

SOCIAL MEDIA, DIGITAL COMMUNICATION, AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRACTICES AMONG NIGERIAN STUDENTS: A COMPUTER-MEDIATED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of social media on English language practices among Nigerian students, addressing gaps in previous research regarding digital discourse and linguistic behavior. Grounded in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the study adopts a qualitative observational methodology. Data were collected from sixty students across WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok over three months. Content analysis was used to examine patterns such as code-mixing, abbreviations, grammatical structures, and vocabulary usage. Findings reveal that social media enhances communicative competence and lexical creativity while also encouraging informal language features that may affect formal writing. The study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by demonstrating that digital English usage is adaptive and context-dependent

rather than indicative of linguistic decline. It recommends integrating digital literacy into language pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

English language occupies a central and institutionalized role in Nigeria as the official language and the primary medium of instruction across all levels of education. It is equally the language of governance, commerce, media, and international communication. Consequently, proficiency in English is not only a marker of educational attainment but also a critical determinant of socio-economic mobility and global participation. However, in recent decades, the patterns of English language use among Nigerian students have undergone significant transformation, largely due to the proliferation of digital technologies and the widespread adoption of social media platforms.

The emergence of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok has fundamentally altered the nature of communication. These platforms provide interactive, multimodal, and instantaneous channels through which users engage in continuous written discourse. Unlike traditional forms of writing, communication on social media is characterized by brevity, informality, and creativity, often incorporating abbreviations, emojis, hashtags, slang expressions, and code-mixing with Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages. As a result, the boundaries between

spoken and written language have become increasingly blurred, giving rise to hybrid forms of English that are context-dependent and socially negotiated.

Scholarly debates surrounding this development remain polarized. On one hand, some researchers argue that social media enhances language learning by increasing exposure to English, promoting frequent usage, and fostering communicative confidence (Crystal, 2011). On the other hand, critics contend that the dominance of informal registers, non-standard spellings, and grammatical inconsistencies may negatively affect students' proficiency in formal and academic English. These concerns are particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where multilingualism already shapes language practices, and where English coexists with Nigerian Pidgin and numerous indigenous languages. Despite these ongoing debates, there remains a need for empirical investigation into how social media specifically influences English language practices among Nigerian students. Much of the existing literature tends to generalize the impact of digital communication without adequately examining the linguistic features that characterize actual online interactions. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how different social media platforms, with their unique affordances, shape language use in distinct ways.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The rapid proliferation of social media has transformed patterns of communication globally, particularly among young people who constitute the

most active users of digital platforms. In Nigeria, students increasingly rely on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok for everyday interaction, academic engagement, and social networking. Within these environments, English serves as the dominant medium of communication, yet it is often used in forms that diverge from conventional standards, incorporating abbreviations, slang, emojis, and code-mixing with Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages.

While existing studies acknowledge the growing influence of social media on language use, there remains a lack of detailed empirical analysis of how these digital practices specifically shape English language proficiency among Nigerian students. Much of the literature tends to adopt generalized or speculative positions either portraying social media as a tool that enhances language learning or as a factor contributing to linguistic decline without sufficient attention to the actual linguistic features present in online interactions. Furthermore, previous research has not adequately examined how different social media platforms, each with unique communicative affordances, influence patterns of language use in distinct ways. In addition, the multilingual nature of the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment complicates the issue further. The coexistence of Standard English, Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and numerous indigenous languages creates a context in which code-mixing and hybrid language forms are not only common but also socially meaningful.

However, it remains unclear whether such practices support communicative competence or undermine mastery of formal English required for academic and professional purposes. The absence of clearly defined research aims and systematic analysis in previous studies has resulted in a gap in understanding the relationship between social media use and English language practices among Nigerian students. Specifically, there is insufficient knowledge about the extent to which digital communication fosters linguistic creativity and confidence, or conversely, contributes to the erosion of grammatical accuracy and formal writing skills.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Global Perspectives on Social Media and Language Use

The relationship between social media and language use has attracted significant scholarly attention within the fields of sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and digital communication. Early work by David Crystal (2011) in *internet linguistics* challenges the assumption that digital communication leads to linguistic deterioration. Instead, Crystal argues that online communication fosters creativity, innovation, and adaptability in language use. He posits that features such as abbreviations, acronyms, and playful spellings are not signs of decay but reflections of users' ability to manipulate language to suit new communicative environments.

Similarly, studies by Sali Tagliamonte and Derek Denis (2008) on instant messaging among teenagers reveal that while non-standard forms are prevalent in digital communication, they do not necessarily undermine competence in standard language. Their findings suggest that young users possess the ability to switch between informal and formal registers depending on context, thereby demonstrating linguistic flexibility rather than deficiency.

Recent studies further emphasize the pedagogical potential of social media. Zhou (2021) observes that platforms such as Facebook and YouTube enhance language acquisition by providing authentic exposure to real-life communication. Likewise, D'Almeida and Ramachandran (2023) argue that social media facilitates interactive learning, allowing users to engage in meaningful communication beyond the traditional classroom setting.

3.2 Social Media as a Digital Discourse Environment

Social media platforms are not merely tools for communication; they constitute complex digital discourse environments shaped by specific technological affordances. These affordances such as character limits, multimodality, interactivity, and algorithmic visibility play a crucial role in shaping language use. For instance, the brevity imposed by X (formerly Twitter) encourages concise expressions, often resulting in abbreviations and compressed syntax. In contrast, platforms like Facebook allow for extended discourse, supporting more

elaborate and semi-formal language use. WhatsApp, with its conversational threading, mirrors spoken interaction, thereby promoting informality and immediacy. Scholars in Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) argue that online communication blurs the distinction between speech and writing. Digital texts often exhibit features of spoken discourse such as turn-taking, informality, and spontaneity while retaining characteristics of written language, including permanence and textual organization. This hybrid nature of communication has significant implications for how English is used and perceived in digital contexts. Furthermore, multimodal elements such as emojis, gifs, and memes function as semiotic resources that complement or even replace linguistic expressions. These elements enrich communication but also challenge traditional notions of language structure and meaning.

3.3 Social Media and English Language Learning

The integration of social media into language learning has been widely discussed in recent literature. Studies indicate that social media platforms can enhance language skills by providing opportunities for authentic interaction, peer collaboration, and immediate feedback. According to recent research in English language pedagogy, social media supports the development of all four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing through exposure to diverse content and communicative contexts. Learners are able to practice English in real-life situations, thereby improving fluency and confidence. Moreover, social

media encourages learner autonomy. Students actively seek out content, participate in discussions, and engage with global audiences, which contribute to experiential learning. This aligns with constructivist theories of language acquisition, which emphasize active participation and social interaction. However, the informal nature of social media communication presents challenges. The dominance of non-standard forms may lead to the transfer of informal features into academic writing. As a result, educators face the task of helping students develop the ability to distinguish between appropriate contexts for different language registers.

3.4 Social Media, Multilingualism, and Nigerian English

The Nigerian context presents unique sociolinguistic dynamics that shape the use of English on social media. Nigeria is a highly multilingual society, where English coexists with Nigerian Pidgin and numerous indigenous languages. This linguistic diversity is reflected in digital communication, where code-mixing and hybrid language forms are common. Scholars such as Isaac and Gaksu (2023) argue that computer-mediated communication has contributed to the evolution of Nigerian English by introducing new lexical items, expressions, and syntactic structures. Similarly, Olorunmade (2022) highlights the role of social media in shaping both linguistic practices and socio-political discourse in Nigeria. Code-mixing, in particular, is a salient feature of Nigerian digital communication. Users frequently alternate between English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages

within a single conversation. While this practice enhances expressiveness and cultural identity, it raises concerns about its impact on mastery of Standard English. Furthermore, the widespread use of Nigerian Pidgin on social media reflects its growing acceptance as a lingua franca among young people. This development complicates the role of English as the dominant language of formal communication, as students may increasingly rely on hybrid forms that blur linguistic boundaries.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), two complementary frameworks that provide a robust basis for examining language use in digital environments. These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding how social media platforms shape linguistic behavior among Nigerian students.

4.1 Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to human interaction that occurs through digital technologies such as computers, mobile devices, and internet-based platforms. According to Susan Herring, CMC encompasses various forms of online communication, including emails, chats, social media posts, and discussion forums. It emphasizes how technological affordances

influence the structure, style, and function of communication. One of the central assumptions of CMC is that communication in digital environments differs significantly from traditional face-to-face interaction. These differences arise from features such as:

- Asynchronicity and synchronicity (e.g., delayed vs. real-time responses)
- Reduced physical cues (absence of tone, gesture, and facial expression)
- Text-based interaction
- Multimodality (integration of text, images, emojis, videos, and gifs)

These characteristics shape how users construct meaning and express themselves linguistically. For instance, the absence of non-verbal cues often leads users to compensate through the use of emojis, punctuation, and creative spellings. Similarly, the need for rapid communication encourages brevity, resulting in abbreviations and condensed syntax. Within the Nigerian context, CMC provides a useful lens for understanding how students adapt English to suit digital communication. The multilingual environment further enriches this interaction, as users incorporate elements of Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages into English discourse. Thus, CMC highlights the role of technology and context in shaping language practices.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, informed by the principles of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to examine patterns of language use, communicative practices, and meaning-making processes in naturally occurring digital interactions rather than to quantify variables. The descriptive design allows for a detailed and systematic exploration of how English is used across different social media platforms. By integrating CMDA, the study applies linguistic and discourse-analytic tools to investigate lexical, syntactic, orthographic, and pragmatic features of online communication.

5.2 Research Setting and Context

The study is situated within the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment, which is characterized by multilingualism and the coexistence of Standard English, Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and various indigenous languages. This linguistic diversity significantly influences communication patterns, particularly in informal digital contexts. Data were collected from widely used social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms were selected because they represent diverse communicative environments, ranging from semi-formal academic discussions to highly informal social interactions. Their widespread use among Nigerian students makes them suitable sites for examining contemporary language practices.

5.3 Population and Sampling Techniques

The target population for this study consists of Nigerian students and young adults aged between 18 and 30 years, who are active users of social media platforms. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants and data sources that are most relevant to the research objectives. The sampling focused on individuals who:

- Regularly engage in English-language communication on social media
- Participate actively in online discussions and interactions
- Use at least one of the selected platforms frequently

Approximately **60 participants** were observed across different platforms. The sampling also included naturally occurring discourse from:

- University WhatsApp groups
- Public threads on X (Twitter)
- TikTok comment sections
- Facebook discussion groups
- Instagram comment interactions

This approach ensured that the data collected were rich, contextually relevant, and representative of real-life communication practices.

5.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through non-participant observation over a period of three (3) months, allowing for the capture of authentic and spontaneous communication.

The procedures for data collection included:

- WhatsApp: Screenshots of group conversations were collected with informed consent from participants.
- X (Twitter) and TikTok: Public posts, replies, and comment threads were systematically observed and documented.
- Facebook and Instagram: Posts and comment sections were examined for recurring linguistic patterns.

In addition, field notes were maintained to record contextual information and recurring features such as abbreviations, code-mixing, stylistic choices, and interactional patterns.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed:

- Consent was obtained for private group data
- Public data were used responsibly
- All identifying information was anonymized
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6. DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Overview of Analytical Approach

This section presents the analysis of data collected from selected social media platforms, guided by the principles of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The analysis focuses on identifying recurring linguistic patterns in students’ online communication and interpreting their communicative functions within digital contexts. The data were systematically coded and categorized into key linguistic features, which include abbreviations, code-mixing, lexical innovation, grammatical variation, orthographic practices, and multimodal elements. These features are analyzed across platforms to reveal patterns of usage and their implications for English language development.

2 Distribution of Linguistic Features Across Platforms

The table below presents the frequency and distribution of major linguistic features identified in the dataset:

Linguistic Feature	WhatsApp	X (Twitter)	TikTok	Facebook	Instagram	Total (%)
Abbreviations/ Acronyms	45	38	22	30	28	26%
Code-mixing	32	27	25	20	18	20%
Lexical Innovation	28	35	40	22	30	23%

Linguistic Feature	WhatsApp	X (Twitter)	TikTok	Facebook	Instagram	Total (%)
Grammatical Variation	25	20	18	26	21	17%
Orthographic Variation	30	25	27	24	26	19%
Emojis/Multimodality	40	22	45	28	42	25%

6.3 Analysis of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviations and acronyms constitute one of the most prominent features of social media communication. Common examples observed include *LOL* (laugh out loud), *BRB* (be right back), *u* (you), and *b4* (before). These forms are particularly frequent on WhatsApp and X (Twitter), where users prioritize speed and brevity. The use of abbreviations reflects an adaptation to the constraints of digital communication, especially in fast-paced conversational exchanges.

Interpretation:

While abbreviations enhance efficiency, they may also contribute to reduced exposure to standard spelling conventions. This has implications for formal writing, where such forms are considered inappropriate.

6.4 Code-Mixing and Hybrid Language Use

Code-mixing is widely observed across all platforms, involving the integration of English with Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages. Examples include:

- “I will call you later *abeg*”
- “That lecture was stressful *sha*”

This phenomenon is more frequent on WhatsApp and TikTok, where informal interaction dominates.

Interpretation:

Code-mixing serves important sociolinguistic functions, including identity expression, solidarity, and cultural relevance. However, its frequent use may influence students’ ability to maintain clear boundaries between formal and informal language contexts.

6.5 Lexical Innovation and Slang Usage

Lexical innovation refers to the creation and use of new words, slang expressions, and context-specific meanings. Examples identified include:

- “No wahala” (no problem)
- “Vibes” (enjoyment/positive mood)
- “Savage” (bold or impressive response)

TikTok and X (Twitter) exhibit the highest levels of lexical innovation due to their trend-driven nature.

Interpretation:

Lexical innovation reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of language in digital spaces. It enhances creativity and expressiveness but may also introduce non-standard forms that are not recognized in formal English usage.

6.6 Grammatical Variation

The analysis reveals noticeable deviations from standard grammatical structures.

Examples include:

- Omission of subjects: "Going to class now"
- Simplified tense usage: "I go school yesterday"
- Lack of punctuation and sentence boundaries

Such variations are common across all platforms but are more pronounced in informal settings.

Interpretation:

Grammatical variation is influenced by the informal nature of social media communication and the need for rapid interaction. While it facilitates ease of communication, it may negatively affect students' mastery of standard grammar in academic contexts.

6.7 Orthographic Variation

Orthographic variation includes non-standard spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Examples include:

- “Gud morning” instead of “Good morning”
- “Hw far?” instead of “How far?”
- Excessive letter repetition: “soooo good!!!”

These features are widely distributed across platforms, particularly in casual interactions.

Interpretation:

Orthographic variation reflects phonetic spelling and expressive emphasis. While it enhances personalization and emotional expression, it may weaken adherence to standard writing conventions.

6.8 Emojis and Multimodal Communication

The use of emojis, gifs, and images is a defining feature of digital communication. Emojis such as 😊, ❤️, and 🍷 are frequently used to complement or replace text.

TikTok and Instagram show the highest levels of multimodal communication, reflecting their visual orientation.

Interpretation:

Emojis compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues in digital communication, enhancing clarity and emotional expression. However, over-reliance on non-textual elements may reduce the use of descriptive language.

6.9 Cross-Platform Comparative Analysis

The analysis reveals distinct patterns across platforms:

- WhatsApp: High use of abbreviations and code-mixing due to conversational nature
- X (Twitter): High lexical innovation driven by trends and brevity constraints
- TikTok: Dominance of slang and multimodal communication
- Facebook: Moderate use of all features, reflecting mixed audiences
- Instagram: High emoji usage and informal language styles

Interpretation:

These variations demonstrate that platform affordances significantly influence language use. Each platform encourages specific communicative strategies, shaping how English is adapted in digital contexts.

This analysis demonstrates that social media communication among Nigerian students is characterized by dynamic and hybrid language use. The integration of abbreviations, code-mixing, lexical innovation, and multimodal elements

reflects adaptation to digital environments. Through the lens of CMDA, these patterns highlight the interaction between technology, language, and social context. While social media fosters creativity and flexibility in language use, it also presents challenges for maintaining standard English proficiency in formal settings.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Overview

This section interprets the findings presented in the data analysis in relation to the study's objectives and the theoretical frameworks of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The discussion focuses on how linguistic features observed in social media interactions reflect broader patterns of language use among Nigerian students and the implications for English language development.

7.2 Alignment with Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to examine patterns of English language use on social media platforms among Nigerian students. The findings clearly demonstrate that social media communication is characterized by non-standard, adaptive, and hybrid linguistic practices. The frequent use of abbreviations, code-mixing, and lexical innovation confirms that users prioritize efficiency,

expressiveness, and social identity in digital communication. These findings directly support the study's aim of identifying how English is modified and reshaped in online environments. Furthermore, the study sought to explore the implications of these patterns for language proficiency. The results indicate that while social media fosters creativity and communicative competence, it also contributes to deviations from standard English norms, particularly in grammar and spelling.

7.3 Interpretation within Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

From a CMC perspective, the observed linguistic features can be understood as responses to the technological affordances of social media platforms. Features such as character limits, real-time interaction, and the absence of non-verbal cues influence how users construct messages.

For example:

- The high frequency of abbreviations reflects the need for brevity and speed
- The use of emojis compensates for the lack of facial expressions and tone
- Informal syntax reflects the conversational nature of digital communication

These patterns are consistent with the view that digital environments reshape language by encouraging efficiency and multimodal expression. In this sense,

social media does not simply degrade language but rather reconfigures it to suit new communicative contexts.

7.4 Interpretation within Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA)

Using the CMDA framework, the findings reveal systematic variations at multiple linguistic levels:

- Lexical Level: Emergence of slang and innovative expressions
- Syntactic Level: Simplified and non-standard sentence structures
- Orthographic Level: Creative spelling and punctuation
- Pragmatic Level: Context-driven meaning and interactional cues

These variations are not random but are shaped by the communicative goals of users. For instance, code-mixing is strategically used to signal identity and cultural belonging, while lexical innovation reflects participation in global and local digital cultures. CMDA thus provides a nuanced understanding of how language operates in online spaces, emphasizing that deviations from standard forms are often functional and contextually appropriate.

7.5 Sociolinguistic Implications

The findings highlight the significant role of Nigeria's multilingual context in shaping digital communication. The integration of Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages into English discourse reflects a hybrid linguistic identity.

Code-mixing serves several sociolinguistic functions:

- Expression of solidarity and group membership
- Reinforcement of cultural identity
- Adaptation to informal communicative settings

This aligns with broader sociolinguistic theories that view language as a dynamic resource for identity construction. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency, the use of mixed codes demonstrates linguistic competence and flexibility.

8.6 Platform-Specific Language Variation

The comparative analysis across platforms reveals that language use is influenced by the affordances and communicative norms of each platform:

- WhatsApp: Highly conversational, encouraging abbreviations and code-mixing
- X (Twitter): Character limits promote brevity and lexical creativity
- TikTok: Emphasis on trends and entertainment fosters slang and multimodality
- Facebook: Mixed audience leads to relatively balanced language use
- Instagram: Visual orientation encourages emoji use and informal expression

These differences confirm that language use is context-dependent, shaped by both technological features and audience expectations.

7.6 Implications for English Language Proficiency

One of the central concerns of this study is the impact of social media on English language proficiency. The findings suggest a dual effect:

Positive Implications:

- Enhances communicative competence in informal contexts
- Encourages creativity and innovation in language use
- Supports multilingual expression and flexibility

Negative Implications:

- Reinforces non-standard grammar and spelling
- Blurs distinctions between formal and informal registers
- May negatively affect academic writing and language accuracy

This duality suggests that social media should not be viewed solely as a threat to language standards but as a complex linguistic environment that requires critical engagement.

8 Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media and digital communication on the English language practices of Nigerian students through the lens of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The findings indicate that social media platforms serve as dynamic spaces for language innovation, hybridization, and pragmatic experimentation among students. Students frequently employ code-switching, abbreviations, emoji-laden expressions, and non-standard orthographic forms as tools for identity construction, peer affiliation, and communicative efficiency. The study confirms that digital communication significantly shapes students' linguistic behavior, fostering a unique digital register that blends formal English with local vernacular expressions. While this facilitates creativity and interpersonal engagement, it also presents challenges for conventional language proficiency, particularly in formal academic contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for educators, policymakers, and researchers:

1. **Integrate Digital Literacy into Curricula:** Educational institutions should incorporate digital communication literacy into English language programs, helping students navigate informal online registers while maintaining formal proficiency.

2. Develop Awareness Campaigns: Workshops and seminars should sensitize students about the impact of social media language on academic writing, promoting balanced language practices.
3. Leverage Social Media for Learning: Teachers can harness social media as a pedagogical tool, using student-preferred platforms to teach formal writing, discourse conventions, and pragmatic competence.
4. Policy and Guidelines: Universities and educational boards should develop guidelines for appropriate digital language use, especially in academic submissions and online learning platforms.
5. Further Research: Future studies should explore longitudinal impacts of social media on students' formal writing skills, cross-platform comparisons, and interventions that balance creativity with linguistic accuracy.
6. Parental and Community Engagement: Parents and community stakeholders should be involved in guiding students' online language practices, emphasizing the importance of contextual appropriateness in communication.

In conclusion, while social media and digital communication present opportunities for linguistic innovation and social interaction, structured interventions are essential to ensure that these practices complement, rather than

compromise, the mastery of standard English. This balance will equip Nigerian students to thrive in both digital and formal communicative domains.

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