

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE USE ON THE WRITTEN ENGLISH OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY WUKARI

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of social media language use on the written English of undergraduate students in the Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Wukari. The study is grounded in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which explains how individuals acquire language behaviors through observation, retention, reproduction, and motivation within their environment. The problem addressed is that social media communication, characterized by abbreviations, slang, code-mixing, and non-standard spellings, may negatively influence students' academic writing. The study aims to identify the common linguistic features in students' social media communication and determine how these features influence their written English in formal academic contexts. Using a corpus-based approach, a purposive sample of 20 second-year students from four departments was selected. Data were collected from authentic texts generated by students from their social media interactions on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. The qualitative analysis identified and described recurring linguistic features including abbreviations (u, 2day, pls), code-mixing with Nigerian Pidgin (dey, abeg, no go), grammatical deviations (I go send, ache me die), and non-standard spellings. The findings reveal that these linguistic features are pervasive in students' online communication and frequently transfer into their academic writing, affecting spelling accuracy, grammatical correctness, and formality. The study concludes that social media significantly shapes students' language habits through repeated exposure and social reinforcement of informal patterns. In view of these findings, the study recommends implementing language awareness programs, strengthening standard writing instruction, integrating digital literacy into the curriculum, increasing formal writing practice, and conducting campus-wide awareness campaigns to help students distinguish between informal digital communication and formal academic writing.

Keywords: Social media, Language, Written English, Academic writing, Abbreviations, Code-mixing.

Introduction

The English language plays a central role in education, governance, and international communication. In Nigeria, it serves as the official language and the principal medium of instruction in schools and universities. As a result, proficiency in written English is essential for academic success, particularly at the tertiary level, where students are assessed through essays, assignments, examinations, and research reports. Effective academic writing requires adherence to standard conventions of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and formal expression.

The rapid growth of digital technology has transformed communication practices, especially among young people. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and also Telegram, have become integral to students' daily interactions. These platforms encourage fast and informal communication, often characterized by abbreviations, slang, emojis, code-mixing, and non-standard spellings. Crystal (2006) observes that internet-mediated communication has generated linguistic forms that differ from conventional writing because users prioritize speed and convenience. Baron (2008) similarly notes that electronic communication promotes brevity and informality, which may blur the distinction between casual and formal writing.

Scholars however have offered differing views on the influence of social media on writing. Some studies suggest that digital platforms provide opportunities for frequent written practice and increased vocabulary exposure. For instance, Naji (2023) found that WhatsApp, when used in a structured instructional setting, improved students' writing performance. However, other studies report that the habitual use of abbreviated and informal expressions may negatively affect students' academic writing. Hashim et al. (2018) and Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) found that students often transfer abbreviations, slang, and grammatical shortcuts from social media into formal assignments.

In multilingual contexts such as Nigeria, social media language is further shaped by the interaction between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages. Students frequently engage in code-mixing and code-switching, producing hybrid expressions such as "I dey come" and "I no wan go." While these forms facilitate informal communication and reflect social identity, they interfere with students' ability to maintain standard English in academic contexts.

This study is anchored in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which posits that individuals learn behaviors through observation and imitation within their environment. Applied to this study, students are continually exposed to informal linguistic patterns on social media and may internalize and reproduce these patterns in their own writing. The theory provides a useful framework for explaining how repeated interaction with digital discourse shapes students' language habits over time.

Despite growing scholarship on social media and writing, there remains a need for context-specific studies that examine authentic student-generated texts. This study therefore investigates the impact of social media language on the written English of undergraduate students in the Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Wukari. It focuses on the extent of social media use, the linguistic features common in students' online communication, and the ways these features influence formal academic writing. The findings contribute to current discussions on language use in the digital age and offer practical insights for improving students' academic writing skills.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth of social media has transformed how students communicate, often favoring fast, informal, and non-standard grammatical structures. While convenient, this has raised concerns about the potential negative influence on students' written English in academic contexts. Previous studies have shown that highly active social media users tend to transfer informal language features into their academic work, affecting spelling and grammatical accuracy. In Nigeria, there is a noted presence of non-standard language forms in students' writing. However, a gap remains in the detailed analysis of specific linguistic features and how they directly influence written English at the local university level. This study aims to fill that gap.

Research Questions

- i. To what extent do undergraduate students use social media platforms?
- ii. What are the common linguistic features used by students on social media?
- iii. How does students engagement on social media influence their written English formal writing?

Research Objectives

- i. To determine the extent to which undergraduate students use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram.
- ii. To identify the common linguistic features used by students on social media.
- iii. To determine the influence of social media communication on students' written English, especially in formal academic writing.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design and a corpus-based approach to examine the impact of social media language on the written English of undergraduate students in the Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Wukari. A purposive sample of 20 second-year students was selected based on their active use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Data consisted of authentic chat messages, and posts generated by the participants. Twenty representative text samples were selected for analysis.

The data were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative analysis identified and described recurring linguistic features, while the quantitative analysis determined their frequency of occurrence. These features were then compared with standard written English to assess their possible influence on students' academic writing.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Linguistic Features Identified in Students' Texts/Messages

This section identifies and categorizes the linguistic features present in students' social media texts.

Sample 1

"Gud mrng bro, pls I won't be able to come 2 class 2day, my head dey ache me die. I go collect note later abeg."

Features:

Gud, mrng, pls, 2day - Abbreviation

dey, abeg - Code-mixing

ache me die Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: “Good morning brother, please I won’t be able to attend the class today because I’m not feeling too well. I tried reading last night but my head was aching seriously. I will catch up with the notes later, just help me inform the course representative.

Sample 2

“Guy I dey come campus later sha but transport don cost wella. If lecture still dey by 12 I go show.”

Features:

dey, sha, don - Code-mixing

wella - Slang

I go show - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: “My friend, I would be coming to school only if the 12 pm class would hold. Transport fare has been doubled.”

Sample 3

“I really appreciate your support during exams, God bless u all. No matter hw e be, we go still thank God.”

Features:

u, hw - Abbreviation

una, e - Code-mixing

we go still - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: “I really appreciate your support during the just concluded exams, God bless you all. We would always thank God, regardless”

Sample 4

“This school stress no get part 2 you go read tire still no get am. Omo we move regardless.”

Features:

2 - Abbreviation

no get, omo - Slang

get am - Code-mixing

Standard form: “The stress from school work is a whole lot, one would read for long and still not get understanding. No matter what, we would push through.”

Sample 5

“Pls who understand that assignment? I don’t really get wetin lecturer mean yday, e come dey look hard now.”

Features:

Pls, yday - Abbreviation

wetin, dey - Code-mixing

lecturer mean - Grammatical Deviation (GD)

Standard form: “Please can someone explain that assignment, I didn’t really understand what the lecturer meant yesterday. I thought it was something simple but now it looks complicated.”

Sample 6

“Time to be proud of our villages, u may meet ur village bro or sis here.

Features:

U, ur, bro, sis- Abbreviation

Standard form: "Its time to take pride in our villages; you may even meet people from your hometown here."

Sample 7

"Abeg remind me test 2mrw, I was too busy 2day I almost forget. I no wan carry last o"

Features:

2mrw, 2day - Abbreviation

Abeg, no wan - Code-mixing

carry last - Slang

Standard form: Please remind me about the test tomorrow, I have been so busy today I almost forgot. I dont want to perform poorly in this course."

Sample 8

"I feel say students no hate reading like that, na stress and pressure dey make everything hard."

Features:

say, na, dey - Code-mixing

no hate → Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "I feel like most students dont actually hate reading, its the environment and pressure that make everything harder than it should be."

Sample 9

"I go send u d material 2nyt, still arranging it. Make sure u read it b4 2mrw class."

Features:

u, d, 2nyt, b4, 2mrw - Abbreviation

I go send - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "I'll send you the material later tonight, I'm still trying to arrange everything properly. Make sure you read it before tomorrow so you won't be confused in class."

Sample 10

"Back then things no hard like dis. Now everything is costly, survival don turn daily struggle fr."

Features:

dis - Non-standard spelling

don - Code-mixing

fr – Slang, meaning for real.

Standard form: "Back in the day, things were not this hard. Now everything is expensive and survival is becoming a daily struggle. We just have to stay strong."

Sample 11

"I no go lecture 2day cos I no feel fine. Abegwetin lecturer give as assignment?"

Features:

2day, cos - Abbreviation

no go, abeg, wetin - Code-mixing

lecturer give - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "I didn't go for the lecture because I was not feeling fine, but I heard the lecturer gave an assignment. Please what exactly are we supposed to do?"

Sample 12

"Life no balance but we thank God one day everything go make sense."

Features:

no balance - Code-mixing

go make sense - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "Life is not Fair, but we thank God because everything will soon be alright."

Sample 13

"Pls send correct timetable, d oneway I get dey confuse me. I no wan miss class again."

Features:

Pls, d - Abbreviation

wey, dey, no wan -Code-mixing

confuse me - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "Can you please send me the correct timetable? The one I have is confusing and I don't want to miss any class again."

Sample 14

"No matter what u'repassing thru, God dey. Just hold on, everything go align."

Features:

U're - Abbreviation

Standard form: "No matter what you are going through, always remember that God is faithful. Just keep believing and everything will fall into place."

Sample 15

First class no be luck, na consistency, sleepless nights and serious discipline.

Features:

no be luck-Code-mixing

Standard form: "Graduating with a first class does not entail luck, it entails consistency, sleepless nights and discipline."

Sample 16

"I try do d assignment yday but I got tired halfway this week stress too much. I go finish am 2mrw mrng."

Features:

d, yday, 2mrw, mrng -Abbreviation

am - Code-mixing

I go finish - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "Honestly, I tried to finish that assignment yesterday but I got tired halfway. The stress from classes this week is too much. I will just wake up early and complete it before submission time."

Sample 17

"Sometimes I just dey think about life after school and e dey scary. Too many expectations tbh."

Features:

dey, e - Code-mixing

tbh – Slang

Standard form: "Sometimes I just sit and think about life after school and it honestly scares me. There are so many expectations and very little opportunities out there."

Sample 18

"God no go shame us even if things hard now, better days dey come."

Features:

no go, dey -Code-mixing

better days dey come - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "God will not put us to shame, even though things are hard now, we still believe that better days are coming. Just keep pushing."

Sample 19

"I no understand anything wey dem teach 2day lecturer too rush. Abeg who fit explain?"

Features:

2day -Abbreviation

no, wey, dem -Code-mixing

lecturer too rush - Grammatical Deviation

Standard form: "I didn't understand what was taught in class today at all. The lecturer was too fast and didn't even explain properly. I will need someone to break it down for me."

Sample 20

"Consistency na key fr. Even if e no dey work now, just keep pushing."

Features:

na, e - Code-mixing

fr -Slang

Standard form: "I have come to realize that consistency is the key to success. Even when it feels like nothing is working, you just have to keep going and trust the process."

The data presented revealed that abbreviations and non-standard spellings were prevalent features in the corpus. Expressions such as "Gud," "mrng," "pls," "u," "2day," and "tnx" occurred across multiple samples. For example, one student wrote, "Gud mrng bro, pls I wont be able to come 2 class 2day, my head dey ache me die. I go collect note later abeg." This single text contains abbreviations ("Gud," "mrng," "pls," "2day"), code-mixing ("dey," "abeg"), and grammatical deviation ("ache me die").

Code-mixing and code-switching involving English and Nigerian Pidgin were also evident throughout the corpus. Expressions such as "I dey come," "transport don cost wella," "God no go shame us," and "Exam go still humble u" demonstrate the integration of local linguistic forms into online communication. The study further observed grammatical deviations, including non-standard sentence constructions such as "I go send u d material 2nyt" and "I no wan go."

These findings indicate that students adapt their language to suit the informal and interactive nature of social media. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory,, this adaptation occurs through repeated observation and imitation of peer communication patterns. Students observe these informal patterns daily, internalize them through repeated exposure, and reproduce them in their own online messages. The social reinforcement they receive quicker responses, peer acceptance, and sense of community belonging motivates continued use of these non-standard forms.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media significantly shapes students' language habits. Frequent exposure to abbreviated and informal expressions appears to normalize these forms within the digital communication context. The danger emerges when students do not consciously distinguish between informal digital communication and academic English. When students

transfer these normalized patterns into academic writing such as essays, assignments, and examinations, they may inadvertently use abbreviated forms ("u" for "you," "2day" for "today"), code-mixed expressions ("I dey come" in place of "I am coming"), and non-standard grammatical structures ("I go send" instead of "I will send") in formal contexts where standard English is required.

This pattern strongly supports Bandura's Social Learning Theory. The theory explains that the linguistic behaviors students acquire through constant observation and repeated interaction within their social media environment become deeply ingrained. As long as students remain immersed in informal digital communication where these patterns are observed, retained, reproduced, and socially rewarded, they are likely to maintain these behaviors. Without explicit intervention or conscious awareness of code-switching requirements, the informal patterns learned through social media will continue to influence and potentially undermine their academic writing.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that social media has a profound influence on students' written English. The informal nature of digital communication encourages the use of non-standard language forms, which students may unconsciously adopt and reproduce.

However, it is important to note that this influence is not entirely negative. Social media also enhances communication, creativity, and linguistic flexibility. The real challenge lies in ensuring that students are able to distinguish between informal and formal contexts of language use.

In line with Social Learning Theory, the study concludes that students' language behavior is largely shaped by their environment. As long as they remain immersed in informal digital communication, there is a strong likelihood that these patterns will continue to influence their writing.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to address the influence of social media on students' written English.

Firstly universities should conduct orientation workshops for first-year students and integrate a 3-credit course titled "Language in Digital Spaces" into the curriculum. These programs should teach students to distinguish between informal digital language and formal academic writing using contrastive examples. Students should analyze authentic social media discourse and develop explicit code-switching strategies. This creates conscious awareness of why language must differ across contexts

Secondly, Students must take responsibility for recognizing and practicing the distinction between informal digital language and formal academic writing. Each student should maintain a reflective journal analyzing their own social media communication, identifying non-standard features (abbreviations, code-mixing, grammatical deviations) that must not appear in academic work. Students should deliberately practice formal writing in essays, assignments, and self-editing before submission. Students must consciously choose to use standard English in academic contexts, understanding that social media language is inappropriate for scholarly work.

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