



SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON EFL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING: A FOCUS ON GEN Z SLANG

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Abstract

It is undeniable that social media plays a vital role in young learners' lives, particularly among Generation Z. It is used not only for accessing information but also for communicating and sharing ideas through various forms of online interaction. This communication heavily relies on writing, a crucial skill that EFL students are expected to master throughout their academic journey. This paper aims to investigate the impact of social media language, specifically as used on Facebook, on EFL students' academic writing. To this end, three empirical studies conducted in three different geographical contexts were selected, reviewed, compared, and contrasted. The findings suggested a balanced perspective. On the one hand, social media platforms can have a positive impact, as students feel more motivated to express themselves and tend to communicate more frequently in English. On the other hand, negative effects were identified, including difficulties in formal writing, linguistic deficiencies, and potential fossilization, which may hinder the acquisition of accurate language structures. This study concludes that both perspectives should be considered. It highlights the importance of learners' awareness and responsibility in deciding whether to use social media as a tool to enhance their academic writing or allow it to adversely affect their academic development.

Keywords: Academic writing, Gen Z, Social media language, EFL students

Introduction:

In today's digital age, the widespread use of social media platforms (henceforth, SMPs) has significantly influenced students' academic outcomes. Within a digitally connected world, young learners, particularly those belonging to Generation Z, increasingly rely on these platforms to support their educational development, enabling them to access information, interact with peers, and share knowledge beyond geographical boundaries.

However, social media functions as a double-edged sword (Harris & Dilts, 2015). While it can serve as a valuable resource for academic growth through access to educational content and online learning opportunities, it may also negatively affect the development of essential academic skills. Among these skills, writing has received particular attention. Writing is closely intertwined with social media use, as it constitutes the primary mode of communication across most platforms. The constant engagement of Gen Z learners in online written interaction has contributed to noticeable shifts in language use, including the growing prevalence of informal expressions, abbreviations, and slang.

This communication tool raises concerns about its potential impact on EFL students' academic writing, especially regarding linguistic accuracy, register awareness, and adherence to formal conventions. Previous empirical studies (e.g., Sari et al., 2019; Al-Jahromi, 2020) have highlighted the significant influence of social media use on writing proficiency, particularly in relation to the use of informal language and its effects on learners' awareness of appropriate academic registers. However, existing research reveals several gaps. These include limited attention to the specific impact of Gen Z slang on academic writing and insufficient consideration of pedagogical factors such as teacher guidance and scaffolding.

Addressing these gaps, the present paper investigates the impact of social media language, particularly slang, on EFL students' academic writing. This is achieved by reviewing, comparing, and synthesizing three empirical studies conducted in three different geographical contexts. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital communication practices can shape EFL students' written production and to identify both the potential benefits and drawbacks of social media language in academic settings.

1. Literature review:

1.1. Generation Z as Digital Natives

Generation Z, typically defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first cohort to grow up fully immersed in digital technologies. Often described as "digital natives," this generation is characterized by its constant connectivity, technological fluency, and reliance on online platforms for communication, learning, and social interaction (Singer et al., 2023). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z learners do not simply use technology as a tool; rather, digital environments shape their cognitive, social, and linguistic practices. Social

media platforms, in particular, play a central role in structuring how they produce and consume language. As a result, their communication is largely mediated through written, fast-paced, and informal digital exchanges.

This deep integration of technology into daily life has significant implications for language learning. For EFL students, continuous exposure to online discourse can create a hybrid linguistic repertoire that blends formal and informal registers. Consequently, Gen Z learners may experience difficulty maintaining clear boundaries between social and academic language, especially in writing tasks.

1.2. Social Media Language and Academic Writing

Social media platforms (SMPs) have become integral to language learning environments, especially for Gen Z students. Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined these platforms as web-based services that enable users to construct profiles and interact within networks. In educational contexts, SMPs are meant to facilitate authentic communication, provide access to diverse linguistic input, and remove temporal and spatial constraints (Chen & Bryer, 2012). For Gen Z learners, these platforms are not supplementary tools but primary spaces for interaction. Their frequent engagement with English on social media can enhance exposure to the language but also reinforce informal usage patterns.

Social Media Language is characterized by informality, abbreviations, and slang expressions that prioritize speed and efficiency (Jasilek, 2013; Mohiuddin, 2016). On this point, Jasilek (2013) pinpoints: “slang words tend to shorten as a result of social media, such as i will send her a message on Facebook becoming just i ll FB her” (p.03). While these features support rapid communication, they often conflict with the conventions of academic writing. In this respect, academic writing requires a formal register, coherence, and grammatical accuracy (Asare et al., 2022; Gillet et al., 2009). However, Gen Z students, due to their constant engagement with informal digital discourse, may struggle with register control. The transfer of SML features into academic contexts can result in linguistic inaccuracies, reduced formality, and structural issues in writing.

As noted by Dalzell and Victor (2017), one of the most significant effects of social media on language use is the appropriation of vocabulary, including the widespread emergence of slang derived from acronyms, abbreviations, and digital expressions such as “memes” and “selfie.” Consequently, this informal online discourse has increasingly permeated written English, with potential implications, both positive and negative, for EFL students’ academic writing. On the one hand, a substantial body of research highlights the pedagogical benefits of SMPs in enhancing EFL students’ writing skills. These platforms, particularly Facebook, have been recognized as valuable tools for language learning and are frequently integrated into blended learning environments (Manan et al., 2012; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010). They can support the development of writing proficiency (Shih, 2011), foster social interaction beyond the classroom (Kabilan et al., 2010; Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011), and promote collaborative and reflective learning (Yang, 2009). Moreover, SMPs provide

opportunities for vocabulary expansion and authentic language use (Hiew, 2012). Deng and Tavares (2013) further argue that web-based discussions enhance students' reflective abilities and critical thinking skills, demonstrating how online interaction encourages learners to express ideas and exchange feedback. Similarly, Galvin and Greenhow (2020) found that SMPs can foster writing development by increasing learners' attention to language use and interaction patterns. Supporting this view, Tienne (2000) suggested that online written communication allows students to articulate their ideas more carefully and thoughtfully. Empirical studies (e.g., Bakeer, 2018; Fithriani et al., 2019) also report improvements in writing through social media engagement, while Shih (2011) observed gains in paragraph structure, grammar, and vocabulary in Facebook-mediated learning environments. Furthermore, SMPs can reduce writing anxiety, thereby increasing motivation, self-confidence, and willingness to take linguistic risks (Mustafa et al., 2022).

On the other hand, numerous studies emphasize the disadvantages of social media on EFL students' academic writing. SMPs may not provide an appropriate environment for formal language learning, as they often encourage distraction and the habitual use of abbreviated forms (White, 2009; Yunus et al., 2012). In this context, Manan et al. (2012) argued that frequent engagement with social media promotes the use of non-standard English, which may negatively affect writing quality. Additionally, Cochran (2012) found that excessive time spent on SMPs correlates with lower academic performance. This is partly attributed to the prioritization of speed and efficiency in online communication, where "getting one's message across rapidly" often takes precedence over accuracy (Verheijen, 2013, p. 584). As noted by O'Connor (2005), "netspeak" frequently violates conventional norms of punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure. The pervasive use of online jargon, including slang and informal expressions, may therefore interfere with students' ability to produce coherent and grammatically accurate academic texts. This influence is evident in the increased occurrence of sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and informal writing styles in students' academic work. Similarly, Obi et al. (2012) reported that frequent users of SMPs tend to transfer digital writing practices into formal contexts, while White (2009) confirmed that the language used on social media differs significantly from standard academic English, reinforcing students' reliance on informal and abbreviated forms.

1.3. Theoretical Perspectives:

The relationship between social media language (SML) and EFL students' academic writing can be understood through an integrated theoretical lens combining Social Constructivism, code-switching and code-meshing, and Affordance Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive explanation of how digital environments shape linguistic behaviour and influence writing practices among Generation Z learners.

From a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), language development is inherently social and mediated through interaction. Social media platforms function as dynamic spaces where learners actively construct knowledge through engagement with peers and exposure to diverse linguistic inputs. For Generation Z students, whose communication is largely embedded in digital contexts, these platforms become key sites of language socialization. Nevertheless, this continuous interaction often privileges informal, non-standard

forms of English, which may be internalized and later transferred into academic writing. As a result, students may unconsciously reproduce features of SML, such as simplified syntax, informal vocabulary, and unconventional orthography, in formal contexts.

This phenomenon can be further explained through the concepts of code-switching and code-meshing. Code-switching (Myers-Scotton, 1993) refers to the alternation between different linguistic varieties, while code-meshing (Young, 2009) involves blending these varieties within a single discourse. In the case of EFL learners, particularly those belonging to Generation Z, the boundary between informal digital language and formal academic English becomes increasingly fluid. Students may incorporate slang, abbreviations, and hybrid expressions into their writing, reflecting their dual engagement with both academic and digital discourse communities. While such practices may demonstrate linguistic creativity and adaptability, their uncontrolled use often leads to register confusion and unsatisfactory academic writing quality.

Moreover, Affordance Theory (Gibson, 1979; Joshi & Rutledge, 2011) complements this understanding by highlighting how the features of social media platforms shape language use. The affordances of immediacy, brevity, and interactivity encourage rapid communication, often at the expense of grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity. As an illustration, the tendency to omit subjects, auxiliary verbs, or punctuation in online exchanges reflects the platform-driven need for efficiency. Over time, these patterns may become habitual, influencing how students approach writing tasks in academic settings. Consequently, the technological environment not only facilitates communication but also subtly restructures linguistic norms and expectations.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that the impact of social media on EFL students' academic writing is not merely a matter of language exposure, but rather the result of a complex interaction between social practices, cognitive processes, and technological affordances. For Generation Z learners, the constant negotiation between informal digital discourse and formal academic conventions creates both opportunities and challenges.

2. Results presentation:

This section synthesizes the key findings of the three empirical studies reviewed, namely Kamnoetsin's (2014), Lakhal's (2021), and Ghouali and Benmoussat's (2019) studies, with a focus on how SML influences EFL students' academic writing. The three studies share the view that SMPs, particularly Facebook, play a significant role in shaping students' writing practices. Across the different contexts, namely Thailand, Morocco, and Algeria, the participants were predominantly EFL university students, and in two cases, teachers were also involved to provide complementary perspectives.

From a methodological standpoint, Lakhal (2021) and Ghouali and Benmoussat (2019) adopted mixed-methods approaches, combining quantitative and qualitative data to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. In contrast, Kamnoetsin (2014) relied primarily on qualitative data through observations and interviews. Despite these differences, all studies highlighted similar linguistic patterns in students' writing.

The findings of the three studies indicate that social media platforms (SMPs) play a significant and influential role in EFL students' writing practices. On the one hand, they offer important opportunities, such as breaking spatial and temporal constraints and providing engaging learning experiences, as highlighted by Kamnoetsin (2014). On the other hand, their educational use must be carefully managed to avoid negative academic consequences. For instance, Ghouali and Benmoussat (2019) emphasized that the inability to distinguish between academic and social media contexts often leads students to transfer informal expressions and abbreviations into formal writing tasks, particularly when using Facebook.

All three studies reported a range of frequent errors in students' written productions. Kamnoetsin's (2014) qualitative study identified informal writing features such as contractions, grammatical inaccuracies, missing punctuation, and capitalization errors; for example, students wrote "i dont know" instead of "I don't know." Participants reported that these forms were acquired through regular Facebook use without awareness of their inappropriateness in formal contexts. Similarly, Ghouali and Benmoussat (2019) identified frequent use of abbreviations and phonetic spellings such as "u" for "you" and "r" for "are," as well as overuse of digital expressions like "thx," "bcoz," "cause," and "lol" in academic essays. These informal patterns were observed to be becoming fossilized, particularly among frequent social media users. In addition, Lakhali (2021) reported lexical inaccuracies, such as using "funny" instead of "interesting," alongside structural weaknesses in students' written production.

Despite these errors, the studies also highlighted several positive effects of social media use. SMPs encouraged students to write more frequently through comments, posts, and messages, thereby increasing practice and exposure to English. This repetition contributed to improved fluency and greater confidence in expression. Students also reported reduced writing anxiety in low-pressure environments, such as Facebook. In Kamnoetsin's (2014) study, learners participated in a Facebook-based tutorial lab, engaging in peer interaction through posting and commenting. This collaborative environment allowed students to learn from one another by observing different writing styles and vocabulary use. Although grammatical accuracy was sometimes limited, students developed consistent writing habits, which is essential for fluency development.

This dissertation also considers EFL learners through the lens of code-switching. The studies conducted in Thailand and Algeria (Kamnoetsin, 2014; Ghouali&Benmoussat, 2019) revealed instances of code-switching influenced by the learners' first languages (Thai, Arabic, and French). These linguistic shifts occurred particularly in Facebook interactions and were used to express identity, maintain social closeness, or compensate for lexical gaps. According to Gudykunst (2004), code-switching often occurs as speakers alternate between informal and formal contexts depending on communicative needs. In academic writing, however, such switching may signal difficulty in maintaining appropriate linguistic registers. For example, in Kamnoetsin's (2014) study, students wrote expressions such as "You welcome Kub" and "thank for your advice ka," where "Kub" and "ka" function as Thai politeness markers, with gender-specific usage.

Overall, the three studies converge on the conclusion that SMPs encourage informal writing practices that negatively affect grammar and spelling accuracy, which may lead to weaker academic writing performance. However, they also acknowledge that social media can enhance writing confidence, increase writing frequency, and improve learner motivation in certain contexts. In response to these mixed effects, the studies propose several pedagogical recommendations. Kamnoetsin (2014) suggested using SMPs as supplementary learning tools rather than replacements for formal instruction. Ghouali and Benmoussat (2019) recommended explicit teaching to help students distinguish between informal and academic writing styles. Finally, Lakhal (2021) emphasized the importance of integrating social media literacy into curricula to support academic writing development.

3. Discussion of the results:

The present paper aims to examine the impact of SML on EFL students' academic writing (AW), particularly the influence of Gen Z slang. To achieve this objective, three empirical studies from different geographical contexts were selected and critically reviewed.

The findings of the reviewed studies suggest that social media platforms exert a complex influence on EFL students' academic writing, particularly through the regular exposure to informal digital discourse. Across the three studies, the students demonstrated a tendency to transfer features of social media language, such as abbreviations, acronyms, slang expressions, and non-standard punctuation, into formal academic tasks. This finding can be interpreted through the lens of Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that learning and language development are socially mediated processes. Since students spend considerable time interacting on digital platforms, these online environments can function as linguistic communities where informal norms are repeatedly practiced, reinforced, and normalized. Consequently, learners internalize these linguistic patterns and reproduce them in academic contexts. This view is supported by Kamnoetsin's (2014) study, whose participants used Facebook as a collaborative learning environment where writing occurred through peer interaction and group discussion. Although this environment increased participation and reduced writing anxiety, it simultaneously exposed students to informal structures and colloquial forms. In line with Social Constructivism, learners do not merely consume language passively but co-construct linguistic knowledge through interaction with peers and digital communities (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Therefore, the frequent use of non-standard forms on social media may gradually shape learners' perceptions of acceptable written norms.

The results can also be explained through Code-switching and Code-meshing theories, which illuminate students' movement between linguistic varieties and registers (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Young, 2009). The reviewed studies revealed several instances in which students alternated between English and their first languages or blended formal and informal English forms. In Ghouali and Benmoussat's (2019) Algerian study, for example, students integrated Arabic- and French-influenced structures into English writing, while Kamnoetsin (2014) reported Thai politeness markers such as *Kub* and *ka* embedded in English expressions. These practices seem to reflect learners' attempts to negotiate multiple linguistic identities in digital

spaces. However, the inability to separate informal online discourse from academic discourse indicates weak register awareness and insufficient mastery of context-appropriate language use.

Moreover, the findings of the three selected studies align with Affordance Theory (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001), which explains how technologies both enable and constrain particular forms of communication. Social media platforms are designed to prioritize immediacy, brevity, interactivity, and efficiency. Such affordances encourage users to write quickly, omit grammatical elements, shorten words, and rely on multimodal features such as emojis and abbreviations. As Verheijen (2013) noted, digital communication values speed and communicative efficiency over formal accuracy. This technological environment may explain why students in the reviewed studies produced fragments, spelling errors, and informal constructions in their academic writing.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal the pedagogical potential of social media when used intentionally. Lakhal (2021) identified a moderate positive correlation between academic use of social media and writing performance, suggesting that the educational value of these platforms depends largely on usage patterns. This finding supports previous studies arguing that social media can facilitate authentic language exposure, vocabulary acquisition, collaborative learning, and writing practice (Kabilan et al., 2010; Shih, 2011). In this sense, SMPs can function as supplementary learning environments that can increase students' writing frequency and lower affective barriers, such as anxiety.

The coexistence of positive and negative outcomes reinforces the notion that social media functions as a double-edged sword in EFL learning. While these platforms provide authentic opportunities for communication and learner engagement, their linguistic norms may conflict with the conventions of academic writing. The reviewed studies collectively suggest that the issue lies not in social media itself, but in the absence of pedagogical mediation. Without explicit instruction on register awareness and digital literacy, students may struggle to differentiate between socially acceptable online language and academically appropriate discourse. Therefore, these findings highlight the importance of integrating social media critically into language education. Rather than prohibiting its use, educators should incorporate activities that help students analyze digital discourse, reflect on language choices, and practice shifting between informal and formal registers (Crystal, 2008). Such an approach would allow learners to benefit from the motivational and collaborative affordances of social media while minimizing its potentially detrimental effects on academic writing.

In sum, the findings confirm that social media language significantly influences EFL students' academic writing practices. Interpreted through Social Constructivism, Code-switching/Code-meshing, and Affordance Theory, this influence emerges as a product of socially mediated digital interaction, multilingual negotiation, and platform-specific communication norms.

Conclusion

Social media has become an integral part of daily communication, particularly among Gen Z, who increasingly rely on written interaction through SMPs. This shift has contributed to the continuous evolution of students' writing practices, where short, rapid exchanges often characterize online communication and may extend into academic writing. While such developments have raised concerns regarding the influence of SML on EFL students' writing performance, existing research also points to potential pedagogical benefits. This paper set out to investigate whether SML on SMPs has a positive or negative impact on EFL students' AW. This objective was achieved through a critical review, comparison, and synthesis of three empirical studies conducted in different geographical contexts. The analysis was further supported by key theoretical frameworks, including Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), Code-switching and Code-meshing theories, and Affordance Theory (Gibson, 1979), which collectively helped explain how digital environments shape learners' linguistic behaviour.

The findings revealed that the relationship between SMP use and academic writing is neither uniform nor deterministic. Rather, it is characterized by a dual effect. On the one hand, SMPs provide meaningful opportunities for language exposure, increased writing practice, enhanced motivation, and reduced writing anxiety. On the other hand, they contribute to the transfer of informal language features into academic contexts, including abbreviations, grammatical inaccuracies, spelling errors, and register confusion. This duality supports the view that social media functions as a "double-edged tool" in EFL writing development. Importantly, a key insight emerging from the reviewed studies is that even when negative impacts are identified, they are often accompanied by increased learner engagement and confidence in writing. This suggests that the issue does not lie in social media itself, but rather in how it is used within and outside educational contexts. Consequently, responsibility is increasingly shifted from the technology itself to its users. Students, educators, and institutions should work towards establishing a balanced approach that integrates SMPs as supportive learning tools while maintaining clear boundaries between informal digital communication and academic writing standards. Achieving this balance is essential for maximizing the educational benefits of social media while minimizing its potential linguistic drawbacks.

In conclusion, SML does not inherently improve or deteriorate EFL students' academic writing; rather, its impact depends on the context, purpose, and manner of use. When appropriately guided, SMPs can serve as valuable pedagogical resources that enhance language learning and writing development.

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