

INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS' INFORMAL DIGITAL LANGUAGE (SOCIAL MEDIA ENGLISH) ON THEIR FORMAL ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of students' informal digital language on their formal academic writing. It focused on second year students in the Department of English Language and Literature, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri. The study aimed to; (i) identify common features of informal digital language,

(ii) examine their occurrence in academic essays, (iii) assess students' awareness of register differences, (iv) determine the relationship between social media use and the transfer of informal language into formal writing. A **mixed-methods research design** was employed. It combined quantitative analysis of 180 academic essays with qualitative data from questionnaires and semi structured interviews involving 90 students. Findings revealed that students frequently use social media for extended periods, with 61.1% spending four hours or more daily, which reinforces habitual informal writing practices. Common digital language features included abbreviations, conversational tone, incomplete (fragmented) sentences, and nonstandard spellings. Analysis of academic essays indicated that 50% contained at least, one informal feature, with abbreviations and conversational tone being the most prevalent. A **strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$)** was observed between the frequency of social media use and the presence of informal features in academic writing. Although, students were generally aware of the differences between social media and academic writing, they often failed to regulate their language, particularly under time constraints. The study validates **Halliday's Register Theory**. It demonstrates that language use is context dependent and influenced by habitual engagement with informal registers. The findings underscore the need for explicit instruction on register differentiation, integration of digital literacy into academic curricula, and institutional support through writing centers and workshops. Such interventions can enhance students' academic writing competence and prepare them for effective communication in both academic and professional contexts.

Keywords: Academic writing, Informal digital language, Language transfer, Register awareness, Social media.

Introduction

Language, in all its forms is dynamic, social, and deeply tied to the contexts in which it is used. Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2011) add that, "..., language is the source of human life and power" (p.284). Over the past two decades, rapid advances in digital communication have reshaped how people, especially young people, write, interact, and construct meaning. "Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have birthed a distinct variety of written communication often referred to as informal digital language, social media English, or net speak" (Crystal, 2011, p. 25). "This variety is characterized by abbreviations (e.g., *u* for *you*, *b4* for *before*), orthographic creativity (e.g., emojis, unconventional punctuation patterns), and linguistic innovations that depart from traditional grammar rules" (Tagg, 2015, pp. 78–79).

While these features serve important sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions in online social spaces, questions have emerged among educators and researchers about "their influence on students' formal academic writing, particularly within higher education" (Baron, 2008, p. 64). Sadly, universities continue to operate within the framework of formal academic literacy. A situation where writing is expected to conform to established standards of grammar, structure, coherence, cohesion, and appropriate register. Academic writing requires clarity of thought, logical organization, adherence to grammatical conventions, and discipline specific rhetorical practices. Students are assessed based on their ability to present ideas in formal Standard English, construct arguments, reference scholarly sources, and maintain an appropriate academic tone. In English medium institutions, proficiency in academic writing is central to students' success, as it affects their performance in assignments, examinations, research projects, and professional communication.

In Nigerian universities, "where English serves as the official language of instruction and assessment" (Bamgbose, 1995, p. 112),

formal academic writing proficiency is both an academic requirement and a professional asset. Yet educators increasingly, observe patterns in student essays, reports, and examination scripts that resemble informal digital language features. This is raising concerns about linguistic transfer from social media contexts into academic genres (Ibrahim, 2017, pp. 143–145). Sadly, this phenomenon is not unique to Nigeria alone. Research in diverse contexts shows that students’ informal digital writing practices coexist with their academic literacy identities, sometimes supporting and other times complicating the development of formal writing skills (White, 2013, pp. 201–202; Thurlow, 2017, p. 35). This widespread engagement with digital communication means that Nigerian students, regularly navigate multiple varieties of English. This ranges from Standard English, Nigerian English, Pidgin English, and informal digital English.

Certainly, the interaction of these varieties creates a rich but complex linguistic environment. Without deliberate instruction on how to distinguish between these registers, students may struggle to maintain appropriate boundaries between informal and formal writing styles. Informal digital features may surface in contexts where formal academic conventions are expected. The relationship between informal digital language and academic writing proficiency has become a significant area of inquiry within applied linguistics, literacy studies, and educational research. Scholars seek to understand whether social media English facilitates creativity and language awareness, or whether it undermines students’ ability to apply conventional grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical organization in formal academic contexts (Werry, 1996, p. 117; Miller and Shepherd, 2004, p. 132). According to Androutsopoulos (2011), “Some researchers argue that digital writing practices reflect adaptive linguistic competence, where users innovate to negotiate meaning efficiently in fast paced environments” (p. 144). On the other hand, Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) claim that, “Others emphasize that

features such as truncated syntax, nonstandard orthography, and emoji use can become habits that negatively influence formal writing when unmonitored by instruction” (pp. 190–192).

Given the rapid proliferation of smartphones and mobile internet access across Nigeria, a growing number of students engage with social media daily. “This raises important questions about how their informal writing practices may transfer to academic genres” (Odetunmibi and Ogunsiji, 2020, p. 237). In this context, it becomes imperative to examine both the linguistic features of students’ informal digital language and how these features surface in their formal academic writing. Such an investigation will contribute to understanding how digital communication ecologies intersect with academic literacy development in Nigerian universities. It is good to note that informal digital language encompasses a broad set of linguistic practices that emerge from computer mediated communication (CMC). According to Crystal (2011), “these practices often prioritize efficiency, identity expression, and interpersonal alignment over standard written norms” (p. 28). Furthermore, Danesi (2017) adds that, “Common features include acronyms and initials (e.g., *LOL*, *BRB*), phonetic spellings (e.g., *thx*, *gr8*), unconventional punctuation (e.g., repeated exclamation marks), and the use of emoji and stickers to convey emotive meaning” (p. 45). Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) stress that, “These features reflect the affordances of digital platforms, where users negotiate meaning in abbreviated, visually driven, and interactive communicative contexts” (p. 56).

Importantly, digital language practices are not random deviations from standard language. According to Tagg (2015), “They represent rule governed systems that index social identity, group membership, and pragmatic purposes” (p. 82). For example Thurlow and Brown (2003) explain that, “the use of specific acronyms may signal in

group solidarity, while creative orthography can serve both stylistic and conversational coordination functions” (p. 296). Informal digital language thus functions as a legitimate register within particular discourses, even as it diverges from formal academic conventions. Hyland (2009) stress that, “Academic writing, by contrast, emphasizes clarity, precision, grammatical correctness, and adherence to disciplinary conventions” (p. 12). Biber (2006) adds that, “Proficiency in academic writing enables students to construct arguments, engage critically with sources, and demonstrate disciplinary knowledge. In English-medium universities, these skills are foundational for success in coursework, research, and professional communication” (p. 224).

Academic writing encompasses multiple genres including essays, research reports, literature reviews, and reflective journals, each with distinct rhetorical expectations. Research on academic literacy development highlights that mastering academic writing is a complex process involving cognitive, social, and linguistic dimensions. Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) emphasize that, “Students must not only learn grammatical structures but also how to position themselves within academic debates, organize ideas logically, and use appropriate register” (p. 8). Lillis and Scott (2007) add that, “These skills are often developed through explicit instruction, practice, feedback, and reflection, processes that may be at odds with the fast, informal, and often idiosyncratic communication patterns of social media” (p. 85). The concept of linguistic transfer provides a useful lens for examining how features of informal digital language might influence formal academic writing. According to Odlin (1989), “Linguistic transfer refers to the phenomenon where linguistic habits or knowledge from one communicative context influence performance in another” (p. 27). In the case of digital language and academic writing, “transfer can occur when students unconsciously apply orthographic patterns, syntactic simplifications, or rhetorical

styles learned in social media contexts to academic tasks” (Sergeant and Tagg, 2014, p. 10).

Empirical studies have documented this kind of transfer. For example, Leppanen et al. (2014) found that Finnish university students’ text messages contained numerous nonstandard abbreviations that occasionally appeared in their academic writing (pp. 98–99). Similarly, a study by Wang and Vásquez (2012) involving Chinese EFL learners showed that participants sometimes used emoticons and abbreviated forms in formal writing when they did not fully differentiate between digital and academic registers (pp. 55–56). These findings suggest that students may not always compartmentalize writing styles effectively, especially when digital communication practices are deeply habitual. However, not all research suggests negative effects. Some scholars argue that digital writing practices can enhance certain aspects of writing development. For instance, “studies have shown that frequent writing on social media can increase writing fluency, vocabulary experimentation, and metalinguistic awareness” (Stockwell and Harrington, 2003, p. 341). When students reflect on differences between informal and formal writing, they may develop stronger register awareness and self-monitoring skills (Thorne, 2013, p. 211). The challenge, then, is not inherently the existence of informal digital language, but how students navigate multiple registers and transfer appropriate skills across contexts.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has significantly altered how university students write and interact with language on a daily basis. Through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), and other social networking applications, students engage in continuous written communication

characterized by brevity, informality, creativity, and nonstandard linguistic forms. This variety of writing, often referred to as informal digital language or social media English, has become deeply embedded in students' everyday communicative practices. While these digital writing practices serve important social and interpersonal functions, concerns are increasingly emerging within academic environments about their possible influence on students' formal academic writing. Academic writing in the university context demands clarity, grammatical accuracy, logical organization, appropriate register, and adherence to established conventions of Standard English. Students are assessed through essays, examinations, reports, projects, and research assignments that require them to demonstrate competence in formal academic discourse. However, lecturers across departments increasingly report encountering features in students' academic scripts that resemble the informal structures typical of social media communication. These include the use of abbreviations like *u*, *b4*, and *d*, omission of punctuation, incomplete sentence structures, conversational tone, emotive expressions, and other nonstandard orthographic patterns. Such occurrences raise questions about whether students are unconsciously transferring habits developed in digital communication into formal academic contexts. This situation presents a serious concern because academic writing proficiency is central to students' academic success and future professional opportunities. When students' writing reflects informal digital patterns rather than formal academic conventions, it affects clarity of expression, coherence of arguments, and overall quality of written work. More importantly, it suggests that students may lack adequate awareness of register differences between informal digital writing and formal academic writing. This lack of awareness may hinder their ability to switch appropriately between writing contexts, a skill that is essential for academic literacy.

In Nigerian universities, the issue becomes even more critical due to the status of English as the official language of instruction, assessment, and scholarly communication. Mastery of formal written English is not optional but foundational to students' academic progression. At the same time, the proliferation of smartphones and affordable internet access has made social media communication a constant presence in students' lives. University students spend a substantial part of their day writing messages, comments, captions, and posts using informal digital language. This sustained exposure and habitual use of nonstandard forms create a linguistic environment where informal patterns may become internalized as default writing habits. Despite the growing visibility of this issue in classrooms, there is a notable gap in systematic empirical research that examines how students' informal digital language practices influence their formal academic writing in Nigerian universities. Most of the existing observations remain anecdotal, based on lecturers' personal experiences of marking scripts rather than structured analysis of students' writing samples. Without empirical investigation, it is difficult to determine the extent of this influence, the specific digital features that appear in academic writing, and the level of students' awareness regarding these features.

Furthermore, existing global studies on digital language and academic writing present mixed conclusions. Some researchers suggest that digital writing can enhance students' writing fluency and creativity, while others argue that it weakens students' control of formal grammar and structure. However, these studies are largely situated in Western or Asian contexts, where linguistic environments differ significantly from the Nigerian setting. Nigerian students operate within a multilingual and multidialectal environment where Standard English, Nigerian English, Pidgin English, and informal digital English coexist. The interaction of these varieties creates a complex linguistic ecology that may shape students' writing in

unique ways. Therefore, findings from other contexts cannot be automatically generalized to Nigerian universities. Another problem is that writing instruction in many university classrooms often assumes that students already understand the distinction between informal and formal registers. Lecturers focus on teaching essay structure, referencing, and argument development, but may not explicitly address how everyday digital writing habits influence students' academic writing. As a result, students may not consciously recognize that certain features acceptable in social media contexts are inappropriate in academic tasks. Without explicit pedagogical attention to register awareness, students may continue to blend informal digital habits with formal writing expectations.

In addition, assessment practices often penalize students for nonstandard writing without investigating the underlying causes of such patterns. Students receive lower grades for grammatical errors, abbreviations, and informal expressions, yet little effort is made to understand how their digital communication environment contributes to these writing habits. This creates a gap between students' lived linguistic experiences and academic expectations. Addressing this gap requires research that moves beyond correction of errors to understanding the source and nature of these errors. The problem is further complicated by the fact that digital language is not entirely detrimental. It represents creativity, adaptability, and active engagement with language. Students who frequently write on social media are not disengaged from writing; rather, they are writing more than ever before, albeit in informal forms. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to condemn informal digital language but to understand how it interacts with academic writing and how students can be guided to manage both registers effectively. Without research-based evidence, educators cannot design informed strategies that leverage the benefits of digital writing while minimizing its negative influence on academic literacy.

Moreover, the absence of research in this area limits curriculum development and pedagogical innovation. Writing courses and general studies programs in Nigerian universities may not yet reflect the realities of students' digital communication practices. If educators do not understand how social media English shapes students' writing habits, instructional approaches may remain outdated and ineffective. Research is needed to inform curriculum adjustments that incorporate digital literacy awareness into academic writing instruction. There is also the issue of students' metalinguistic awareness. It is unclear whether students recognize the differences between the language they use on social media and the language expected in academic writing. Do they consciously switch between registers, or do they perceive writing as a uniform activity regardless of context? Understanding students' perceptions and awareness is crucial for designing interventions that help them develop better control over their writing.

Objectives of this Study

This study aims to examine the influence of students' informal digital language (social media English) on their formal academic writing. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- 1. Identify** the common features of informal digital language used by students in their social media communication.
- 2. Examine** the presence of informal digital language features in students' formal academic writing.
- 3. Determine** the extent to which students' use of social media English influences the quality of their academic writing.

4. Assess students' awareness of the differences between informal digital writing and formal academic writing.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions;

1. What are the common features of informal digital language used by students in their social media communication?
2. To what extent do features of informal digital language appear in students' formal academic writing?
3. How does the use of social media English influence the quality of students' academic writing?
4. How aware are students of the differences between informal digital writing and formal academic writing?

Significance of this Study

Firstly, the study is significant to **students**. By identifying how informal digital language features appear in their academic writing, students will become more aware of the differences between social media communication and formal academic writing. This awareness can help them develop better control over their writing, improve grammatical accuracy, and adopt appropriate academic conventions. Ultimately, this will enhance their performance in assignments, examinations, research projects, and other academic tasks that require formal writing proficiency.

Secondly, the study is significant to **lecturers and writing instructors**. Many lecturers observe the presence of social media

language in students' scripts but lack empirical evidence to explain the source and extent of this phenomenon. The findings of this study will provide lecturers with concrete insights into the specific digital language features that influence students' writing. This knowledge can guide lecturers in designing targeted teaching strategies that address register awareness, error patterns, and writing discipline in the classroom.

Thirdly, the study is valuable for **curriculum developers and educational planners**. Current writing curricula in many universities do not explicitly address the impact of digital communication on students' writing habits. By providing evidence of how informal digital practices influence academic writing, this study can inform curriculum revisions that incorporate digital literacy awareness into academic writing courses. Such integration will make writing instruction more relevant to students' lived linguistic experiences.

Fourthly, the study contributes to **applied linguistics and literacy research** by expanding knowledge on the relationship between computer-mediated communication and academic literacy development. While several studies exist in other parts of the world, there is limited research focusing on the Nigerian university context. This study therefore fills an important gap by providing context specific evidence from Nigerian students, enriching global discussions on language use in the digital age.

Fifthly, the study is significant to **educational policy and assessment practices**. Understanding how digital language influences academic writing can help institutions develop better assessment guidelines and writing support programs. Rather than merely penalizing students for non-standard writing, educators can adopt more informed approaches that address the root causes of writing challenges.

Finally, the study holds broader significance for understanding how **language evolves in response to technological change**. It highlights the dynamic nature of language and the need for educational practices to adapt to contemporary communication realities. By examining how students navigate multiple writing registers, the study underscores the importance of register awareness as a critical component of academic literacy in the digital era.

Theoretical Framework

This is anchored on **Register Theory**. Register theory originates from **Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)**. This theory explains how variations in language use are shaped by context and communicative purpose. According to Halliday and Hasan (1985), "SFL views language not as an abstract system of rules but as a **resource for meaning-making in social contexts**" (p. 12). Halliday (1978) stresses that language users make choices from a repertoire of linguistic options to construct meaning based on the social situation they are in. The context of situation, including the participants, purposes, and medium of communication affects these choices and gives rise to distinct varieties of language known as **registers**. In this perspective, "language variation is not arbitrary but shaped by communicative function" (Halliday and Hasan, 1985, p. 9). Language is always contextualized. What counts as appropriate language in one setting may be inappropriate in another. In education, this theoretical stance is crucial because it recognizes that students encounter different communicative demands across contexts. Informal digital language, the kind used in texting, instant messaging, and social media operates under different communicative conditions from formal academic writing. Social media communication prioritizes speed, brevity, and interaction among peers, whereas academic writing demands clarity, organization, and conformity to disciplinary conventions.

Therefore, understanding the influence of students' everyday digital language practices on their academic writing requires a theory that captures how language varies with context. Register Theory offers exactly this. In SFL, “a **register** is a variety of language associated with a particular **context of situation**” (Biber and Conrad, 2009, p. 20). Halliday and Hasan (1985) pp. 37–38) describe register “as a set of linguistic features typical in a specific type of discourse, shaped by three principal contextual variables: **field**, **tenor**, and **mode** (pp. 37-8). **Field** refers to “what is happening, the subject matter or activity being enacted” (Halliday and Hasan, 1985, p. 40). **Tenor** refers to “the social roles and relationships between the interactants” (Halliday and Hasan, 1985, p. 40). **Mode** refers to “the organization of the text, including whether it is spoken or written, and how language is structured” (Halliday and Hasan, 1985, p. 41). These contextual variables influence linguistic features such as vocabulary choice, grammar, cohesion, and text organization. For example, academic writing is typified by explicit logical relations, complex sentence structures, abstract vocabulary, and impersonal tone. Informal digital language, by contrast, often includes abbreviations, emoticons, nonstandard spellings, and conversational structures, features that are functional in fast, peer to peer communication but inappropriate in academic contexts.

In the digital environment, Tagg (2015) explains that, “the **field** typically involves personal interaction, social exchange, and rapid information sharing. Writers are more concerned with immediacy and expressivity than with depth of argument or exposition” (p. 78). The **tenor** is generally informal and egalitarian: students communicate with peers in casual relationships. The **mode** is often mixed involving text, emojis, images, and abbreviations, and is shaped by the affordances of mobile devices and digital platforms. On the other hand, Hyland (2009) claims that, “the **field** of academic writing involves intellectual argumentation, knowledge construction,

and the critical presentation of ideas” (p. 12). The **tenor** is formal, often between student and lecturer or academic readership. The **mode** is written, structured, and governed by conventions of organization, grammar, and citation practices. These distinctions make clear why certain linguistic features are suitable in one context but not in another. Register Theory accounts for such contextual differences by showing how variation is systematic rather than random. Biber and Conrad (2009) note that, “linguistic features cluster according to register variables: genres with similar communicative purposes exhibit similar feature patterns” (p. 21). Academic registers broadly exhibit dense noun phrases, explicit cohesion, and carefully structured argumentation, patterns that differ significantly from digital communication.

One of the core principles of Register Theory is that language must be evaluated in terms of **appropriateness to context**. Halliday (1978) emphasizes that, “variation is inherent to language; there is no absolute standard of correctness independent of context” (p. 6). What counts as appropriate or effective writing in one register may be judged inappropriate in another. In the context of this study, features such as abbreviations (*u, ur, coz*), emoticons, and run-on sentences are not errors in the digital register. They are legitimate means of expressing identity and facilitating rapid interaction. However, the same features transferred into an academic essay violate the norms of the academic register, leading to misalignment between language use and communicative expectations. This theoretical insight reframes what might superficially be labeled as poor English in students’ writing as a **register misapplication**. It signals that students may lack the metalinguistic awareness to distinguish between registers or may not have developed strategies to adjust their language according to context.

A key concept derived from Register Theory is **register awareness**, the ability to recognize and adjust language choices according to context. Teaching academic writing involves not just grammar and structure but also helping students understand how different communicative contexts demand different language features. Lillis and Scott (2007, p. 9) describe academic literacy as “socially situated practice in which learners must negotiate the conventions of disciplinary communication”. Register awareness, therefore, becomes a necessary component of academic literacy. Students must learn to separate features of informal digital communication from those required in academic writing. Without explicit instruction in register awareness, students may rely on habitual writing practices developed through frequent use of digital media. As Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) observe, “Language practices in digital communication can become deeply ingrained because of repetitive use and social reinforcement” (pp. 190-1). This habit may make it difficult for students to switch effectively between informal digital registers and formal academic registers.

Another key insight from Register Theory is the concept of **transfer**. Transfer refers to the influence of one language variety or register on another. Odlin’s (1989) stress that, “the notion of transfer, originally used in second language acquisition, can be adapted to register contexts: habitual patterns from one register may carry over into another when speakers or writers do not sufficiently monitor their language choices” (p. 27). In this study, features typical of digital communication that appear in academic writing can be understood as instances of register transfer. This form of transfer is not limited to errors but reflects deeper cognitive and social processes in language use. When students write frequently on social media, they internalize certain writing practices. Without conscious regulation or explicit awareness of register boundaries, these practices may automatically appear in other writing contexts, including academic tasks.

Methodology

Research Design: This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Population: The population for this study comprised all **second year students** in the **Department of English Language and Literature, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri**. This cohort was selected because they had prior experience with both academic writing tasks (essays, assignments, and examination scripts) and social media communication. The total population of 200-level students in the department is **180 students**, which served as the accessible population for this study.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique: A sample size of **90 students (50% of the population)** was purposively selected using **stratified random sampling** to ensure representation across gender and class sections.

Method of Data Collection: For the **academic writing samples**, **two essays per student** were collected from the selected participants, resulting in a total of **180 essays** for analysis. The essays were drawn from assignments and examination scripts submitted in the current academic session to ensure authenticity and relevance. For the **qualitative component**, **all 90 students** completed a questionnaire on their digital writing habits and academic writing practices. Additionally, **15 students (5 male, 10 female)** were selected for follow up semi structured interviews to gain deeper insights into their awareness of register differences. The following instruments were employed in this study: (i) **Academic Writing Analysis Guide (AWAG)**. (ii) **Questionnaire on Digital Writing and Academic Awareness (QDWA)**. (iii) **Semi Structured Interview Guide (SSIG)**.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents (N=90)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	40	44.4
Female	50	55.6
Total	90	100

The demographic sample was relatively balanced, with slightly more females (55.6%) than males (44.4%), which allows for gender-based analysis of digital writing practices.

Table 2: Daily Social Media Usage of Respondents

Duration per Day	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hr.	10	11.1
1-3 hr.	25	27.8
4-6 hr.	35	38.9
More than 6 hrs.	20	22.2
Total	90	100

This table shows that majority of students (61.1%) spend **4 hours or more daily** on social media platforms. This high level of engagement suggests that informal digital language is a significant part of their

everyday linguistic practice. Frequent exposure to informal digital writing increases the likelihood that students’ academic writing may be influenced by digital language features.

Table 3: Common Features of Informal Digital Language among Students

Feature	Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage (%)
Abbreviations (u, b4, coz)	85	94.4
Emoji and emoticons	75	83.3
Nonstandard spelling (plz, gud)	70	77.8
Incomplete sentences	60	66.7
Conversational tone	80	88.9
Use of slang	50	55.6

The data in this table indicate that **abbreviations, emoji, and conversational tone** are the most prevalent features. These patterns reflect the **informal, peer-oriented nature** of social media communication among students.

Table 4: Frequency of Digital Features in Academic Writing (N=180 essays)

Feature	Number of Essays	
Percentage (%)		
Abbreviations (u, b4, coz)	90	50

Emojis and emoticons	30	16.7
Nonstandard spelling (plz, gud)	45	25
Incomplete sentences	60	33.3
Conversational tone	80	44.4
Use of slang	40	22.2

This table shows that half of the essays contained **abbreviations typical of social media**, while nearly 45% exhibited a **conversational tone**. This confirms the **influence of informal digital language** on formal academic writing. Features such as emoji were less common, likely because students recognize their inappropriateness in academic contexts.

Table 5: Correlation between Social Media Use and Digital Features in Academic Writing

Variable	Social Media Use	Digital
Features in Essays		
Social Media Use	1	0.68**
Digital Features in Essays	0.68**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

This table shows that the there is a **strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$)** between the amount of time students spend on social media and the occurrence of digital language features in their academic writing. This indicates that **more frequent social media**

use increases the likelihood that students’ writing will contain informal digital features.

Table 6: Students’ Awareness of Register Differences (N=90)

Awareness Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
I know that social media writing is different from essays	35	30	20	5	3.33
I consciously avoid informal language in academic writing	25	40	15	10	3.11
I sometimes transfer social media language into essays	40	30	10	10	3.22
I need more guidance on using formal academic language	50	25	10	5	3.44

This table shows that although, most students recognize that **social media language differs from academic writing**, a majority **admit to sometimes transferring informal features** into their essays. Additionally, 75% of students indicated a **need for more guidance**, highlighting gaps in register awareness.

Themes from Semi Structured Interviews

The semi structured interviews revealed four recurring themes.

1. Habitual Transfer of Digital Language: Many students admitted that abbreviations and casual expressions appear unconsciously in essays, especially under time pressure. *I often write 'u' instead of 'you' when rushing an assignment.* (Student 7, Female).

2. Difficulty with Formal Tone: Students struggled to maintain impersonal and formal tone due to habitual conversational style. *Even when I try, my writing still sounds like I'm chatting with friends.* (Student 3, Male).

3. Awareness but Lack of Control: Students knew formal academic rules but lacked strategies to avoid informal habits. *I know it's wrong, but when typing fast, I forget and use slang.* (Student 12, Female).

4. Desire for Guidance: Students requested more explicit instruction on how to separate social media and academic registers. *We need exercises to practice formal writing without mixing it with chat language.* (Student 5, Female).

Discussion of Findings

The study found that a majority of students (61.1%) spend four hours or more daily on social media. The quantitative analysis revealed a **strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$)** between social media usage and the occurrence of digital features in academic writing. This indicates that students who engage more frequently with digital platforms are more likely to transfer informal features, such as abbreviations, conversational tone, and incomplete sentences, into their essays. This finding supports Halliday's (1978, p. 6) notion that language varies systematically according to context. Social media represents an informal register shaped by rapid, peer to peer

communication (field), egalitarian social relationships (tenor), and multimodal digital channels (mode). Academic writing, by contrast, represents a formal register that demands impersonal tone, structured syntax, and adherence to disciplinary norms. The observed transfer of informal features into academic writing illustrates a **failure in register differentiation**, confirming the theoretical premise that language appropriateness depends on context.

Analysis of students' essays revealed that the most frequent features of digital language appearing in academic writing were **abbreviations (50%), conversational tone (44.4%), and incomplete sentences (33.3%)**. Emojis and slang appeared less frequently, likely because students recognize their inappropriateness in academic contexts. The prevalence of abbreviations and informal tone highlights that students' writing habits are shaped by **cognitive automaticity**. When students are accustomed to typing quickly on mobile devices or social media platforms, the informal digital register becomes habitual, leading to unintentional transfer into academic contexts.

Questionnaire and interview data showed that students are **aware of the differences between social media and academic registers**, yet they often fail to regulate their writing. Approximately 75% of respondents indicated the need for more guidance in formal writing, and interviews revealed that habitual transfer occurs especially when students are under time constraints. This supports Halliday and Hasan's (1985, p. 9) claim that **language users must possess register awareness** to adapt their linguistic choices appropriately. Awareness alone is insufficient without deliberate practice and structured guidance. Students' struggles suggest that digital literacy and academic literacy intersect, with social media writing influencing their approach to academic tasks. This interplay highlights a **pedagogical gap** in writing instruction. It suggests that while

students are competent in digital registers, formal register mastery requires explicit instruction and reinforcement.

Implications of this Study

The study provides empirical support for **Halliday's Register Theory** (1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1985), reinforcing the claim that **language appropriateness is context dependent**. The presence of informal digital features such as abbreviations, conversational tone, and incomplete sentences in students' essays confirms that habitual engagement with a particular register (social media English) can influence performance in another register (academic English). This finding extends Register Theory by demonstrating its applicability in a **digital, contemporary context**, where new forms of informal communication, such as text messaging, WhatsApp, and social media platforms, shape students' linguistic habits. Traditional applications of Register Theory often focused on spoken versus written language, or on formal versus informal settings in pre-digital contexts. This study confirms that the **digital environment introduces a highly influential informal register** that can transfer into formal academic domains. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of **register awareness** as a theoretical construct. While students demonstrated recognition of differences between social media and academic writing, they often failed to regulate their language use, particularly under time constraints. This aligns with Halliday and Hasan's (1985, p. 41) proposition that register is dynamic, and effective use requires **conscious adaptation to contextual variables**: field, tenor, and mode. The study therefore contributes to the theoretical understanding of how digital registers interact with traditional academic registers and reinforces the notion that **language learning and literacy development are socially situated and contextually mediated**. Additionally, the correlation between frequency of social media use and the presence of informal

features in academic writing ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) provides quantitative evidence supporting the theory of **register transfer**. The findings suggest that habitual engagement in one register strengthens linguistic patterns that may **inadvertently become generalized** to other contexts. This has broader theoretical relevance for understanding cognitive and sociolinguistic mechanisms underlying language use in the digital age.

The study has direct implications for **teaching and learning practices in higher education**, particularly in the instruction of academic writing. Firstly, the findings indicate that students need **explicit instruction on register differentiation**. Although students are aware that social media and academic writing differ, this awareness alone does not prevent informal digital features from appearing in essays. Therefore, university instructors should integrate **register focused exercises** into writing curricula, emphasizing the linguistic characteristics of social media versus academic writing, practice activities that involve rewriting informal texts in academic style, and reflection on habitual language use in different contexts. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of **digital literacy integration in academic instruction**. Students' frequent use of digital platforms shapes cognitive and writing habits. Educators can leverage this by designing activities that **bridge informal digital registers and formal academic registers** like (i) collaborative online discussions with formal writing requirements. (ii) Digital peer editing with emphasis on register correction. (iii) Exercises translating casual social media messages into structured essays. Thirdly, the findings suggest that **time management and writing habits** influence register transfer. Students often revert to informal digital language when writing under pressure. This indicates a need for pedagogical interventions that **teach strategies for deliberate language control**, including pre-writing planning, proofreading for register, and self-monitoring techniques. Finally,

gender considerations emerge from the study's demographic data. Although, both male and female students engage heavily in digital communication, subtle differences in writing patterns may exist, suggesting **differentiated teaching approaches** could enhance outcomes. For example, interventions can include gender-sensitive workshops to address varying tendencies in informal digital usage.

The study has implications for **curriculum designers and educational policymakers**. Findings indicate a, **disconnect between students' informal digital practices and formal academic expectations**. To address this; (i) Courses should include discussions on how social media influences writing habits and how to adapt informal language for academic purposes. (ii) Recognize that informal features may unintentionally appear, instructors could implement **formative assessments** that provide feedback specifically on register use. (iii) Given that digital communication affects students in all fields, cross-disciplinary approaches to teaching register awareness can enhance overall academic communication skills. (iv) Students should be taught to **self-assess their writing**, comparing informal and formal samples, identifying transfer issues, and adjusting accordingly.

Beyond teaching, the study contributes to the field of **academic writing research**, particularly in the Nigerian higher education context. While much research has focused on grammar, vocabulary, and structure, this study emphasizes the **role of digital language in shaping academic writing competence**. This has implications for future studies, including (i) Exploring interventions to minimize digital register transfer. (ii) Examining the impact of multilingual backgrounds on digital and academic registers. (iii) Investigating longitudinal effects of social media use on writing proficiency over time. Moreover, the study underscores the **need for localized research**. Nigerian students operate in a multilingual environment

where digital English interacts with Standard English and academic English. Understanding these interactions informs the **design of contextually relevant writing pedagogy**, which may differ from Western centric approaches.

The study also has implications for **policy development and academic support structures** in universities. Institutions could:

- (i) Establish writing centers that focus not only on grammar but also on **register awareness**.
- (ii) Organize workshops for lecturers to integrate **register conscious teaching** into their courses.
- (iii) Implement guidelines for digital literacy education to help students navigate **informal and formal registers effectively**.
- (iv) Develop peer-mentoring programs where advanced students support juniors in mastering **academic writing conventions**.

These measures could enhance students' writing performance, reduce the negative influence of informal digital language, and contribute to improved academic outcomes.

Finally, the study has broader societal implications. In the digital age, students are **exposed to multiple language varieties**, and their writing skills affect not only academic success but also **employability and professional communication**. If informal digital language becomes dominant in professional contexts, graduates may struggle with workplace communication. Therefore, the study highlights the importance of **early intervention in academic writing education** to equip students with the ability to switch registers appropriately, ensuring both academic and professional competence.

Conclusion

This study has shown that students' informal digital language, commonly used on social media platforms, significantly influences their formal academic writing. Features such as abbreviations, conversational tone, and incomplete sentences frequently appear in students' essays, reflecting the habitual nature of digital communication. While students generally recognize the differences between informal digital writing and academic writing, they often struggle to regulate their language, especially under time constraints. The findings confirm Halliday's Register Theory, demonstrating that language use is context dependent and that habitual engagement in one register can transfer into another, affecting the appropriateness and quality of written academic work. The implications of this study highlight the need for **explicit instruction on register differentiation**, integration of digital literacy into the curriculum, and institutional support through writing centers and workshops. Educators can help students develop the skills necessary to navigate between informal and formal registers effectively by fostering register awareness and providing targeted guidance. Ultimately, such interventions will enhance academic writing competence, improve overall communication skills, and prepare students for both academic and professional success in a digitalized society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made;

Firstly, it is recommended that **students actively develop register awareness** by consciously differentiating between informal digital communication and formal academic writing. Students should be encouraged to review their essays and assignments critically, identifying informal features such as abbreviations, slang, and conversational tone. Reflective writing exercises, where students

compare social media messages with academic essays, can help cultivate self-monitoring skills and reduce unintentional transfer of digital language into formal writing. Additionally, students should practice **planning and proofreading** their work before submission, as these strategies can mitigate the influence of habitual informal writing patterns.

Secondly, **lecturers and academic instructors** should incorporate **explicit instruction on register differentiation** into writing courses. This includes teaching students the characteristics of formal academic registers, illustrating the differences with clear examples, and providing exercises that require students to transform informal digital text into formal academic writing. Lecturers should also provide **constructive feedback** highlighting instances where digital language features appear in students' essays. Such feedback not only reinforces correct academic writing conventions but also enhances students' awareness of contextual appropriateness in language use.

Thirdly, **curriculum designers and educational institutions** should integrate **digital literacy and academic writing modules** that address the interaction between informal and formal registers. Writing curricula should include activities that simulate real-world writing scenarios where students must switch registers effectively. For example, modules can include exercises translating chat messages into structured essays, peer review sessions focusing on register, and collaborative online writing assignments with formal language requirements. Embedding such exercises in the curriculum will equip students with the skills necessary to navigate multiple registers successfully.

Fourthly, it is recommended that **universities establish or strengthen academic support structures** like writing centers, workshops, and mentoring programs. Writing centers should provide

targeted support on **register awareness, academic vocabulary, and essay organization**, while workshops can train students in **strategies to minimize informal digital influence** like sentence restructuring, paraphrasing, and editing. Peer mentoring programs, where advanced students guide juniors in formal writing practices, can also provide continuous support and reinforce proper writing habits.

Furthermore, **educational policymakers** should recognize the impact of digital communication on academic literacy and develop guidelines that promote formal writing proficiency alongside digital competence. Policies can encourage institutions to adopt **assessment practices** that reward correct register use, ensure that writing instruction addresses digital influences, and provide resources for teacher training in academic writing pedagogy. Such measures will create a supportive learning environment that helps students develop both digital literacy and academic writing proficiency.

Finally, it is recommended that **further research** be conducted to explore the influence of digital language on students' writing across different disciplines and academic levels. Longitudinal studies could examine how students' engagement with digital registers evolves over time and its impact on professional writing skills. Research could also investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as register-focused workshops or curriculum enhancements, in reducing the transfer of informal digital language into academic writing.

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