

# Social Media Language Practices and Their Influence on Academic Writing Among Undergraduate Students in Cameroon

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## Abstract

This study examines the influence of social media language on the formal academic writing of undergraduate students in Cameroon. Students have made digital platforms an important part of their everyday lives (Crystal, 2006; Barton & Lee, 2013). They are used for learning, chatting with friends, watching the news, entertainment, business, etc. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram are the main ones, giving rise to a new form of computer-mediated communication defined by neologisms, abbreviations, and frequent code-switching. (Herring, 2013; Crystal, 2008).

Leveraging Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and Register Theory, this research examines the linguistic proficiency and register awareness of 200 university students. The findings reveal a significant presence of abbreviations, Slangs, emojis, shortened words, creative spelling, internet catch phrases and neologisms, such as "la go," "le proving," "vibes," "slay," and "ghosted," "OMG," "its giving," "flex," "luv," and "ghosted" in formal assignments and examinations, leading to what may be described as "register flattening," where students struggle to distinguish between informal digital discourse and formal academic writing conventions (Halliday, 1978). where students struggle to shift between informal digital speech and formal academic expression. The research also examines the extent of code-mixing in digital interactions, identifying prevalent shifts from English to French (49%), Cameroon Pidgin English (20%), and indigenous home languages (11.5%). While these practices reflect a creative construction of online identity and community, they undermine grammatical accuracy, lexical appropriateness, and adherence to Standard English conventions in academic writing. The findings suggest that students increasingly rely on simplified sentence structures commonly associated with digital communication, as conversational writing forms replace traditional scholarly writing. Finally, the study advocates for pedagogical interventions to increase register awareness and improve academic standards amid increasing digital encroachment. By understanding the cultural and linguistic drivers of social media language, educators can better assist students in navigating the boundaries between their informal digital language and their formal academic writing.

**Key Words :** Social media languag , Academic writing ,Computer-mediated communication Systemic Functional Linguistics

## INTRODUCTION

The growth of digital communication technologies has completely changed the language of the public space for the younger generation in Cameroon. Social media is no longer used only for leisure, but it is now a way of life for many young undergraduates (Rheingold, 2012). It now serves as a classroom, a playground for some, and a battlefield for others, where linguistic and social identities are debated. Mobile internet use has risen in recent years, although there is no official national data on students' internet use. Up to 42% of the entire population is engaged (Data Reportal, 2025). Amongst undergraduates, students' social media platforms are widely integrated into academic communication and peer interaction as learning is now intertwined with platforms like WhatsApp, where class information, teacher announcements, and other relevant information are shared. This is a particular area of concern, as students navigate a digital world that blurs the boundaries between academic study and screen time. The educational milieu has witnessed a change in the system of interaction brought about by this technological shift and the rise of computer-mediated communication (Herring, 2013; Fairclough, 1995).

In the Cameroonian context, the impact of social media is unique due to the country's complex multilingual profile. 273 indigenous languages are spoken across the country alongside 2 national languages (English and French). Students are not only navigating the transition from digital to formal language but also managing multiple languages, including English, French, Cameroon Pidgin English, and about 273 indigenous languages ([Kouankem & Ferreira-Meyers, 2025](#); [Tabe, 2023](#)).

Due to the high presence of students in the digital space, discourse of platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok influences their way of speaking and writing, thereby developing a unique linguistic style that is comprised of emotional expression through emojis, brevity, abbreviations and acronyms, hashtags, and informality with a departure from standard grammatical rules.

While this "digital lexicon" increases social bonding and creative expression, its "encroachment" into formal academic writing is a growing concern for educators and linguists. ([Harith et al., 2025](#); [TUMASANG, 2025](#)).

Academic writing requires a certain level of precision, a formal tone, and conformity to established spelling and structural language rules. It is a style of language used in the systematic exchange of ideas among scholars. On the contrary, digital language emphasizes spontaneity, style, and speed, with little or no regard for coherence or grammatical accuracy.

The primary problem addressed in this study is the phenomenon of "the informalisation of academic discourse," in which students struggle to switch between the informal language used in digital interactions and the formal language requirements of university-level writing. The recurring problem of social media writing habits in formal essays and examination scripts, expressed as incomplete sentence forms, neologisms, and a decline in lexical diversity and richness, stems from an inability to differentiate between the two registers. ([Harith et al., 2025](#); [TUMASANG, 2025](#)).

Social media presents both opportunities and threats; some refer to it as "a double-edged sword". Students use social media as a tool to boost their writing quality, improve their confidence, and access an unlimited amount of learning materials, while still battling with the unconscious habit of using abbreviations and informal writing forms, thereby undermining students' overall writing competence.

In Cameroon, the challenges are further complicated by the use of Pidgin English (derived from English) and "Camfranglais" (derived from English, French, and Pidgin English), both of which significantly affect formal academic writing. Frequently used Pidgin English statements like "wetty di happen" meaning what is happening, "ei no sabi" meaning he does not know, or Camfranglais statements like

“Je go a la piol” meaning I am going home or “C’est le proving” meaning showing off are mixed with Standard English in online interactions to imply identity and belonging (Njuasi & Nkwain, 2026; Pérez-Sabater & Maguelouk-Moffo, 2020). This study examines how these digital practises influence the formal language adaptation of undergraduate students in Cameroonian universities. The research also explores the meanings and interpretations of social media expressions and their impact on learning skills. It also provides an in-depth analysis of the linguistic changes.

By exploring the meanings and interpretations of social media expressions and their impact on learning skills, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the linguistic changes among Cameroonian youth (Kouankem & Ferreira-Meyers, 2025). The significance of this study lies in its support for the development of pedagogical frameworks.

The slow changes in language from its phonetic and visual form to the syntax of digital text messaging have made it important to examine how these changes affect students’ academic performance and learning habits (Alobwede, 2023; Kouankem & Ferreira-Meyers, 2025).

The research will clearly show, within the next generation of Cameroonian intellectuals, the extent to which formal writing standards are being influenced by social media language, using a detailed analysis of student scripts and digital interactions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Rise of Computer-Mediated Communication in Cameroon

The expansion of digital communication in Cameroon through computers, smartphones, and internet-based platforms has led to the emergence and use of computer-mediated communication, especially in education (Alobwede, 2023), indicating a shift from traditional writing forms to unconventional stylistic forms, particularly among the younger generation.

This newly found way of communication is characterized by a shift from complex sentence structures that follow strict grammatical rules to simplified syntax that reflects spoken-language patterns (Crystal, 2008; Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

Researchers have noted that as digital lingua takes over conversational writing, digital communication often promotes abbreviated forms, simplified syntax, and non-standard orthographic patterns (Crystal, 2008; Tagg, 2015); incomplete sentences and modified ideograms, such as emojis, now replace formal language. In Cameroon, this transition is evident in the writings of university students, where the influence of digital platforms has begun to alter their writing patterns. For example;

(student writing with digital language influence)

*“The government should do smth abt the education system because students are not really getting help. In sch, we just copy notes, and we do not even understand. Teachers are lyk always absent n dats y many students fail exams.*

Correct formal academic version

*The government should take action regarding the education system because many students are not receiving adequate academic support. In schools, students often copy notes without understanding the content. Teachers are frequently absent, which contributes to poor academic performance*

## **Register Theory and the Digital Lexicon**

An important theoretical perspective of understanding the transition from digital to formal language is Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, specifically Register Theory. Register refers to the variety of language that is shaped by the social situation or context in which it is used (Halliday, M. A. K., 1978). Academic writing is a formal register, whereas social media interaction is inherently informal. The "digital lexicon," that is, a collection of neologisms, slang, and abbreviations introduced by social media, has become the everyday language of communication for students. Terms such as "ghosted," "capping," "vibes," "low-key," "flex," "lit," and "slay" enable users to communicate ideas and personal experiences, establish social connections and emotional meanings, and structure messages in ways that promote effective online interaction. When these terms appear in formal academic contexts such as assignments and examinations, they indicate a failure in register awareness.

## **Multilingualism and Code-Mixing in Digital Spaces**

Social media language practices are widely promoted on the Cameroonian internet due to the country's multilingual environment. Students use digital platforms to build online communities and create identities by incorporating their multilingual backgrounds, given that the majority of the population is functionally bilingual or multilingual. (Njuasi & Nkwain, 2026). Code-switching and code-mixing are important features of these online interactions (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Pérez-Sabater & Maguelouk-Moffo, 2020).

(Tabe, 2023) revealed that 48% of electronic messaging instances involved a blend between English and French for example "Do not worry, ça va aller" which means everything is fine, 18.4% involved English and Pidgin English like "Make you call me later, I go tell you everything," meaning call me later, and 11.5% involved English and indigenous languages for example "situation a ti critical" meaning it is a delicate situation. These cases are common and far from random, as they serve as a tool for indicating identity and membership in these online communities (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990). The use of mixed forms such as "Camfranglais" and "Mboko" alongside Pidgin English is a new development in the Cameroonian linguistic landscape. It continues to evolve as indigenous languages play a more visible role in written exchanges among educated youth.

## **The Impact of Social Media Language ML on Academic Writing Standards**

The impact of social media language on academic writing has become a matter of global scholarly discussion. Scholars around the world are reporting studies with similar results that examine the extent to which digital language affects formal academic writing. In Morocco, studies show that students become "unconsciously accustomed" to using abbreviations while chatting, leading them to reproduce the same errors in formal writing (Lakhal, 2021). It was also argued in Malaysia that the "encroachment" of informal digital language has been shown to undermine vocabulary richness and grammatical accuracy, eventually weakening students' writing performance (Harith et al., 2025). Likewise, in Nigeria, researchers at Bayero University, Kano, found that while social media increases writing frequency, it also leads to informality, abbreviations, and grammatical inaccuracies in formal academic scripts (Zakari, 2025). All the above findings are similar to those in Cameroon, where the use of neologisms and social media language in formal assignments is associated with reduced clarity and inappropriate register (TUMASANG, 2025).

## **Communication Accommodation Theory**

In 1970, Howard Giles developed this theory to explain how individuals adjust their speech, vocabulary, accent, and communication style during interaction to gain approval, ensure easy understanding, or create a social identity (Giles & Ogay, 2007). The study states that speakers will either move towards others' linguistic styles for social acceptance or move away to maintain distinctiveness and group identity. Over time, communication accommodation theory has expanded beyond face-to-face interactions to encompass digital

communication contexts, especially on social media and in online messaging. CAT also suggests that students often adapt their linguistic behavior to conform to the rules of their online community (Gee, 2015).

For Cameroonian students, using the informal writing style found on social media helps align with the linguistic rules of their digital peers. This conformity to the informal digital group often comes at the expense of maintaining the academic community's linguistic rules. The outcome is a written representation that reflects the simple syntax and informal structures of text messaging rather than the complex, rule-governed structures of Standard English.

### **The Semantic Content of Social Media Expressions**

Beyond the structural aspects of language, researchers are also investigating the linguistic meaning of social media expressions (Tagg, 2015). In Cameroon, studies on university learners aim to understand how these expressions are used and interpreted, and what cultural influences shape their use. Understanding these semantic shifts is important for educators, as it helps to identify misunderstandings caused by slang or cultural references (Kouankem & Ferreira-Meyers, 2025). Moreover, assessing students' ability to manage their language habits is essential for developing interventions that foster responsible social media use alongside academic excellence.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-methods approach was selected because it allows the integration of quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative interpretation of students' linguistic behavior (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It enables triangulation of quantitative data on the frequency of use of social media language features with qualitative insights into students' linguistic habits and perceptions.

### **Participants and Setting**

A sample of 200 first- and second-year undergraduate students from two major Cameroonian universities was used, representing the primary users of digital platforms in the country. This sample size and demographic characteristics align with recent linguistic studies investigating the impact of social media neologisms on students' proficiency. The study was conducted at one Anglophone university in an English-speaking region and at one Francophone university in a French-speaking region to capture the bilingual and multilingual dynamics of the Cameroonian student experience.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

1. **Scriptural Analysis:** The assignments and examination scripts of 200 students were used as the primary data source, where relevant linguistic data and thematic information were obtained. These students' scripts were used to pinpoint digital language in a formal academic context and also to track the frequency and grammatical functions of neologisms, abbreviations, and overall social media language features.
2. **Structured Surveys:** To explore students' metalinguistic awareness, a survey was administered. It was also used to examine their social media habits and the students' ability to use both formal and informal registers interchangeably. Students' data on online platforms and their views on the impact of social media on academic performance were also included in the survey. It collected both linguistic and behavioral data on students' language use in digital and academic contexts.
3. **Interviews and Discussions:** Semi-structured interviews and small group discussions were organized with a diverse sample of students. Students were placed in groups of 10 and held discussions to understand the cultural, social, and contextual factors

that shape how students write and speak on social media. Students were allowed to discuss their attitudes, motivations, and perceptions towards language use on social media.

4. **Digital Message Corpus:** To provide a reference point for students' informal writing practices, a total of 20 electronic messages per student, which included students' comments, posts, and inbox messages, were all collected from online platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok). These platforms were chosen because of their popularity among students, and the collected messages were analyzed for patterns of code-mixing and code-switching.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Quantitative data were used to determine neologism types and their frequency, as well as the percentages of code mixing across different language pairs. A coding scheme was also developed to examine the conceptual, interactional, and textual functions of these social media features.

Qualitative analysis involved applying Register Theory to assess the extent of the transition from digital to formal language in academic scripts. Online speech analysis tools, such as Voyant Tools, were used to analyze word frequency in digital interactions. Student perceptions were also obtained through surveys to provide further insight into their level of knowledge of the subject matter.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All the students were given consent forms informing them of their participation in the research and assuring them that their data would be used solely for research purposes. The study adhered to the institutional research guidelines of both universities (Université de la Côte and the University of Buea). All data scripts and social media messages were anonymized, and all scripts were coded with numeric codes to protect students' privacy and identity. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The analysis of student scripts, surveys, and digital interactions revealed several recurring linguistic patterns associated with social media language use. These findings are classified into 3 major categories: the impact of code mixing and code switching, the breakdown of formal register boundaries, and the prevalence of neologisms.

### **The Proliferation of Social Media Neologisms**

An important finding in the study is the frequent use of social media terminologies, phrases, and abbreviations in formal academic work. In the written output of 200 students, over 2750 occurrences of neologisms were identified across 100 distinct types. These neologisms include "b4," "btw," "2day," "2mrrow," "pic," "4u," "ghosted," "vibes," "nerve," and "low-key," "LOL," "info," "thx," "bro," and "plz" were mostly found in the English speaking university while "mimba," "tchop," "la go," "le proving," "wanda," "kongossa," "barrer," "Njoka," "feyman," "bensikinneur," "bolo," "kwatt," "kmer," "toli and "237" . Some students go so far as to use social media abbreviations like OMG in their examination scripts, other refer to their country as "kmer" and most recently "le continent". These terms, commonly used on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok to encourage informal communication and interpersonal connections, are increasingly appearing in formal assignments, where they are lexically inappropriate. The data showed

that these terms have become part of students' "daily communication," making it difficult for them to revert to Standard English synonyms in academic settings fully.

### **Frequency and Syntactic Roles of Neologisms**

The recoding of these 800 occurrences indicated that neologisms are not just isolated slang words in digital discourse but play functional roles in students' writing in academic settings. It was also revealed that 68% of students use neologisms, though the extent varies. Only 32% of the scripts were void of neologisms. Halliday's SFL framework was used for the analysis, which showed that neologisms perform ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. We can see this in cases where terms like "situationship," meaning an undefined relationship, or "slay," meaning doing well or looking impressive, are used to convey complex social experiences (ideational) and to establish an informal, relatable tone with the reader (interpersonal). However, their use in formal writing undermines grammatical accuracy and coherence, as these terms often lack the precise semantic boundaries required for academic discourse.

### **Code-Mixing and Translanguaging Patterns**

The multilingual nature of Cameroon is an important factor in the growth of social media languages in the country. A total of 4000 electronic messages was used as the sample size. Code mixing and code switching were dominant in these messages, with 49% involving switching between French and English, 20% between English and Cameroon Pidgin English, and 11.5% to indigenous languages. With the high frequency of code mixing and switching in digital interactions, the spillover into academic writing becomes habitual, where students use lexical items from non-official languages. For example, students often say "you are going to where" instead of "where are you going to". This is as a result of a direct translation from the Pidgin English phrase "wuside you di go". This is a general theme seen, and as this identity construct is also transmitted into student writing in a formal academic context. When these habits are reproduced in academic scripts, they undermine the use of Standard English and contribute to the emergence of non-standard linguistic forms in academic writing.

[\(Alobwede, 2023\).](#)

### **Register Flattening in Academic Scripts**

Even though students demonstrated metalinguistic awareness, they constantly struggle to switch between the formal academic register and the informal digital register. The survey data and script analysis indicated this, providing evidence of a reduction in writing standards. Complex sentence structures are now being replaced by simple syntax and incomplete forms, which are characteristic of online text messaging. This is evident in the failure to follow grammatical rules, with students even using ideograms in academic contexts.

### **Impact on Grammatical Accuracy and Spelling**

Student language proficiency is negatively affected by the constant usage of social media linguistic norms. Through scriptural analysis, a large number of students demonstrated poor grammatical accuracy and numerous spelling errors. These errors may be associated with students' frequent exposure to informal digital writing styles. These scripts revealed that students lack accurate lexical usage or context-sensitive vocabulary, due to the prioritization of informal structures in social media language, which encourages emotional expression over a formal academic tone.

## **Student Perceptions and Awareness**

Through semi-structured interviews and group sessions, students' perceptions were captured despite the scripts having a negative intonation. Students carry a mixed perspective. Some students reported that social media platforms increase confidence in communication and collaboration, and provide access to unlimited learning materials, and that study sessions amongst peers can be easily conducted without necessarily requiring a physical meeting (Rheingold, 2012; Barton & Lee, 2013). It also facilitates rapid communication and opens students to new vocabulary. Others are well aware of the negative effects, such as reduced attention to grammatical accuracy, increased use of informal expressions, and difficulty maintaining a formal academic register (Harith et al., 2025; Lakhali, 2021). Structured surveys also revealed that, while most of these students understand the negative effects and believe they can master the transition between formal and informal contexts, they still find it difficult under academic pressure. Overall, the findings indicate that students are aware of social media's impact on academic writing, but their ability to consistently regulate register and maintain lexical appropriateness remains limited. This indicates that new pedagogical strategies are needed to encourage effective code-switching between informal social media language and formal academic writing, and to prevent code-mixing, thereby strengthening their overall metalinguistic awareness.

## **The Cultural Drivers of Digital Language**

Qualitative findings from the group discussion indicated that cultural influences and the desire for "identity performance" play an important role in digital linguistics. Butler (1990) argued that identity is not a fixed attribute but is continually produced through repeated social interactions and communications. Similarly, Goffman (1959) argues that individuals actively present and negotiate identities through social interaction. It is an essential part of signaling identity in online communities in Cameroon by blending both official and local languages. These "selected social media expressions" are a way for students to navigate their multicultural reality (Kouankem & Ferreira-Meyers, 2025), but unfortunately, these digital languages conflict with the requirements for academic success as institutions still demand mastery of formal language rules and regulations.

## **Limitations of the Study**

This study focused on undergraduate students from only two universities; therefore, the findings may not fully represent all university students in Cameroon. Additionally, the study relied partly on self-reported survey responses and sampled digital interactions, which may be influenced by participant bias and contextual variation. Future studies may benefit from a larger national sample and longitudinal analysis of students' writing practices.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research aimed to analyze social media language and its effects on the formal academic writing of undergraduate students in Cameroon, with an emphasis on how digital language affects linguistic proficiency in higher education. Social media language indeed has a growing influence on academic writing for undergraduate students in Cameroon. The findings also indicate that digital platforms provide students with opportunities for collaboration, creativity, and rapid access to information notwithstanding it is also visible as the primary effect of "encroachment": the use of informal digital language in formal academic writing, leading to "register flattening." The findings also revealed a high rate of neologisms, abbreviations, and digital slang, which undermine grammatical accuracy, coherence, and basic lexical correctness. This increasing interference between informal digital practises and standard English norms could also be seen in the widespread use of code mixing between languages learned from these online interactions, and spills over into examination

and assignment scripts. While these online platforms, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Reddit, and Facebook, offer benefits including creative avenues for identity construction, increased confidence in self-expression, and access to unlimited study materials, their unintended negative effects on academic writing are a growing challenge. This shift from complex, acceptable sentence structures to the simple syntax of text messaging, as seen on social media, further reflects this decline in formal academic settings, leaving students unable to acquire the skills needed for university-level success. The findings also indicate that the students are unable to clearly distinguish between their digital linguistic habits and formal academic writing requirements, leading them to reproduce informal habits in important writing situations repeatedly.

As solutions to the challenges presented in the research, it recommends pedagogical interventions. Educators must emphasize developing students' register awareness to help them understand the differences and the importance of establishing a clear boundary between digital communication and formal academic writing.

Greater emphasis should be placed on Communication skills courses, which should include modules on digital literacy that teach students to harness the interactive benefits of social media without compromising formal writing standards (Zakari, 2025). Teachers should also address the semantics of social media expressions in the classroom to clarify potential misunderstandings caused by slang and cultural references.

Ultimately, the digital revolution in Cameroon comes with "two faces" for learners. While linguistic innovation is a natural reflection of cultural change, academic success still requires a mastery of formal communication rules and regulations. By educating students on register awareness and providing continuous feedback on student writing, the Cameroonian educational system can transform social media from a distraction into a supportive tool for academic development. Maintaining these standards is essential for ensuring that the next generation of Cameroonian graduates can communicate competently in both national and international academic contexts

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