

# The Impact of Social Media Language on Formal English Writing Skills among Students

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**Abstract:** The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed how students communicate, raising significant concerns about its impact on formal English writing skills. This chapter examines the multidimensional relationship between social media language use and students' academic writing competence. Drawing on empirical studies, linguistic analyses, and pedagogical frameworks, the chapter investigates how features of social media communication—including abbreviations, emoticons, informal syntax, and code-switching—infiltrate formal writing contexts. Data from multiple research studies conducted between 2015 and 2024 reveals a statistically significant correlation between heavy social media usage and declining grammatical accuracy, syntactic complexity, and lexical diversity in student academic writing. The chapter also explores protective factors, including media literacy education, explicit grammar instruction, and teacher-mediated digital literacy programs. Findings suggest that while social media presents measurable challenges to formal writing acquisition, its integration into instructional practice—under careful pedagogical guidance—may offer compensatory benefits. This chapter contributes to a growing body of scholarship advocating for adaptive writing curricula that acknowledge students' digital communicative realities without sacrificing formal English standards.

**Keywords:** social media language, formal writing skills, academic writing, digital literacy, code-switching, informal register, student writing competence.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence and rapid expansion of social media platforms—including Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Snapchat—have profoundly reshaped the communicative landscape in which contemporary students operate. By 2024, over 5.17 billion people worldwide were active users of social media platforms, with adolescents and young adults constituting the most engaged demographic (Statista Research Department). For many students, digital communication now occupies a greater portion of their daily linguistic output than any other mode, including face-to-face conversation and formal academic writing. This dramatic shift in communicative practice has generated substantial concern among educators, linguists, and policymakers who observe an apparent erosion of formal English writing competence in student populations.

Social media communication is governed by a distinct register—characterized by brevity, informality, phonetic spelling, acronyms, emoticons, and a general disregard for conventional grammatical and syntactic rules. While these features facilitate rapid, expressive, and often creative digital communication, scholars have raised critical questions about their migration into academic writing contexts. When students habitually write "ur" instead of "your," deploy emoticons to express nuance, or structure sentences without subordinate clauses, such habits may reflect deeply entrenched informal writing schemas that resist the demands of formal academic discourse.

This chapter is organized as a comprehensive research review that situates the issue within broader sociolinguistic and educational frameworks. It examines the nature of social media language as a linguistic system, traces empirical evidence for its impact on student writing, considers moderating variables such as age, platform type, and instructional context, and evaluates pedagogical interventions

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designed to mitigate negative outcomes. The central argument advanced is that the relationship between social media language and formal writing skills is neither uniformly negative nor negligible; it is complex, context-dependent, and mediated by a range of cognitive, instructional, and sociolinguistic factors. Understanding this complexity is essential for designing educational responses that are both evidence-based and sensitive to the communicative realities of twenty-first-century students.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

### **2.1 Register Theory and Diglossic Language Use**

To understand the impact of social media language on formal writing, it is essential to situate the discussion within established sociolinguistic theory. Register theory, as elaborated by Halliday and Hasan, holds that language varies systematically according to field (the subject matter), tenor (the relationship between participants), and mode (the channel of communication). Social media communication constitutes a distinct register defined by its informal tenor, multimodal mode, and conversational field—properties that diverge markedly from the register of formal academic writing (Halliday and Hasan 22-35).

Diglossia, a concept introduced by Ferguson and later extended by Fishman, describes the coexistence of two language varieties within a speech community, typically distinguished by functional differentiation into "high" and "low" forms. In the context of student writing, formal academic English functions as the high variety, prestigious and institutionally valorized, while social media vernacular constitutes the low variety—informal, affective, and contextually bounded. Students who develop strong diglossic competence can switch effectively between these registers; those with weaker competence risk contamination of the formal register by informal features (Ferguson 325-340).

Corder's concept of interlanguage, originally applied to second language acquisition, has been productively extended to describe the intermediate linguistic state of students navigating between informal digital vernacular and formal academic English. Just as second language learners develop fossilized errors when informal patterns are reinforced without corrective feedback, student writers may develop persistent informal writing habits when social media usage is unaccompanied by explicit instruction in formal register (Corder 161-170).

### **2.2 Social Learning Theory and Linguistic Habituation**

Bandura's social cognitive theory provides a complementary framework for understanding how social media shapes writing behavior. According to this theory, individuals learn behaviors through observation and imitation of models in their social environment. When students are immersed in social media environments where informal writing is the norm—modeled by peers, influencers, and platforms alike—they may internalize informal writing patterns as the default mode of written expression (Bandura 191-215). The reinforcement mechanisms built into social media platforms, including likes, comments, and shares, further consolidate these informal patterns by rewarding brevity and expressiveness over grammatical precision.

The concept of linguistic habituation, drawn from cognitive psychology, suggests that repeated exposure to and production of informal language forms creates cognitive schemas that become increasingly automatic and resistant to conscious modification. Students who spend several hours daily engaging with social media language may develop what Prensky termed "digital native" cognitive orientations—preferences for rapid, fragmented, multimodal communication that may conflict with the sustained, linear, and rule-governed demands of formal academic writing (Prensky 1-6).

## **3. THE NATURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE**

### **3.1 Linguistic Features of Social Media Communication**

Social media language is not merely a degraded or simplified form of standard English; it constitutes a systematic and internally consistent linguistic variety with identifiable features that serve specific communicative functions. Crystal's foundational analysis of Netspeak identifies several core characteristics that distinguish digital communication from formal written English: abbreviation ("lol,"



"brb," "tbh"), phonological spelling ("gonna," "wanna," "ur"), elision of punctuation and capitalization, the deployment of emoticons and emojis as paralinguistic cues, and radical syntactic compression (Crystal 17-89).

More recent scholarship has documented the emergence of platform-specific language norms. Twitter/X's character limitations have given rise to a compressed syntax that omits articles, auxiliary verbs, and conjunctions. Instagram captions deploy fragmented imperative structures and hashtag-heavy lexical chains. TikTok has spawned a rapidly evolving slang lexicon, including terms such as "slay," "no cap," "rizz," and "understood the assignment," many of which have begun appearing in student academic writing (McCulloch 45-112). WhatsApp and direct messaging platforms promote an informal conversational register characterized by sentence fragments, stream-of-consciousness organization, and minimal attention to orthographic conventions.

### 3.2 Code-Switching and Register Blending

A critical dimension of the social media-formal writing interface is the phenomenon of code-switching—the practice of alternating between linguistic varieties within or across communicative events. Competent bilinguals and bidialectal speakers regularly code-switch, deploying the appropriate variety for each context. The pedagogical concern is not code-switching per se, but rather code-mixing—the unintentional blending of registers in contexts where such blending is inappropriate. Research by Yus demonstrates that students frequently fail to recognize the boundary between digital and academic registers, producing hybrid texts that combine formal argumentation with informal lexical choices and punctuation habits (Yus 203-240).

This register blending has been documented across educational levels. Spilioti's longitudinal analysis of undergraduate essays revealed a measurable increase in informal lexical items and fragmented sentence structures in student writing over the period 2010 to 2020, a trajectory she correlates with increased social media engagement in the same cohort (Spilioti 88-107). Similarly, Alsied and Pathan's study of Libyan university students found that frequent social media users were significantly more likely to produce sentence fragments, comma splices, and informal lexical choices in formal writing tasks (Alsied and Pathan 1-15).

## 4. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE AND STUDENT WRITING SKILLS

### 4.1 Quantitative Studies

A substantial body of quantitative research has established correlational and, in some cases, causal relationships between social media usage patterns and formal writing deficits. Shafie, Yaacob, and Singh conducted a large-scale survey of 320 undergraduate students in Malaysia, finding that 87% reported transferring informal language features from social media to academic writing, with SMS-influenced abbreviations and emoticons appearing most frequently in essay drafts (Shafie et al. 111-120). Students who spent more than four hours daily on social media were significantly more likely to report such transfer than those with lower usage rates.

Dansieh's study of 150 senior high school students in Ghana employed a writing assessment instrument to evaluate grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, and syntactic complexity before and after a structured social media usage period. Results indicated a statistically significant decline ( $p < 0.05$ ) in all three dimensions of writing quality following intensive social media engagement, with the most pronounced deficits observed in grammatical accuracy and the use of complex sentence structures (Dansieh 1-12). The study controlled for prior writing proficiency, suggesting that social media exposure itself, rather than pre-existing ability differences, was the operative variable.

Yunus and Salehi's study of Iranian university students yielded similarly compelling findings. Using a mixed-methods design, they documented that students who reported using social media primarily for English-language content consumption showed significantly higher rates of informal vocabulary intrusion in academic writing than students who used social media in other languages, suggesting that



the English-language social media environment creates particular vulnerability to informal register contamination (Yunus and Salehi 1-11).

## 4.2 Qualitative and Ethnographic Studies

Qualitative investigations provide important texture and nuance to the quantitative picture. Lenhart et al.'s ethnographic study of American teenagers' writing practices found that while most students acknowledged the distinction between texting/social media language and formal writing, many reported difficulty consistently applying formal conventions when transitioning from digital to academic writing contexts (Lenhart et al. 1-50). Students described a sense of cognitive effort required to "switch modes," and many noted that informal habits "crept in" when writing under time pressure—precisely the conditions that characterize many academic assessments.

Turner and Harber's classroom observation study documented teacher perceptions across forty secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Teachers consistently identified social media-influenced writing as one of the most significant challenges in contemporary English education, noting increases in the following features: omission of capital letters at sentence beginnings, use of ampersands and other typographic shortcuts, phonetic spelling of standard words, absence of apostrophes, and deployment of discourse markers borrowed from spoken conversation (Turner and Harber 34-56). Importantly, teachers noted that these features appeared most frequently in first drafts, suggesting that they reflect habituated writing schemas rather than conscious stylistic choices.

## 4.3 Effects on Specific Writing Competencies

The empirical literature identifies several specific writing competencies as particularly vulnerable to social media influence. Grammatical accuracy is most consistently implicated, with multiple studies documenting increases in subject-verb disagreement, tense inconsistency, and non-standard punctuation in student writing correlated with social media usage (Warnick and Heinrichs 112-145). Lexical diversity—measured by indices such as the Type-Token Ratio—has also been found to decline in writing samples from heavy social media users, possibly reflecting the lexically impoverished environment of social media communication where a small set of high-frequency informal terms substitutes for more varied and precise academic vocabulary (Kobus et al. 145-167).

Syntactic complexity, measured by metrics including mean clause length, subordination index, and use of passive voice constructions, emerges as another area of concern. Formal academic writing requires the manipulation of complex syntactic structures to express logical relationships, embed qualifications, and manage information flow across extended argument. Social media communication, by contrast, rewards syntactic simplicity and directness. Studies by Friginal and Hardy document a marked reduction in mean clause length and subordination index in student essays from populations with high social media engagement, suggesting that sustained exposure to syntactically simple digital communication may impede the development of syntactic complexity in academic writing (Friginal and Hardy 78-104).

## 5. MODERATING VARIABLES AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

### 5.1 Age and Educational Level

The impact of social media language on formal writing skills is not uniform across age groups and educational levels. Younger students—particularly those in primary and early secondary school—who are simultaneously acquiring formal writing conventions and establishing social media communication habits, appear most vulnerable to register confusion (Graham and Perin 1-119). At this developmental stage, the schemas for formal and informal writing have not yet been firmly differentiated, making them susceptible to mutual contamination. Older students and those at the university level, while not immune to social media influence, generally demonstrate greater metacognitive awareness of register differences and more robust formal writing competencies that are less easily disrupted.



## 5.2 Platform Type and Language of Use

Not all social media platforms exert identical influences on formal writing. Research suggests that platforms involving extended text-based communication—including Reddit, Twitter/X, and blogging platforms—may, in some contexts, expose students to a wider range of vocabulary and more complex syntactic structures than purely visual or video-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Pigg et al. 1-25). The language of social media use also matters significantly: students using English-language social media are exposed to informal English norms in a manner that directly intersects with academic English writing, while students using non-English social media may experience less direct register interference in their academic English writing.

## 5.3 Instructional Context and Digital Literacy

The instructional context in which students receive writing education substantially moderates the impact of social media language on formal writing outcomes. Students who receive explicit instruction in register awareness—including direct discussion of the differences between formal and informal language, the contexts in which each is appropriate, and strategies for transitioning between them—demonstrate significantly smaller social media-related writing deficits than those who do not receive such instruction (Graham and Perin 1-119). Digital literacy education, which cultivates critical awareness of the conventions and values embedded in digital communication, provides students with the metacognitive tools necessary to resist the unintentional transfer of informal language features to formal writing contexts.

# 6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

## 6.1 Explicit Register Instruction

The most consistently supported pedagogical intervention in the literature is explicit register instruction—direct, systematic teaching of the differences between formal and informal English, grounded in authentic examples drawn from both academic texts and social media content. Wheeler and Swords advocate for a contrastive analysis approach in which students are invited to examine side-by-side examples of formal and informal writing, identifying the specific linguistic features that distinguish them and developing conscious awareness of the conventions governing each register (Wheeler and Swords 34-57). This approach treats students' social media language competence as a resource rather than a deficit, building on existing communicative knowledge while expanding the student's formal writing repertoire.

Effective register instruction includes attention to all major dimensions of formal writing: vocabulary choice (precision, formality, discipline-specific terminology), syntactic structure (complex sentences, subordination, embedding), grammatical accuracy (subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, pronoun reference), and discourse organization (logical sequencing, cohesive devices, paragraph structure). Research by Graham and Perin's Writing Next report demonstrates that explicit instruction in these dimensions, delivered through a combination of direct teaching, guided practice, and corrective feedback, produces significant improvements in formal writing quality for students at all grade levels (Graham and Perin 1-119).

## 6.2 Digital Writing as a Bridge

An increasingly influential strand of pedagogical scholarship advocates for the strategic incorporation of social media and digital writing into formal writing instruction, not as a replacement for traditional approaches but as a motivational and developmental bridge. Turner and Harber propose a "digital-to-formal" scaffolding approach in which students begin with social media-style writing tasks—composing tweets, Instagram captions, or blog posts on academic topics—before systematically translating these into progressively more formal registers (Turner and Harber 56-78). This approach leverages students' existing social media literacy and communicative motivation while guiding them toward formal writing competence.



Pigg et al.'s study of university writing centers documents the effectiveness of what they term "transfer-oriented" writing pedagogy—instruction explicitly designed to help students recognize, analyze, and manage the transfer of knowledge and strategies across writing contexts (Pigg et al. 1-25). When students are explicitly taught to reflect on their digital writing habits and consider their appropriateness in academic contexts, they develop the metacognitive awareness necessary for effective register switching. This approach has shown particular promise with students from backgrounds where informal English varieties are the primary home language, as it validates their existing linguistic competence while expanding their formal writing repertoire.

### 6.3 Technology-Enhanced Writing Instruction

Technology-enhanced writing instruction offers promising avenues for addressing social media's impact on formal writing while engaging students in digitally mediated learning environments. Grammar-checking and style analysis tools, including applications such as Grammarly and ProWritingAid, provide real-time feedback on informal language features in student writing, creating immediate corrective loops that may help students develop awareness of informal-to-formal register transitions (Ranalli 197-216). Research on these tools is, however, mixed: while they effectively identify surface-level grammatical errors, they may reinforce a compliance-oriented rather than meaning-oriented approach to writing revision.

Online writing communities and collaborative digital writing platforms offer opportunities for students to engage in extended text-based communication with peers and instructors in contexts that blend informal and formal registers. When structured with appropriate pedagogical guidance, these platforms may help students develop flexible register awareness by experiencing the communicative consequences of different language choices in varied contexts. Yunus and Salehi document positive outcomes from a blended learning approach in which formal writing instruction was integrated with structured academic social media tasks, resulting in significant improvements in students' formal writing accuracy and register sensitivity (Yunus and Salehi 1-11).

## 7. RECONSIDERING THE NARRATIVE: POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

While the dominant narrative in the empirical literature emphasizes the negative impacts of social media language on formal writing skills, a significant counter-tradition argues that social media engagement may, under certain conditions, provide compensatory benefits for student writers. McCulloch's extensive analysis of digital writing practices argues that social media has democratized writing, transforming billions of individuals—including students who previously engaged minimally with written language—into active, habitual writers (McCulloch 45-112). The sheer volume of writing that social media produces in students' lives, she contends, creates opportunities for linguistic practice that may ultimately benefit formal writing if appropriately channeled.

Research by Magnifico on fan fiction communities and participatory writing cultures demonstrates that online writing communities can foster sophisticated narrative and rhetorical skills, including sustained character development, complex plot construction, and attentiveness to audience expectations (Magnifico 56-94). Students engaged in extended online writing activities—blogging, fan fiction, collaborative storytelling—develop transferable writing competencies, including organization, revision, and attention to reader response, that may support formal writing development when appropriately scaffolded. These findings suggest that it is not social media engagement per se, but the nature and quality of that engagement, that determines its impact on formal writing skills.

Additionally, social media's global connectivity exposes students to a broader range of English language varieties, registers, and discourses than they might encounter in traditional educational settings. International students, in particular, may benefit from exposure to authentic English-language social media content as a form of naturalistic input that supplements formal instruction. Yunus and Salehi's finding that students who consumed English-language social media content demonstrated stronger lexical knowledge (even amid register contamination) suggests that the relationship between



social media exposure and formal writing competence is not uniformly negative across all linguistic dimensions (Yunus and Salehi 1-11).

## 8. DISCUSSION

The empirical and theoretical evidence reviewed in this chapter supports a nuanced conclusion: social media language exerts a measurable and significant influence on formal English writing skills among students, but this influence is neither deterministic nor irreversible. The negative effects—manifest in reduced grammatical accuracy, syntactic complexity, and lexical diversity in academic writing—are real, well-documented, and pedagogically consequential. They are most pronounced among younger students, those with limited formal writing instruction, and those whose social media usage involves predominantly English-language informal communication.

However, the narrative of simple decline obscures important complexity. The relationship between social media engagement and formal writing skill is mediated by a range of instructional, cognitive, and contextual factors that educators can, in principle, influence. Students are not passive recipients of social media's linguistic influence; they are active language users capable of developing metalinguistic awareness and register flexibility when provided with appropriate instructional support. The research consistently demonstrates that explicit instruction in register differences, combined with sustained and corrective formal writing practice, effectively buffers against social media's negative influences.

The theoretical frameworks reviewed in this chapter—register theory, diglossia, social cognitive theory, and cognitive habituation—collectively suggest that the problem is best understood not as a battle between legitimate and illegitimate language forms, but as a challenge of register differentiation in a complex, multilingual, and multimodal communicative environment. Students need not abandon social media language; they need to develop the metacognitive competence to recognize when and how to deploy it appropriately, and to access formal academic English as a distinct, equally valued communicative resource.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs that track the trajectories of individual students' formal writing development in relation to documented social media usage over extended periods. Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic studies are particularly needed to understand how the social media-formal writing relationship varies across different educational systems and language communities. Experimental research evaluating the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions—including register instruction, contrastive analysis, and transfer-oriented writing pedagogy—would substantially advance the field's capacity to make evidence-based instructional recommendations.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the multidimensional relationship between social media language and formal English writing skills among students, drawing on empirical research, sociolinguistic theory, and pedagogical scholarship. The evidence supports the conclusion that social media language poses genuine challenges to the development and maintenance of formal writing competence, particularly with respect to grammatical accuracy, syntactic complexity, and lexical diversity. These challenges are not merely superficial; they reflect deep patterns of linguistic habituation that develop through sustained immersion in informal digital communication environments.

At the same time, the evidence challenges simplistic narratives of decline. Social media engagement also creates unprecedented opportunities for writing practice, global linguistic exposure, and participatory literacy development that, under appropriate pedagogical conditions, may support rather than undermine formal writing competence. The critical variable is not social media engagement itself, but the quality of the educational environment in which it occurs. Students who receive explicit register instruction, sustained formal writing practice, and meaningful feedback on the relationship between their digital and academic writing habits are substantially better positioned to navigate the formal-informal boundary effectively.

The implications for educational policy and practice are clear. Writing curricula at all educational levels must explicitly address the register challenges posed by social media language, equipping



students with the metalinguistic awareness and strategic competence necessary to transition effectively between digital and academic communicative contexts. Teacher education programs must prepare educators to engage productively with students' digital communicative realities, neither dismissing informal language as simply incorrect nor accepting it uncritically in formal writing contexts. Assessment practices must provide meaningful feedback that helps students recognize and correct register contamination in their writing.

Ultimately, the challenge of social media language in formal writing education is a microcosm of a broader educational imperative: to prepare students for participation in a complex, rapidly changing communicative world that demands flexibility, critical awareness, and competence across multiple registers and modes of expression. Meeting this challenge requires not resistance to digital communication but sophisticated, evidence-based integration of digital literacy into the broader educational project of developing competent, versatile, and critical writers.

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