitate cognitive and cultural shifts, highlighting the profound influence language exerts on identity construction and social dynamics.

2.2 Sociolinguistic Identity Construction and Community Boundaries

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language significantly shapes and reinforces social identities by delineating group boundaries and facilitating identity construction. McEntee-Atalianis (2022) highlights that linguistic practices are central to identity formation, acting as distinctive markers through which groups differentiate themselves from outsiders. Linguistic choices thus reflect and actively construct social meanings and relationships, reinforcing community boundaries and enabling members to express shared cultural norms and values. Similarly, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) expand on this by asserting that identities are emergent, constructed dynamically through social interactions and discursive practices. They emphasize that identity is not static but performative, continually negotiated and reshaped within and across social contexts through linguistic interactions.



Applying this theoretical perspective, the innovative appropriation of kinship terms within internet subcultures, such as fan communities, LGBTQ+ groups, and drag cultures, illustrates the active role language plays in identity construction and

community cohesion. Terms like “drag mother,” “mother,” and “sister” transcend their traditional familial meanings to serve new symbolic purposes within these communities. For example, in drag culture, “drag mother” signifies mentorship and emotional support, creating hierarchical yet nurturing relationships that reinforce social cohesion and communal identity. Similarly, in LGBTQ+ contexts, the term “sister” expresses camaraderie and collective solidarity, establishing strong intra-group alliances and marking clear social boundaries. In fan communities, employing kinship metaphors such as “mother” or “daddy” to describe celebrities facilitates a sense of intimacy and collective belonging, strengthening community bonds and reinforcing group identity. These linguistic innovations not only reflect shared cultural experiences and values but also actively participate in shaping and solidifying group identity through ongoing discourse practices. Thus, sociolinguistic identity construction theory underscores how language use within digital subcultures is integral to identity negotiation, community building, and the reinforcement of social boundaries.

2.3 Queer Linguistics and Subversion of Normative Structures

Queer theoretical perspectives, particularly Butler’s (1990) foundational concept of gender performativity, emphasize that gender identities are socially constructed through repetitive actions and linguistic practices rather than being innate or fixed. Butler argues that gender is not something individuals inherently possess but rather something continuously performed and reinforced by language, behavior, and cultural conventions (Butler, 1990; Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Language thus becomes a primary tool for either perpetuating traditional gender norms or strategically undermining them, providing opportunities for subversion and resistance (Leap, 2019; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Through deliberate linguistic interventions and symbolic disruptions, queer linguistic practices expose and challenge normative assumptions about gender roles and family structures, highlighting their artificiality and instability (Motschenbacher, 2010).

Applying Butler’s theoretical insights to internet subcultures reveals how kinship terms such as “daddy” are linguistically repurposed to critically engage with patriarchal norms and traditional gendered power relations. In fan communities and

BDSM subcultures, the term “daddy” transcends its conventional paternal connotations, instead signifying complex intersections of authority, dominance, intimacy, and sexual attraction (Weiss, 2011). This linguistic reappropriation serves simultaneously as ironic commentary and subversive practice, destabilizing traditional meanings associated with paternal authority and masculinity (Attwood, 2010). For example, the popular slang “zaddy,” frequently used to describe celebrities, embodies this nuanced interplay, merging paternal respect with explicit sexual desirability to critically reconfigure perceptions of patriarchal power. Similarly, within BDSM contexts, adopting “daddy” enables consensual power dynamics that explicitly interrogate conventional gender hierarchies, reshaping and subverting established norms of intimacy and authority (Weiss, 2011).

3. Kinship Term Reappropriation in Digital Subcultures

Comparative Table of Kinship Term Semantic Shifts in Digital Subcultures

Subculture Type	Term	Original Meaning	New Meaning	Semantic Features
Drag Culture	Mother	Mother/Caregiver	Authority, Leader, Mentor	Authority, Intimacy
Fan Culture	Mother	Mother/Caregiver	Protective Authority, Emotional Bond	Authority, Emotional Connection
BDSM Subculture	Daddy	Father/Authority	Dominance, Protective, Sexualized Authority	Dominance, Sexual Charisma, Intimacy
Fan Culture	Zaddy/Daddy	Father/Authority	Sexual Attraction, Authoritative Charisma	Sexual Attraction, Authority, Irony
LGBTQ+ Communities	Sister	Sister/Familial Relation	Community Solidarity, Emotional Support	Emotional Intimacy, Community Cohesion
Chinese Fan Culture	Mother-fan	Mother/Caregiver	Emotional Support, Protective	Emotional Responsibility, Moral Guardianship
Chinese Fan Culture	Daddy-type Idol	Father/Authority	Authority, Maturity, Protective Appeal	Authority, Responsibility, Intimacy

3.1 “Mother”: From Familial Nurturance to Symbolic Dominance

This section explores how the familial term “mother” undergoes semantic transformation, shifting from nurturing familial roles toward symbolic forms of authoritative dominance within digital subcultures. In contemporary drag culture, the term “mother” has notably transcended its traditional familial connotations, becoming synonymous with authoritative leadership and community mentorship, exemplified prominently by figures such as RuPaul. Within the subculture of drag houses, RuPaul functions as the quintessential “House Mother,” a figure who provides emotional support, artistic guidance, and strategic advice to younger performers (Moore, 2013). RuPaul’s status as a “mother” symbolizes more than mere caregiving; it encapsulates a hierarchical and charismatic leadership that embodies

both power and nurturing. His role on the influential reality show “RuPaul’s Drag Race” exemplifies this dynamic clearly. Contestants frequently refer to RuPaul as their “mother,” recognizing his authority to critique, mentor, and ultimately shape their careers (Strings & Bui, 2014). The show’s structure reinforces RuPaul’s authoritative role by placing him as the decisive judge, mentor, and cultural arbiter who directs contestants’ artistic and professional development. RuPaul further reinforces this maternal imagery by fostering a sense of collective identity and unity, encouraging participants to embrace and celebrate their authentic selves. This active engagement in emotional and professional support structures firmly establishes RuPaul as a pivotal figure whose maternal role symbolizes empowerment and authority, effectively redefining traditional understandings of motherhood within drag culture (Moore, 2013). Additionally, RuPaul’s iconic status extends beyond television into broader popular culture, where his maternal symbolism continues to shape public perceptions of drag culture and LGBTQ+ identity, cementing his role as both protector and authoritative figure.

Similarly, within fan culture, notably exemplified by Lady Gaga’s followers, the term “mother” has been appropriated to signify authority coupled with profound emotional resonance. Lady Gaga is often affectionately and reverently called “Mother Monster” by her fans, a term that emphasizes her unique blend of creative authority, emotional openness, and maternal protectiveness towards her audience (Click et al., 2017). Her “Mother Monster” persona performs Butler’s (1990) citational subversion by juxtaposing maternal care with monstrous alterity, destabilizing heteronormative motherhood tropes. This maternal metaphor extends beyond conventional parental imagery to symbolize Gaga’s role as an influential cultural leader who fosters a safe and inclusive space for marginalized identities, frequently promoting themes of self-acceptance, empowerment, and collective solidarity. Her fans, known as “Little Monsters,” position themselves as part of an extended family under her maternal guidance. Gaga actively encourages this familial narrative, regularly communicating directly with fans through social media and public events, providing emotional support and validation. The maternal role Gaga assumes involves not only providing emotional care but also asserting an influential authority over cultural norms and values within her fanbase. Through her artistic and

personal advocacy, she emphasizes the themes of self-empowerment and social inclusion, resonating deeply with fans who view her authority as simultaneously protective and inspirational. This deliberate cultivation of a maternal image helps consolidate her authoritative role, reinforcing the emotional connection and loyalty of her fanbase. Consequently, this metaphorical framing transforms Lady Gaga's public persona into one characterized by both emotional intimacy and hierarchical respect, reshaping conventional maternal imagery to align with contemporary values of empowerment and inclusivity within popular culture (Click et al., 2017).

The transformation of the term "mother" from a familial caregiver into a metaphorical representation of authority and control can be elucidated through Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory. According to their framework, metaphors operate by mapping attributes from a source domain, typically concrete and experiential, onto an abstract target domain to facilitate "mother," attributes traditionally associated with maternal caregiving, such as protection, guidance, nurturing, and emotional support, are metaphorically projected onto domains of social authority, leadership, and influence (Semino, 2008). This cognitive mechanism explains how the figure of the mother, initially understood primarily in terms of domestic caregiving roles, becomes a powerful symbol of dominance and control in non-familial contexts such as drag and fan cultures. The maternal metaphor enables members of these communities to comprehend and articulate relationships characterized by hierarchical authority and emotional investment simultaneously (Gibbs, 1994). For instance, RuPaul and Lady Gaga, through their maternal imagery, reflect and shape powerful emotional bonds with their followers, reinforcing their positions as leaders who simultaneously nurture and control their communities. By adopting and reshaping traditional familial metaphors, these subcultures actively negotiate and transform social meanings, revealing deeper socio-cultural shifts in the perception of gender roles and power dynamics. This dynamic process underscores the potential of metaphors as powerful tools for shaping cultural identity and power relations. Furthermore, the maternal metaphor reveals how linguistic innovation in digital subcultures actively participates in broader socio-cultural shifts, challenging traditional conceptions of gender roles and authority structures. This metaphorical reappropriation demonstrates how language can

fundamentally alter the cultural understanding and expression of authority, shifting traditional perceptions of motherhood toward more nuanced and culturally relevant interpretations.

Thus, applying Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory (1980), the maternal metaphor demonstrates how concrete familial experiences are effectively mapped onto abstract forms of leadership and community identity, reflecting shifting cultural perceptions of power and authority.

3.2 “Daddy”: From Familial Authority to Sexualized Dominance

Similarly, this section examines how the kinship term “daddy” transitions from a paternal symbol of familial authority into a metaphor signifying sexualized dominance and playful subversion within digital communities. In BDSM subculture, the term “daddy” has been recontextualized as a powerful symbolic representation intertwining authority, dominance, and sexuality. Within consensual BDSM dynamics, “daddy” characterizes a specific form of relational power exchange, wherein one partner adopts a guiding, protective, yet explicitly dominant role. This linguistic appropriation significantly deviates from conventional paternal implications, instead highlighting themes of authority combined with intimacy, care, and consensual submission (Weiss, 2011; Langridge & Barker, 2007). The “daddy” figure typically embodies a caretaker role, exercising authority through structured guidance, emotional support, and clearly defined power hierarchies. Importantly, this role is fundamentally consensual, negotiated explicitly between partners, allowing for the deliberate exploration and articulation of complex emotional and sexual dynamics (Langridge & Barker, 2007). Consequently, the “daddy” figure within BDSM spaces signifies a nuanced balance of paternalistic care and sexual dominance, effectively blending traditional patriarchal symbolism with contemporary expressions of sexual autonomy and interpersonal trust. Participants employ “daddy” to safely explore power dynamics within relationships, providing a controlled context where hierarchical roles are clearly defined and consensually enacted. Such interactions illustrate how linguistic practices actively challenge traditional interpretations of patriarchal authority by reframing it as voluntary and reciprocal,

highlighting a subversive dimension inherent in BDSM discourse (Weiss, 2011; Lindemann, 2011).

Similarly, within contemporary fan culture, the term “zaddy” has emerged as a cultural meme blending paternal authority with overt sexual appeal, most notably exemplified by celebrities such as Idris Elba. The colloquial term “zaddy,” a playful linguistic variant of “daddy,” specifically emphasizes sexual charisma and attractiveness while maintaining subtle references to authority and maturity. Fans utilize the term to express admiration and attraction toward public figures who exemplify an idealized blend of masculinity, authority, and sex appeal (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015; Click et al., 2017). Idris Elba, frequently cited as an iconic “zaddy,” embodies this intersection through his roles and public persona, combining an authoritative, masculine presence with widespread sexual desirability. The term “zaddy” circulates prominently on social media platforms, where fans engage in collective acts of admiration and humorous objectification, recontextualizing traditional patriarchal imagery into a playful, subversive, and sexually charged context (Click et al., 2017). This phenomenon highlights how fan communities creatively reinterpret meanings around authority and sexuality, generating cultural resonance by juxtaposing traditional patriarchal symbolism with contemporary ideals of sexual attractiveness and gendered performance. The playful yet meaningful usage of “zaddy” reveals how contemporary fan cultures leverage digital communication platforms to reshape social meanings surrounding gender and authority, reflecting evolving cultural attitudes towards masculinity and sexuality (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015; Jenkins, 2006).

The linguistic reappropriation of “daddy” within BDSM and fan communities can be insightfully analyzed through Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity. Butler conceptualizes gender not as an inherent biological trait but as an ongoing, socially constructed performance continually enacted and reinforced through language and practice. From this perspective, the deliberate and playful use of “daddy” can be understood as a performative act, strategically invoking and simultaneously subverting traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. By consciously appropriating this terminology, individuals and communities engage in practices that

both reflect and challenge existing structures of power, dominance, and gendered expectations (Butler, 1990; Cameron & Kulick, 2003). BDSM's usage of "daddy" deliberately reconstructs patriarchal authority as consensual and negotiated, critically destabilizing oppressive connotations traditionally associated with paternal authority. Similarly, fan-culture adoption of "zaddy" humorously disrupts patriarchal seriousness, highlighting its constructed nature by exaggerating and explicitly sexualizing masculine authority. These linguistic practices underscore language's performative potential to question, challenge, and reshape social understandings of gender roles and authority, demonstrating its centrality in identity formation and social transformation processes (Butler, 1990; Leap, 2019).

Furthermore, both BDSM and fan communities exemplify how linguistic innovations surrounding terms like "daddy" reflect broader cultural shifts toward acknowledgment and acceptance of diverse sexualities, gender identities, and relational dynamics (Langridge & Barker, 2007; Lindemann, 2011). Through strategic language use, these communities create inclusive spaces where traditional power dynamics are redefined, enabling participants to safely and creatively explore complex identities and relational structures. By doing so, they actively contest traditional power hierarchies and norms, revealing linguistic performance's transformative potential in reconfiguring gendered meanings and relationships. This active engagement in linguistic reappropriation highlights the agency of communities in shaping contemporary discourse on gender and sexuality, underscoring how language functions as both a medium and resource for social change (Jones, 2023; Lawson & Coffey-Glover, 2023).

Informed by Butler's performativity theory (1990), the reappropriation of "daddy" illustrates how digital communities use linguistic play and performance to critically engage and subvert traditional patriarchal meanings, highlighting the active role of language in reshaping contemporary power relations.

3.3 Cross-Cultural Comparisons: "Sister," "Mother-fan," and "Daddy-type Idol"

Finally, this section provides a cross-cultural perspective, examining how kinship metaphors extend beyond Western contexts and how their meanings differ culturally.

3.3.1 “Sister” as Collective Solidarity in LGBTQ+ Communities

Within LGBTQ+ communities, the term “sister” is frequently appropriated as a linguistic marker of collective identity, solidarity, and emotional intimacy, significantly diverging from its original familial meaning. Specifically, in drag culture and broader queer contexts, “sister” functions symbolically as an inclusive, unifying form of address, establishing connections among individuals who share experiences of marginalization, identity formation, and community support (Barrett, 2017; Moore, 2013). The popular phrase “Yes, sister!” commonly heard in drag competitions and queer spaces epitomizes a form of mutual encouragement and affirmation, encapsulating an atmosphere of camaraderie, resilience, and communal celebration of shared queer identities. Through these linguistic practices, “sister” explicitly fosters an environment characterized by emotional bonding, alliance-building, and reciprocal recognition, effectively bridging gaps caused by broader social exclusion or discrimination (Barrett, 2017; Leap, 2019).

Notably, the usage of “sister” within drag culture emphasizes collective identity formation through symbolic familial relationships. Drag families, often structured around “drag mothers” and “drag sisters,” establish alternative kinship networks founded on mentorship, emotional support, and collective empowerment (Moore, 2013). By employing the language of sisterhood, LGBTQ+ communities assert a shared social identity rooted not in biological kinship but in shared lived experiences, social struggles, and mutual empowerment. Such symbolic appropriations of kinship terms serve as linguistic mechanisms through which community boundaries are actively drawn and reinforced, creating safe, affirming spaces that challenge traditional familial norms and heteronormative structures. Ultimately, the queer linguistic innovation of “sister” illustrates a broader strategy of symbolic resistance and identity construction, uniting individuals through a performative enactment of solidarity and mutual affirmation, explicitly defined by shared identities and collective emotional bonds (Barrett, 2017).

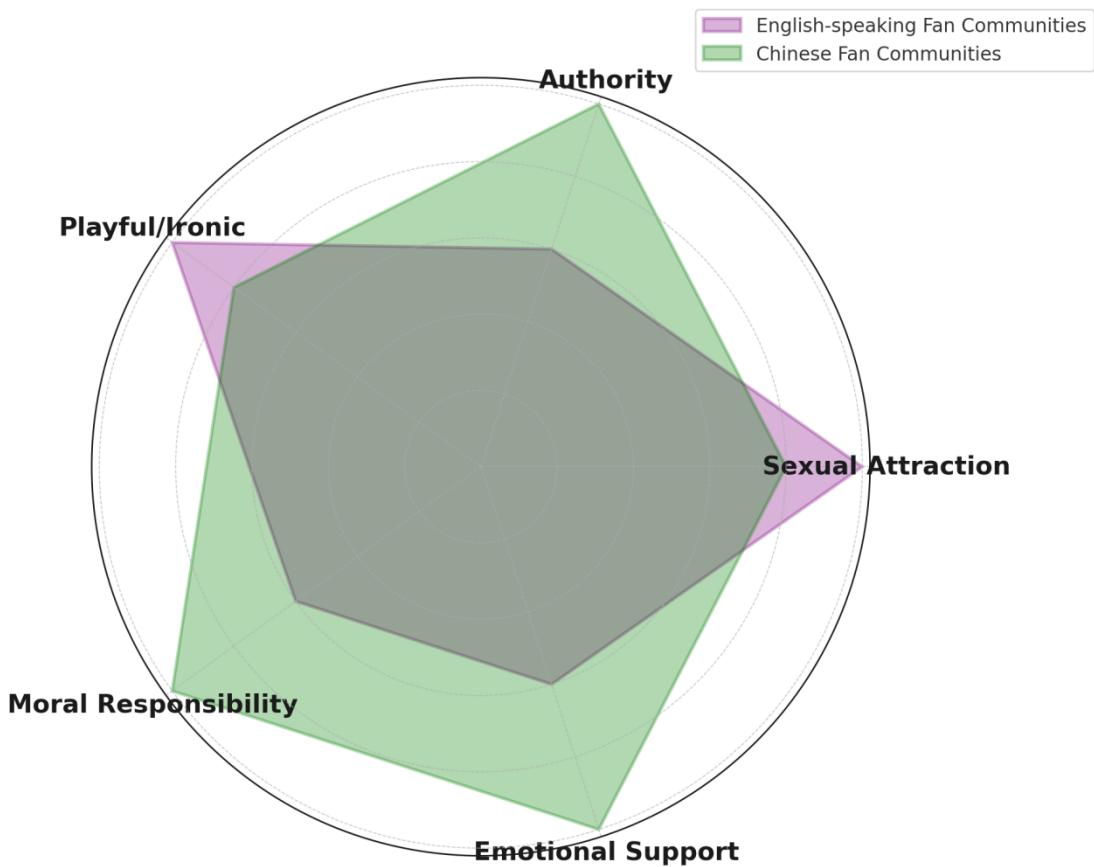
3.3.2 Chinese Fan Culture’s “Mother-fan” and “Daddy-type Idol”

Cross-culturally, the use of familial language in fan communities reveals intriguing variations and shared features, exemplified by the Chinese terms “mother-fan”

(妈粉) and “Daddy-type idol” (爹系爱豆). In Chinese online fandom, “mother-fan” refers specifically to fans who express affection toward idols by assuming a nurturing, protective stance, actively engaging in caretaking behaviors, such as providing emotional support, managing online discussions, or collectively defending idols against criticism (Yang & Bao, 2012). This linguistic crossing (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) from familial to fandom domains marks in-group solidarity through shared care registers. And it underscores a performative enactment of motherly care, signaling deep emotional investment, responsibility, and intimacy. Conversely, the concept of “Daddy-type idol” encapsulates male idols who project an authoritative, mature, and protective image that fans find reassuring or appealing. These idols are often admired for embodying characteristics traditionally associated with paternal authority: stability, reliability, emotional maturity, thus facilitating the projection of desirable qualities onto idol-fan interactions (Stever, 2011).

Comparatively, English-speaking fan cultures employ terms such as “Mother” and “Zaddy” to similarly signify authority, intimacy, and sexual attraction, albeit with greater emphasis on sexuality and playful irony (Jenkins, 2006). While both linguistic contexts utilize familial terminology to express emotional closeness and collective identity, Chinese fandom appears to emphasize emotional caretaking and moral responsibility more explicitly, reflecting culturally specific values around collectivism, social harmony, and affective bonds (Yang & Bao, 2012). English-speaking fan communities, in contrast, frequently blend sexualized discourse with authority, thus foregrounding playful subversion and irony in fan-celebrity relationships (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015). This cultural divergence highlights how localized linguistic practices differently articulate community identities, emotional connections, and power relations, providing valuable insights into the varied ways fan communities negotiate and express relational dynamics across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Semantic Emphasis Comparison in Fan Communities (English vs. Chinese)

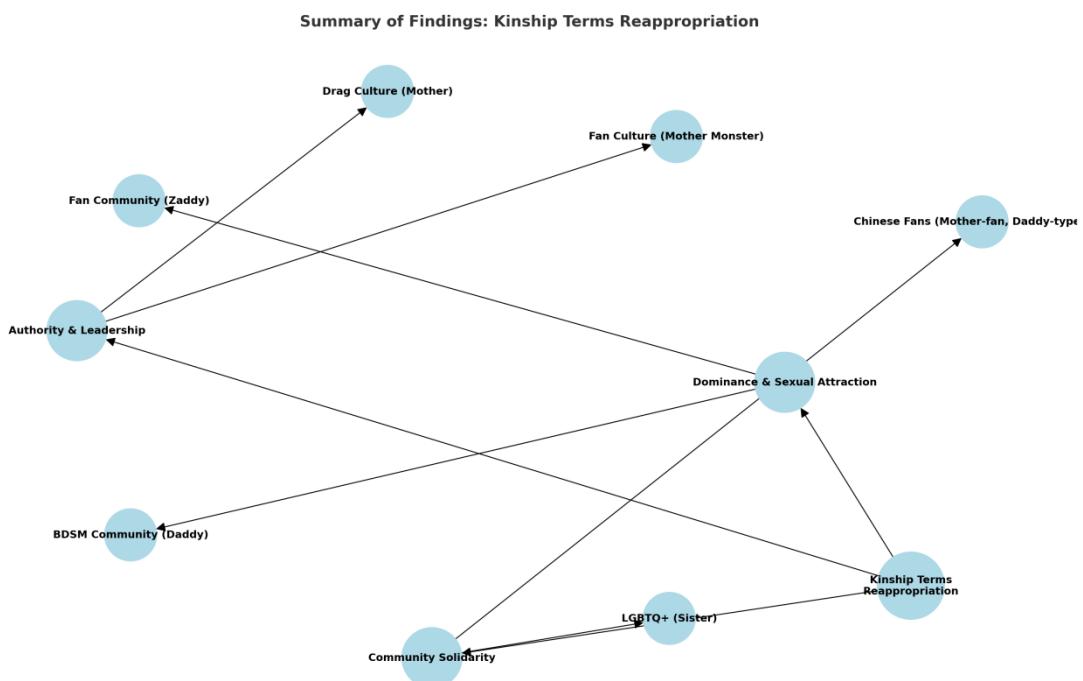


Cross-cultural comparisons underscore that while kinship metaphors share global patterns of linguistic creativity, their culturally specific appropriations highlight distinct societal values, providing deeper insight into localized identity constructions and community dynamics.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has explored how kinship terms, specifically “Mother,” “Daddy,” and “Sister,” undergo semantic transformations within digital subcultures such as fan communities, LGBTQ+ groups, drag cultures, and BDSM contexts. This study initially raised two critical questions: first, how and why kinship terms have become powerful metaphors within digital subcultures, and second, what these semantic shifts reveal about identity politics and community building online. Addressing the first question, this research demonstrates that kinship terms such as “mother,” “Daddy,” and “sister” are metaphorically powerful due to their capacity to embody

complex relational dynamics including authority, intimacy, and emotional support within communities that lack traditional familial structures. Through metaphorical mappings identified by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), attributes traditionally associated with familial roles, such as nurturing, protection, guidance, and authority, are cognitively and linguistically projected onto non-familial contexts, effectively addressing these communities' collective needs for alternative forms of social bonding, hierarchical organization, and identity expression. Regarding the second question, the semantic transformations of kinship terms expose the underlying identity politics at play, revealing a strategic negotiation and subversion of traditional norms surrounding gender, sexuality, and power. Specifically, these metaphorical reappropriations serve as performative acts (Butler, 1990) through which marginalized communities assert autonomy, challenge dominant cultural narratives, and construct cohesive identities, thus highlighting the inherently political dimension of linguistic creativity within digital spaces. These linguistic innovations vividly illustrate the intricate interplay between language, identity politics, and power relations, demonstrating how seemingly mundane lexical choices become powerful sites for negotiating contemporary social meanings and group boundaries.



The term “Mother,” traditionally signifying biological nurturing and familial responsibility, has been symbolically elevated within various internet subcultures to represent authoritative leadership, collective guidance, and community cohesion. Within drag culture, exemplified by RuPaul’s influential role as a “House Mother,” the maternal metaphor conveys a sense of protective mentorship combined with assertive leadership, signifying both communal belonging and hierarchical respect (Moore, 2013). Similarly, fan culture frequently attributes maternal authority to figures like Lady Gaga, who embody protective and nurturing authority over fan communities. Drawing upon Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, this semantic shift, from nurturing caregiver to controlling authority, reflects a broader cognitive transformation that connects emotional intimacy to the exercise of power and control, thereby reshaping traditional familial metaphors into contemporary symbols of authority. Contrary to classical kinship metaphor theories that prioritize biological continuity, our findings demonstrate that digital subcultures preferentially map familial terms onto power hierarchies rather than blood ties (e.g., “mother” → drag authority). This necessitates revisions to metaphor theory’s treatment of kinship as primarily genealogical.

Likewise, the term “Daddy” has been significantly recontextualized, blending patriarchal authority with explicit sexuality and consensual dominance, particularly evident within BDSM communities and fan cultures. BDSM’s linguistic appropriation of “Daddy” emphasizes carefully negotiated relational dynamics wherein paternalistic care merges explicitly with sexual and emotional dominance, challenging traditional patriarchal associations with coercive control (Langridge & Barker, 2007; Weiss, 2011). The fan culture phenomenon of “Zaddy,” exemplified by celebrities such as Idris Elba, similarly integrates patriarchal imagery with sexual charisma, transforming authoritative masculinity into a playful yet meaningful cultural meme. Both usages critically reconfigure paternal authority by foregrounding elements of consent, sexual autonomy, and playful subversion, thus reflecting nuanced negotiations of gender and power within contemporary digital spaces (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015).

Further analysis reveals how the term “Sister” functions within LGBTQ+ communities to actively construct solidarity, identity affirmation, and collective resistance to social marginalization. Terms like “Yes, sister!” often serve as vocal affirmations of mutual support, explicitly constructing emotional and social cohesion within queer spaces (Barrett, 2017). Additionally, cross-cultural comparative analysis highlights distinct linguistic practices in Chinese fan communities, where terms such as “mother-fan” (妈粉) and “Daddy-type idol” (爹系爱豆) emphasize emotional responsibility, caretaking, and protective intimacy in ways that reflect culturally specific collectivist values (Yang & Bao, 2012). Compared to English-language fan communities, where familial terms often carry stronger playful and sexualized connotations, Chinese fandom’s metaphorical use of familial terms foregrounds relational responsibility, emotional management, and moral guardianship.

Collectively, these findings underline that kinship term innovations are not merely linguistic curiosities but rather strategic, performative practices central to digital identity politics. Through metaphorical extension and symbolic reinterpretation, online subcultures actively negotiate identity boundaries, reaffirm group cohesion, and critically engage with existing power structures, reflecting broader shifts in cultural attitudes toward gender roles, sexuality, authority, and community.

This paper provides important theoretical insights into queer linguistics and sociolinguistic research by highlighting the subversive and innovative potentials of digital linguistic practices. Importantly, the performative resignification of “daddy” generalizes Butler’s theory beyond its original focus on gendered terms (e.g., “queen”). When kinship terms like “daddy” become sites of subversion through BDSM contracts (“daddy’s rules are negotiated”) or fan memes (“#ZaddyJustice”), they demonstrate that even patriarchal vocabulary can be destabilized through digital community practices. This expands the scope of performativity theory to include ostensibly neutral kinship lexemes. Extending Butler’s (1990) gender performativity framework, the research demonstrates how strategic linguistic appropriations actively destabilize traditional conceptions of gender and power. By illustrating how terms like “Daddy” and “Mother” are performatively employed to both reference and subvert normative social expectations, this study underscores language’s dynamic

role in reshaping cultural narratives surrounding gender and sexuality. These findings emphasize linguistic practices as critical sites for performative subversion, expanding queer theoretical perspectives beyond purely gender-based analyses to encompass broader structures of authority and relational dynamics (Butler, 1990; Leap, 2019).

Moreover, the research significantly contributes to sociolinguistic theories of identity construction and community boundary-making (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). By documenting the deliberate linguistic strategies employed within digital subcultures to construct shared identities and group solidarity, this study demonstrates language's active role in both creating and maintaining social identities. The cross-cultural comparative dimension, examining Chinese versus English-speaking fandom, further highlights the interplay between linguistic choices and cultural context, thus emphasizing the importance of culturally specific values in shaping linguistic practices and community dynamics.

Despite its contributions, this research acknowledges several limitations. First, the analysis primarily focuses on English-speaking and Chinese digital communities, limiting the scope of linguistic diversity. While comparative analysis between English and Chinese contexts provides valuable insights, additional exploration involving other languages and cultures could further enrich our understanding of kinship metaphors in digital subcultures. Additionally, the qualitative and textual nature of the research relies predominantly on interpretative analysis of selected cases, potentially limiting generalizability and overlooking broader quantitative patterns of linguistic usage.

Furthermore, the emphasis on specific digital platforms and communities (e.g., fan groups, BDSM forums, LGBTQ+ digital spaces) limits insights into offline linguistic practices and interactions. Future research could integrate more diverse datasets, including offline contexts, structured interviews, and participant observation, to provide deeper insights into how linguistic practices are embodied and enacted beyond online contexts.

In conclusion, future studies should pursue broader cross-linguistic comparisons, incorporate quantitative analyses to map linguistic innovations more systematically,

and include offline ethnographic data to further illuminate the complex interactions between linguistic practice, identity formation, and cultural context. Expanding research in these directions promises deeper insights into the multifaceted roles language plays in constructing identities, reshaping social boundaries, and negotiating power dynamics within diverse cultural and linguistic landscapes.

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