VOL. 07 NO. 6,
FEBRUARY, 2025
E-ISSN 3027-1401
P-ISSN 3026-9148

African Scholar Publications & Research International
www.africanscholarpub.com

Journal of Arts and Sociological Research (JASR)

Digital Communication Practices and Their Influence on English Language Use Among Students in Bauchi State

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/ajasr.v7i6.032

Abstract

The proliferation of digital communication technologies—particularly social media platforms, instant messaging applications, and mobile devices—has fundamentally transformed how young people engage with language. In Nigeria, where English functions as the official language and medium of instruction, the impact of digital communication practices on students' English language use has become a subject of growing concern among educators, policymakers, and parents. This mixed-methods study investigated the digital communication practices of secondary school students in Bauchi State, Nigeria, and examined the influence of these practices on their English language use, including writing conventions, vocabulary, grammar, and attitudes toward English. A census sample of 40 English teachers and a stratified random sample of 300 students (JS3 and SS2) from six secondary schools across Bauchi State (Bauchi, Tafawa Balewa, Toro, Dass, Bogoro, and Alkaleri LGAs) participated. Quantitative data were collected using the Digital Communication Practices Questionnaire (DCPQ, α=0.86), the English Language Influence Scale (ELIS, α=0.84), and the English Proficiency Test (EPT, KR-20=0.82). Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers and 40 students, as well as analysis of students' social media writing samples. The findings reveal that digital communication is ubiquitous among students: 96% of respondents reported using WhatsApp, 88% reported using YouTube, and 72% reported using Facebook. The average daily screen time was 4.2 hours (SD=2.1). Students reported frequent use of digital language features including abbreviations (94%), non-standard spellings (88%), absence of punctuation (86%), and code-switching between English and Hausa (82%). A moderate negative correlation was found between frequency of digital communication and performance on formal English writing tasks ($r = -0.51$, $p < .01$), with students in the top quartile of digital language use scoring 31 percentage points lower on the EPT writing section compared to students in the bottom quartile. However, digital

practices also showed positive influences: 76% of students reported that online English content (YouTube tutorials, educational websites) improved their vocabulary and comprehension. Teachers expressed concern about "digitalese" (abbreviated, non-standard English) transferring to formal academic writing, with 84% reporting that students increasingly use text-message abbreviations in examinations. Digital communication practices in Bauchi State have a dual influence on English language use: they facilitate access to English-language content and informal learning opportunities but simultaneously contribute to the erosion of standard writing conventions. The study concludes that rather than condemning digital language practices, educators should leverage them as pedagogical resources while explicitly teaching register awareness—the ability to distinguish between informal digital communication and formal academic writing. Integrate digital literacy into English curriculum; train teachers to address "digitalese" constructively; develop context-appropriate materials that bridge informal and formal English; and conduct parental awareness programs on monitoring students' digital engagement.

Keywords: Digital communication, social media, English language proficiency, text messaging, abbreviations, ESL, Bauchi State, Nigeria, secondary school students

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented transformation in communication practices, driven by the proliferation of digital technologies, mobile devices, and social media platforms. According to global statistics, over 4.9 billion people use social media worldwide, with the average user spending approximately 2.5 hours daily on these platforms (DataReportal, 2023). In Nigeria, the adoption of digital communication has been particularly rapid, fueled by the expansion of mobile phone penetration (estimated at over 80% of the population) and decreasing data costs (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2023). Among young Nigerians—the so-called "digital natives"—engagement with digital platforms is nearly universal, with WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok being the most popular applications. This digital revolution has profound implications for language use. Digital communication platforms have given rise to distinctive linguistic features—abbreviations, acronyms, non-standard spellings, emojis, memes, and syntactic simplifications—that deviate significantly from the conventions of standard written English. As observed by Akabua (2024), "social media and digital communication platforms have altered the dynamics of language use, introducing new forms of expression, slang, and abbreviations that reflect a hybrid linguistic culture". While these features facilitate rapid, informal communication among peers, concerns have been raised about their potential negative impact on students' formal writing skills, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts where learners already face

significant challenges in mastering standard English conventions.

In Nigeria, the impact of digital communication on English language use is particularly consequential given English's status as the official language, medium of instruction, and gatekeeper for educational and economic advancement (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). The National Policy on Education stipulates that English shall be the language of instruction from primary four onward, and performance on the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and Junior School Certificate Examination (JSCE) determines access to higher education and formal employment. However, persistent concerns about declining English proficiency among Nigerian students have led educators and policymakers to question whether digital communication practices are contributing to this decline.

These concerns are not merely anecdotal. In Bauchi State, the Nigerian Postal Service (NIPOST) has explicitly linked the advent of social media and text messaging to declining writing skills among students. The Postmaster-General, Dr. Richard Balami, speaking at a letter writing competition in Bauchi State, expressed regret that "the advent of social media and phone text messages known as Short Messages Service (SMS) have negatively affected the writing skills of students nowadays such that many of them cannot spell English words correctly". This observation led NIPOST to organize a letter writing competition in collaboration with the Bauchi State Ministry of Education, aimed at "checkmate the ugly trend among students, which leads to their persistent failure in English Language examinations".

Bauchi State, with its unique linguistic ecology characterized by trilingualism (Zaar/Hausa/English), presents a particularly rich context for investigating the influence of digital communication on English language use. As documented in previous research, students in Bauchi State typically speak an indigenous language (Zaar, Gyaazi, Fulfulde, etc.) at home, Hausa as a regional lingua franca in the community, and English as the language of formal education. This complex multilingual background already presents challenges for English acquisition; the addition of digital communication practices—which often involve code-switching, non-standard spelling, and abbreviated forms—may compound these challenges or, alternatively, may provide new opportunities for English exposure and practice.

Despite the centrality of English to educational and economic success in Nigeria, there is growing evidence of declining English proficiency among secondary school students, particularly in northern Nigeria. In Bauchi State, English language pass rates in the Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination have averaged only 34% in recent years (St. Joseph Secondary School, 2022), with persistent failure in English language examinations preventing many students from securing admission to tertiary institutions.

Concurrent with this decline in English proficiency has been the rapid adoption of digital communication technologies among young people. WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms have become integral to students' daily lives, with many spending several hours daily engaged in digital communication. These platforms have given rise to distinctive linguistic practices characterized by abbreviations (e.g., "u" for "you," "r" for "are"), non-

standard spellings (e.g., "dat" for "that," "dis" for "this"), absence of punctuation and capitalization, and code-switching between English and Hausa.

The juxtaposition of these two trends—declining formal English proficiency and increasing digital communication—has led educators and policymakers to question whether digital practices are contributing to students' difficulties with standard English. However, existing research on this question has produced mixed findings. Some studies have found negative correlations between social media use and formal writing skills, documenting the transfer of "textspeak" features into academic writing. Other studies have found that digital engagement can enhance English vocabulary and comprehension through exposure to authentic language content. Still other research suggests that the relationship is more complex, with effects depending on the type of digital activity, the student's existing proficiency, and the presence or absence of explicit instruction on register awareness.

Several significant gaps exist in the current literature. First, no published study has systematically investigated digital communication practices and their influence on English language use among students in Bauchi State specifically. Most existing Nigerian studies focus on southern or north-central states (Lagos, Nasarawa, Anambra) and may not generalize to Bauchi's unique linguistic context. Second, few studies have used mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative measures (frequency of digital practices, proficiency tests) with qualitative depth (interviews, writing sample analysis) to capture the nuances of how digital practices influence language use. Third, the perspective of English teachers—who are on the front lines of observing changes in student writing—has been underexplored. Fourth, the potential positive influences of digital communication (e.g., access to English-language content, informal learning opportunities) have received less attention than negative influences. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the digital communication practices of secondary school students in Bauchi State, examining both the positive and negative influences of these practices on English language use, and exploring the perspectives of students and teachers on how digital communication is reshaping English in the digital age.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study is to investigate the digital communication practices and examined the influence of these practices on the English language use, including writing conventions, vocabulary, grammar, and attitudes toward English within the secondary school students in Bauchi State, Nigeria. The following objectives guided this study:

1. To identify the digital communication platforms most frequently used by secondary school students in Bauchi State and to quantify the frequency and duration of their digital engagement.
2. To describe the distinctive linguistic features (abbreviations, non-standard spellings, punctuation omissions, code-switching) characteristic of students' digital communication practices.

3. To determine the correlation between frequency of digital communication and students' performance on formal English proficiency measures (grammar, writing, reading comprehension).
4. To identify both the positive influences (e.g., vocabulary expansion, access to English content) and negative influences (e.g., transfer of non-standard features to formal writing) of digital communication on English language use as perceived by students and teachers.
5. To explore students' and teachers' attitudes toward digital language practices and their recommendations for integrating digital literacy into English language instruction.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What digital communication platforms do secondary school students in Bauchi State use most frequently, and what is the average daily duration of their digital engagement?
2. What are the characteristic linguistic features (abbreviations, non-standard spellings, punctuation patterns, code-switching) of students' digital communication practices?
3. Is there a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of students' digital communication and their performance on formal English proficiency measures (grammar, writing, reading)?
4. What positive influences (e.g., vocabulary development, access to English content) and negative influences (e.g., transfer to formal writing) of digital communication on English language use do students and teachers identify?
5. What are students' and teachers' attitudes toward digital language practices, and what recommendations do they offer for integrating digital literacy into English instruction?

Research Hypotheses

The following null and alternative hypotheses were formulated and tested at the alpha = 0.05 significance level:

H_0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no statistically significant correlation between the frequency of students' digital communication practices and their performance on formal English proficiency measures at secondary schools in Bauchi State.

H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the frequency of students' digital communication practices and their performance on formal English proficiency measures at secondary schools in Bauchi State (i.e., higher digital communication frequency is associated with lower formal English proficiency).

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for multiple stakeholders. For the Bauchi State Ministry of Education, the findings provide empirical evidence to inform policies on digital literacy,

mobile phone use in schools, and English language instruction. For English language teachers, the results offer guidance on how to address the influence of digital communication on student writing—whether to condemn, ignore, or leverage digital language practices as pedagogical resources. For curriculum developers, the study highlights the need to integrate digital literacy and register awareness into the English curriculum, preparing students to navigate the distinction between informal digital communication and formal academic writing. For parents, the findings provide insights into how their children's digital engagement may be affecting English language development, informing decisions about monitoring and guidance. For educational researchers, this study contributes to the growing literature on digital communication and language change in ESL contexts, particularly in under-resourced, multilingual settings.

Scope and Delimitation

This study was delimited to secondary school students (JS3 and SS2) and English language teachers in six Local Government Areas of Bauchi State: Bauchi (urban), Tafawa Balewa, Toro, Dass, Bogoro, and Alkaleri. The study focused specifically on digital communication practices (social media, instant messaging, internet browsing) and their influence on written English (grammar, spelling, punctuation, writing conventions). It did not examine the influence of digital communication on spoken English, nor did it examine digital practices unrelated to language use (e.g., gaming, streaming non-English content). The study included 300 students (stratified random sample) and 40 English teachers (census). Students with diagnosed learning disabilities or whose first language is English were excluded.

Operational Definition of Terms

- **Digital communication practices:** The use of digital technologies—particularly social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok), instant messaging applications, and internet browsing—for interpersonal communication and content consumption. Operationally measured by the Digital Communication Practices Questionnaire (DCPQ), which assesses platform usage, frequency, duration, and specific linguistic practices.
- **English language use:** In this study, English language use refers to students' production of written English in both digital contexts (social media posts, messages) and formal academic contexts (examinations, essays). It is measured through (a) the English Proficiency Test (EPT) assessing grammar, writing, and reading comprehension; (b) analysis of students' social media writing samples; and (c) teacher reports of observed language use in academic writing.
- **Influence:** The measurable effects of digital communication practices on English language use, operationalized as (a) correlations between DCPQ scores and EPT scores; (b) differences in EPT scores between high-frequency and low-frequency

digital users; (c) qualitative themes from interviews regarding perceived positive and negative influences.

- **"Digitalese" / "Textspeak":** The distinctive linguistic features associated with digital communication, including abbreviations (e.g., "u" for "you," "pls" for "please"), acronyms (e.g., "LOL" for "laugh out loud"), non-standard spellings (e.g., "dat" for "that," "dis" for "this"), omission of punctuation and capitalization, use of emojis and memes, and code-switching between English and Hausa .
- **Bauchi State:** A state in northeastern Nigeria, created in 1976, with its capital at Bauchi city. The state is known for its extreme linguistic diversity, with over 50 indigenous languages spoken alongside Hausa (the regional lingua franca) and English (the official language).

Defining Digital Communication Practices

Digital communication practices encompass the range of activities through which individuals use digital technologies to create, share, and exchange information. In the context of this study, digital communication practices refer specifically to secondary school students' use of social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok), instant messaging applications, and internet browsing for interpersonal communication, content consumption, and information seeking.

The adoption of digital communication among Nigerian youth has been rapid and extensive. According to Agunloye (2025), a study of students in Nigeria's North Central Geo-Political Zone found that WhatsApp was used by 91.51% of respondents, YouTube by 85.38%, and Facebook by significant proportions. These findings are consistent with earlier research by Ezeah (2013), who documented the "prevalent phenomenon" of social media use among Nigerian university students. In Bauchi State specifically, the Nigerian Postal Service has noted that "the recent intrusion of mobile phones in our lives at the turn of the century especially on the fragile minds of our youths" has created new challenges for language and literacy development.

Digital communication is characterized by several distinctive features that distinguish it from traditional written communication. As noted by Obasi and Obasi (2024) in their study of Nigerian Generation Z language use on Twitter (now X), the communicative features commonly employed by ESL Generation Z individuals include "emoji, slang, meme, hashtag, and code-switching," with "slang expressions and memes more commonly used than code-switching and hashtags". These features are shaped by "a complex interplay of factors, including character limits, social issues, social identity, pop culture, and digital nativity".

Linguistic Features of Digital Communication

Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has documented a range of distinctive linguistic features associated with digital platforms. In the Nigerian context, Akabuike and

Onuh (2025) investigated "the different spelling forms used by some select undergraduates as observed in their social media discourses" and identified "the following spelling variations: acronyms, Nigerian pidgins, code switching/mixing, neologism and so on". They noted that these variations include "the (un)intentional deletion of letters, unpopular academic abbreviation, and nonstandard spellings".

These linguistic features serve multiple functions in digital communication. They enable rapid typing, convey informal tone and solidarity, signal group membership and digital nativity, and accommodate the technical constraints of platforms (e.g., character limits on Twitter). However, concerns have been raised about the potential for these features to "transfer" to formal academic writing, a phenomenon sometimes termed "digitalese" or "textspeak" interference.

Digital Communication and Second Language Acquisition: Theoretical Perspectives

Understanding the influence of digital communication on English language use requires a theoretical framework that accounts for both the opportunities and challenges presented by digital engagement. This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Swain's Output Hypothesis, and the Notion of Register Awareness.

Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis posits that second language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to "comprehensible input"—language that is slightly above their current proficiency level (i+1). Digital communication platforms provide abundant opportunities for such input: YouTube tutorials, English-language social media content, news websites, and educational blogs all expose students to authentic English. As Akeredolu-Ale et al. (n.d.) observed in their study of Nigerian university students, "ICT-mediated teaching and learning stimulates interest and enhances language acquisition and performance in language classes". From this perspective, digital engagement can be a valuable source of English input that supplements classroom instruction.

Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis complements the Input Hypothesis by emphasizing that language acquisition also requires opportunities for "pushed output"—producing language that is comprehensible, coherent, and appropriate. Digital communication provides abundant opportunities for output: students write WhatsApp messages, post comments on Facebook, compose tweets, and create content for various platforms. However, the output produced in digital contexts is typically informal, unedited, and characterized by non-standard features. The question is whether this output practice facilitates or hinders the development of standard written English.

Register Awareness—the ability to distinguish between different language varieties and use the appropriate variety for a given context—is a crucial metalinguistic skill for ESL learners. Digital communication represents an informal register characterized by abbreviations, non-standard spellings, and relaxed grammatical conventions. Academic writing represents a

formal register characterized by standard spelling, complete sentences, and adherence to grammatical rules. The challenge for students is to develop register awareness: the ability to use digitalese appropriately in informal contexts while switching to standard English in formal academic contexts. As Akabua (2024) notes, "while these technologies have democratized access to information and fostered global communication, they have also presented challenges such as the erosion of formal writing skills". The erosion occurs when students fail to distinguish between registers and transfer informal digital features into formal writing.

Prevalence and Patterns of Digital Communication Among Nigerian Students

A substantial body of research has documented the widespread adoption of digital communication among Nigerian students. Agunloye (2025) conducted a study examining "the impact of social media usage on English language proficiency of students in the North Central Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria" using a descriptive survey design with 424 students. The results showed that "WhatsApp (91.51%), YouTube (85.38%)" were the most frequently used platforms. The study found that social media has "become an integral part of daily life, particularly among the younger generation" and that "its impact on language skills is a subject of growing concern".

In the South-East region, Ezeah (2013) examined "the use of social media among students of universities in South-East Nigeria" and found it to be "a prevalent phenomenon". Similarly, in Nasarawa State (North-Central), Ahmad (2025) assessed "the utilization of electronic media in teaching and learning English language" and found that while digital technologies are present in schools, "their application in vocabulary instruction remains limited". The study revealed that "most of the required electronic media for the teaching and learning of English language were not available in the senior secondary schools" and that "the level of awareness of usage of available electronic media was very low".

In Bauchi State specifically, the Nigerian Postal Service (NIPOST) has documented the pervasive influence of digital communication on students. At a letter writing competition organized in collaboration with the Bauchi State Ministry of Education, the Postmaster-General noted that "the recent intrusion of mobile phones in our lives at the turn of the century especially on the fragile minds of our youths" has led to a situation where "many of them cannot spell English words correctly". This observation was based on the participation of "4,844 students from 36 secondary schools in the state" in the competition.

Positive Influences of Digital Communication on English Language Use

Despite concerns about negative effects, several studies have documented positive influences of digital communication on English language development. Agunloye (2025) found that platforms like YouTube provide valuable English-language content that can enhance vocabulary and comprehension. Alwehaibi (2015) specifically examined "the impact of using YouTube in EFL classroom on enhancing EFL students' content learning" and recommended

that "YouTube should be considered as an effective instructional tool for enhancing content learning of EFL college students and as an important teaching resource in classrooms".

In the Nigerian university context, Akeredolu-Ale, Aduradola, Sotiloye, and Bodunde (n.d.) examined "the impact of the digital age on the teaching and learning of English and Communication Skills (ECS)" at the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta. They found that "though bereft with challenges, experience at FUNAAB revealed that ICT-mediated teaching and learning stimulates interest and enhances language acquisition and performance in language classes". They recommended "adequate provision of infrastructural amenities, availability of requisite soft and hardware packages and workable policy to sustain interest and enhance motivation for greater performance".

Ogbuehi (2025) investigated "the extent to which digital technology is strategically incorporated in Nigerian English language classrooms to enhance vocabulary development among ESL learners". Grounded in Constructivist Learning Theory, the study found that "while digital technologies, such as computers and internet connectivity are present in schools, their application in vocabulary instruction remains limited". The most frequently used digital method "involves projecting downloaded pictures and videos to engage students visually," but "unreliable internet access continues to hamper more advanced technological integration". The study concluded that "in order to enhance vocabulary learning in today's technology-driven era, English language teachers must become proficient in the use of online platforms and software tailored for vocabulary instruction".

Negative Influences of Digital Communication on English Language Use

Concerns about negative influences of digital communication on formal English proficiency have been extensively documented. The Nigerian Postal Service has been particularly vocal on this issue, with the Postmaster-General stating that "the advent of social media and phone text messages known as Short Messages Service (SMS) have negatively affected the writing skills of students nowadays such that many of them cannot spell English words correctly". This concern is not merely academic; it has practical consequences for students' educational trajectories, as "persistent failure in English Language examinations" prevents students from "securing admissions in tertiary institutions".

Akabua (2024) conducted a comprehensive study on "the impact of digital technology and Information Communication Technology on English Language in Nigeria," adopting a qualitative research methodology with a comprehensive literature review and thematic analysis. The study found that "social media and digital communication platforms have altered the dynamics of language use, introducing new forms of expression, slang, and abbreviations that reflect a hybrid linguistic culture". While acknowledging positive effects, Akabua noted that these technologies have also presented "challenges such as the erosion of formal writing skills and the potential for the proliferation of non-standard English". The study is grounded

in the Theory of Blended Learning Instructional Approach (BLIA), which "provides insights into the integration of traditional and digital learning methods".

Obasi and Obasi (2024) examined "the various communicative features and factors that influence the language use of selected ESL Generation Z individuals on Twitter". Using purposive sampling of five popular Nigerian Generation Z media personalities and applying Lesley Jeffries' (2010) Critical Stylistics theoretical framework, the study identified "five communicative features commonly employed by ESL Generation Z individuals: emoji, slang, meme, hashtag, and code-switching". The study found that "slang expressions and memes are more commonly used than code-switching and hashtags" and that "ESL Gen Z's language use on Twitter is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including character limits, social issues, social identity, pop culture, and digital nativity".

Teacher Perspectives on Digital Communication and Student Writing

The perspective of English teachers—who observe the effects of digital communication on student writing firsthand—has been documented in several studies. Ogbuehi (2025) collected data from "40 English language teachers across government, missionary, and private secondary schools" and found that "most English language laboratories are non-functional, and many teachers lack adequate familiarity with internet-based educational tools and vocabulary teaching software". This suggests that even when teachers recognize the influence of digital communication, they may lack the training and resources to address it effectively.

In Bauchi State specifically, the collaboration between NIPOST and the Bauchi State Ministry of Education to organize a letter writing competition reflects teacher and policymaker concern about declining writing skills. The Commissioner for Education, represented by the Permanent Secretary, "commended NIPOST for organising the programme, which he said would enhance students' communication skills". The competition, which involved 4,844 students from 36 secondary schools, was explicitly designed to "checkmate the ugly trend among students" of deteriorating writing skills.

Ahmad (2025) assessed "the utilization of electronic media in teaching and learning English language in senior secondary schools in Akwanga Local Government, Nasarawa State". The study found that "most of the required electronic media for the teaching and learning of English language were not available in the senior secondary schools" and that "the level of awareness of usage of available electronic media was very low". This finding highlights a critical gap: while students are using digital media extensively for informal communication, schools are not effectively leveraging digital tools for formal instruction.

Contextual Review: Digital Communication in Bauchi State

Bauchi State presents a unique context for studying digital communication and English language use. As documented in previous research, the state is characterized by extreme linguistic diversity, with over 50 indigenous languages spoken alongside Hausa (the regional

lingua franca) and English (the official language). This multilingual ecology means that English is typically a third language for students, acquired after their mother tongue (e.g., Zaar, Gyaazi, Fulfulde) and Hausa.

The adoption of digital communication in Bauchi State has been facilitated by increasing mobile phone penetration. However, access remains uneven: urban students (Bauchi LGA) generally have better access to smartphones and data plans than rural students (Toro, Dass, Alkaleri LGAs). This digital divide has implications for English language development, as students with greater access to English-language content online may have advantages in vocabulary and comprehension, while also being more exposed to non-standard digital language features.

The Nigerian Postal Service's letter writing competition in Bauchi State provides a concrete example of institutional response to perceived digital language interference. The competition, which drew participants from 36 secondary schools, was designed to "inculcate the art of speaking and writing good English Language among youths". The winners—Silverline Tetua from Government Secondary School, Dass (overall winner), Amina Gambo and Musa Habu from Government Day Secondary School, Kofar Wambai, Bauchi (first and second runners-up)—demonstrate that some students are able to maintain standard writing skills despite pervasive digital communication. Understanding what differentiates these students from their peers is an important question for future research.

Gap in Knowledge

Despite the extensive literature on digital communication and language use, significant gaps remain. First, no published study has systematically investigated digital communication practices and their influence on English language use among secondary school students in Bauchi State specifically. Most existing Nigerian studies focus on southern or north-central states (Lagos, Nasarawa, Anambra, Delta) and may not generalize to Bauchi's unique trilingual (indigenous language-Hausa-English) context. Second, few studies have used mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative measures (frequency of digital practices, proficiency tests) with qualitative depth (interviews, writing sample analysis) to capture the nuances of how digital practices influence language use. Most existing studies rely on surveys alone or interviews alone. Third, the perspective of English teachers in Bauchi State has been underexplored; no study has systematically documented teacher observations of "digitalese" transfer to academic writing in Bauchi classrooms. Fourth, the potential positive influences of digital communication—particularly access to English-language content via YouTube and educational websites—have received less attention than negative influences. Fifth, the specific linguistic features of digital communication among Bauchi State students (including code-switching between English, Hausa, and indigenous languages) have not been documented. The present study addresses these gaps.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), with quantitative data collection and analysis followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to explain, elaborate upon, or challenge the quantitative findings. The sequential design was chosen because the research questions require both breadth (to establish patterns of digital communication across a large sample) and depth (to understand the mechanisms through which digital practices influence language use).

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in six Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Bauchi State, Nigeria: Bauchi LGA (urban center), Tafawa Balewa LGA (semi-urban), Toro LGA (rural), Dass LGA (rural), Bogoro LGA (semi-urban), and Alkaleri LGA (rural). These LGAs were purposively selected to represent the range of urbanicity and access to digital infrastructure in the state.

Target Population and Sample

The target population comprised all English language teachers (N=40) and all students in JS3 and SS2 (N=1,200) across the six selected secondary schools (one school per LGA). A census sampling technique was employed for teachers: all 40 English teachers were included. For students, a stratified random sampling technique was employed: students were stratified by class level (JS3, SS2) and LGA, then randomly selected within strata. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for a population of 1,200, yielding a target of 291. To account for attrition, 350 students were initially sampled; after data cleaning, 300 complete responses were retained (50 per LGA, 25 JS3 and 25 SS2 per LGA).

Instruments

Four instruments were used:

1. **Digital Communication Practices Questionnaire (DCPQ):** A 25-item Likert-scale instrument (1=Never to 5=Very Often) measuring (a) platforms used (WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter); (b) frequency and duration of use; (c) specific linguistic practices (abbreviations, non-standard spellings, punctuation omissions, code-switching). The DCPQ was pilot-tested on 50 students in Bauchi LGA (not included in the main sample), yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86.
2. **English Language Influence Scale (ELIS):** A 20-item Likert-scale instrument (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) measuring students' perceptions of digital communication's influence on their English language use, including both positive influences (e.g., "Social media has helped me learn new English words") and negative influences (e.g., "I sometimes use abbreviations from WhatsApp in my school writing"). The ELIS was pilot-tested, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84.

3. **English Proficiency Test (EPT):** A 40-item test comprising grammar (15 items), writing (10 items—error identification and correction), and reading comprehension (15 items). Items were drawn from past JSCE and WASSCE English language examinations (2015-2022). The test was validated by three English language educators (CVI=0.90). Reliability was estimated using Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20=0.82).
4. **Semi-Structured Interview Guides:** Two interview guides were developed: one for teachers (15 questions) and one for students (12 questions). Teacher questions covered observed changes in student writing, perceptions of digital language influence, classroom strategies, and recommendations. Student questions covered digital practices, awareness of register differences, perceived influences on writing, and attitudes.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity of the DCPQ and ELIS was established through expert review by three measurement specialists from Bauchi State University. Construct validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis, which extracted three factors for the DCPQ (platform use, frequency, linguistic features) explaining 64% of variance, and two factors for the ELIS (positive influence, negative influence) explaining 61% of variance. Reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha (DCPQ α=0.86, ELIS α=0.84) and KR-20 for the EPT (0.82).

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred over four weeks (October-November 2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the Bauchi State Ministry of Education and school administrations. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and parents/guardians of students.

Week 1: The DCPQ and ELIS were administered to 300 students during regular English periods. Teachers were excused from the classroom during administration to reduce social desirability bias.

Week 2: The EPT was administered to all 300 students under standard examination conditions (60 minutes).

Week 3: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 teachers (purposively selected based on teaching experience and school location) and 40 students (10 per LGA, balanced by gender and proficiency level). Social media writing samples (from WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter) were collected from consenting students.

Week 4: Data cleaning and preliminary analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages) were computed for DCPQ and ELIS items.

Pearson product-moment correlation was computed between DCPQ scores and EPT scores. Independent-samples t-tests compared EPT scores between high-frequency (top quartile) and low-frequency (bottom quartile) digital users. The alpha level was set at $p < 0.05$.
Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were transcribed verbatim (Hausa interviews were translated into English). Two coders independently coded 20% of the transcripts; inter-coder reliability was 85%.

Ethical Considerations
The study adhered to the American Educational Research Association's (2011) Code of Ethics. Key considerations included: (a) informed consent; (b) anonymity and confidentiality (participants identified by codes); (c) protection from harm; (d) debriefing (participants received a summary of findings).

Demographic Characteristics of Participants
Student participants (N=300): 52% female, 48% male. Age range: 13-18 (M=15.2, SD=1.4). Class level: JS3 (50%), SS2 (50%). LGA distribution: Bauchi (50), Tafawa Balewa (50), Toro (50), Dass (50), Bogoro (50), Alkaleri (50). Smartphone ownership: 78% owned a smartphone; an additional 12% had access to a family smartphone. Internet access: 68% reported daily internet access; 22% reported weekly access; 10% reported no regular access.
Teacher participants (N=40): 55% male, 45% female. Teaching experience: M=8.7 years (SD=4.9). Educational qualifications: NCE (65%), bachelor's degree (30%), master's degree (5%). Smartphone ownership: 100%. Daily internet access: 95%.

Research Question 1: Digital Communication Platforms and Frequency
The first research question asked: What digital communication platforms do secondary school students in Bauchi State use most frequently, and what is the average daily duration of their digital engagement? The table 1 presents platform usage statistics.

Table 1: Digital Communication Platform Usage (N=300)

Platform	% Use (Daily/Almost Daily)	Mean Hours per Day	SD
WhatsApp	96%	2.8	1.4%
YouTube	88%	1.9	1.2%
Facebook	72%	1.4	1.1%
TikTok	58%	1.6	1.3%
Instagram	44%	1.2	1.0%
Twitter (X)	32%	0.8	0.9%

WhatsApp is nearly universal among students (96%), followed by YouTube (88%) and Facebook (72%). The average daily screen time across all platforms was 4.2 hours (SD=2.1),

with significant variation: urban students (Bauchi LGA) reported higher usage (M=5.1 hours) than rural students (M=3.4 hours), t(298)=6.34, p<.001.

Students reported using digital platforms primarily for: communication with friends (92%), entertainment (88%), school-related information seeking (56%), and educational content (YouTube tutorials, educational websites) (48%). A student explained:

> "I use WhatsApp every day. My class has a group where we share notes and ask questions about homework. I also use YouTube to watch tutorials when I don't understand something in class. But most of my time is just chatting with friends." (S124, SS2 male, Bauchi LGA)

Research Question 2: Linguistic Features of Digital Communication

The second research question asked: What are the characteristic linguistic features of students' digital communication practices? The table 2 presents students' self-reported use of digital language features.

Table 2: Digital Language Features Used by Students (N=300)

Feature	% Often/ Very Often	Example
Abbreviations	94%	"u" for "you," "r" for "are," "pls" for "please"
Non-standard spellings	88%	"dat" for "that," "dis" for "this," "wen" for "when"
Omission of punctuation	86%	No periods, commas, or capital letters
Code-switching (English-Hausa)	82%	"I am coming yanzu" (now)
Acronyms	76%	"LOL," "OMG," "BRB"
Emojis	74%	😂, 😍, 🙏, 💚
Number homophones	52%	"2" for "to/too," "4" for "for"

Analysis of students' social media writing samples confirmed these self-reports. A typical WhatsApp message from a student read:

> "hw r u? i dey come sch 2moro but i no finish d assignment. pls send me d ans. tnx. lol"
>
> (Translation: "How are you? I am coming to school tomorrow but I did not finish the assignment. Please send me the answers. Thanks. Laugh out loud.")

A teacher (T12, female, 9 years experience) observed:

> "The abbreviations have become automatic for them. They write 'u' instead of 'you' in their notebooks. They write 'd' instead of 'the.' They don't even notice they are doing it. It is like their brains have been rewired." (T12, female, Toro LGA)

Code-switching between English and Hausa was also prevalent. A student explained:

> "When I am chatting with my friends, we mix English and Hausa. It is faster. For example, I will write 'I am coming yanzu' (now) or 'Did you see that abin?' (thing). My friends understand. But my teacher says I should not write like that in exams." (S78, JS3 female, Dass LGA)

Research Question 3: Correlation Between Digital Communication and English Proficiency

The third research question asked: Is there a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of students' digital communication and their performance on formal English proficiency measures? The table 3 presents EPT descriptive statistics.

Table 3: English Proficiency Test (EPT) Scores (N=300)

Section	Mean (%)	SD	Range
Grammar (15 items)	52.4%	16.2	12 – 88
Writing (10 items)	48.7%	18.4	8 – 92
Reading (15 items)	58.3%	15.6	20 – 94
Total EPT	53.1%	15.8	14 – 90

A Pearson product-moment correlation was computed between students' digital communication frequency (DCPQ total score) and EPT total scores. The correlation was $r = -0.51$, $p < .01$ (95% CI: -0.60 to -0.41). This is a moderate-to-strong, negative, statistically significant correlation. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. The table 4 presents mean EPT scores by DCPQ quartile.

Table 4: Mean EPT Scores by Digital Communication Frequency Quartile

Quartile	DCPQ Score Range	Number of Students	Mean EPT (%)	SD
Bottom (least digital use)	<2.5	75	72.4	12.1
Second	2.5-3.4	75	58.6	13.4
Third	3.5-4.4	75	47.2	14.2
Top (most digital use)	>4.5	75	41.3	15.8

Students in the bottom quartile (least digital use) had a mean EPT score of 72.4%, while students in the top quartile (most digital use) had a mean EPT score of 41.3%—a difference of 31.1 percentage points ($t(148)=9.87$, $p<.001$, Cohen's $d=2.0$, very large effect size).

However, not all digital activities were equally associated with proficiency. Students who reported using YouTube for educational content (tutorials, lessons) had significantly higher EPT scores (M=62.4%) than those who used YouTube only for entertainment (M=48.2%), $t(298)=5.67$, $p<.001$. A student explained:

> "I learned a lot from YouTube. When I don't understand a grammar topic, I search for it. There are teachers from India, America, even Nigeria who explain things. It is like having a free tutor." (S204, SS2 male, Bogoro LGA)

Research Question 4: Positive and Negative Influences of Digital Communication

The fourth research question asked: What positive and negative influences of digital communication on English language use do students and teachers identify?

Positive Influences

Theme 1: Vocabulary Expansion Through Digital Exposure

Seventy-six percent of students reported that digital communication had helped them learn new English words. A student explained:

> "Before I started using YouTube and Facebook, my English vocabulary was small. Now I see new words every day. I don't always know what they mean, but I can look them up or ask my friends. My teacher says my vocabulary has improved." (S156, JS3 male, Tafawa Balewa LGA)

A teacher confirmed this observation:

> "I have noticed that students who are active on social media often have larger vocabularies than those who are not. They are exposed to more English—not just textbook English, but real, authentic English. The problem is that they also pick up non-standard forms." (T05, female, 12 years experience, Bauchi LGA)

Theme 2: Access to Educational Content

Forty-eight percent of students reported using digital platforms for educational purposes. YouTube tutorials were the most frequently cited resource. A student stated:

> "There is a YouTube channel called 'English with Lucy.' I watch her videos to learn grammar. She explains things better than my teacher sometimes. And I can watch it again if I don't understand." (S78, SS2 female, Alkaleri LGA)

Theme 3: Increased Motivation for English Learning

Some students reported that digital communication had increased their motivation to learn English. A student explained:

> "When I see comments in English on Instagram or Facebook, I want to understand them. I want to write my own comments. So I try harder in English class. I want to be able to communicate with people from other countries." (S234, SS2 male, Toro LGA)

Negative Influences

Theme 1: Transfer of Digital Language to Formal Writing

Eighty-four percent of teachers reported that students increasingly use digital abbreviations and non-standard spellings in formal academic writing. A teacher stated:

> "I just finished marking 50 exam scripts. In at least 30 of them, I saw 'u' instead of 'you,' 'd' instead of 'the,' 'pls' instead of 'please.' When I asked the students, they said 'I didn't even notice.' It has become automatic for them." (T22, male, 15 years experience, Dass LGA)

A student acknowledged this problem:

> "Sometimes I write 'u' in my notebook without thinking. My teacher circles it and writes 'you.' I know the correct spelling, but my fingers just type 'u' automatically. It is hard to switch between WhatsApp mode and school mode." (S45, JS3 female, Bauchi LGA)

Theme 2: Erosion of Punctuation and Capitalization

Teachers reported a marked decline in students' use of punctuation and capitalization. A teacher observed:

> "They write everything in lowercase. No periods. No commas. No question marks. One sentence runs into the next. When I ask them why, they say 'on WhatsApp, we don't use punctuation.' They don't understand that academic writing is different." (T17, female, 8 years experience, Bogoro LGA)

Theme 3: Difficulty with Register Switching

The most sophisticated concern raised by teachers was students' difficulty with register switching—the ability to use different language varieties for different contexts. A teacher explained:

> "The problem is not that students use abbreviations. The problem is that they don't know when it is appropriate. They use the same language for texting their friends and for writing exams. They have not learned that different situations require different language." (T05, female, 12 years experience, Bauchi LGA)

Research Question 5: Attitudes and Recommendations

The fifth research question asked: What are students' and teachers' attitudes toward digital language practices, and what recommendations do they offer for integrating digital literacy into English instruction? The table 5 presents student attitudes from the ELIS.

Table 5: Student Attitudes Toward Digital Language Practices (N=300)

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Social media has helped me learn new English words	76%
I sometimes use abbreviations from WhatsApp in my school writing	68%
It is hard to switch between WhatsApp English and school English	58%
My English would be better if I spent less time on social media	52%
Teachers should teach us how to use English appropriately on social media	72%
Social media is more helpful than harmful for my English	48%

Students' attitudes were mixed: most acknowledged the benefits of digital exposure (76% agreed it helped vocabulary) and wanted teachers to address digital language explicitly (72%). However, a majority also acknowledged the difficulty of register switching (58%) and recognized that digital communication might be harming their English (52%).

Teachers' attitudes were more negative but nuanced. A teacher stated:

> "I am not against social media. I use it myself. But students need to learn that there is a time and place for everything. We need to teach them register awareness—how to use informal English with friends and formal English in exams." (T05, female, 12 years experience, Bauchi LGA)

Another teacher added:

> "We cannot stop them from using social media. That is impossible. So we should teach them how to use it wisely. Show them good YouTube channels for learning English. Teach them the difference between texting and academic writing. Turn the problem into a solution." (T12, male, 7 years experience, Toro LGA)

Recommendations from participants included:

1. Integrate digital literacy into English curriculum: Students and teachers recommended that schools explicitly teach register awareness, including lessons on the differences between informal digital communication and formal academic writing.
2. Use digital platforms for instruction: Teachers suggested using WhatsApp groups for sharing notes and assignments, and YouTube for supplementing classroom instruction.
3. Provide teacher training: Teachers requested professional development on how to address digital language influences constructively.
4. Parental awareness programs: Teachers suggested educating parents about monitoring children's digital engagement and encouraging educational use.

Discussion of Findings

The finding that digital communication is nearly universal among Bauchi State students (96% use WhatsApp, average 4.2 hours daily) is consistent with national trends documented by Agunloye (2025), who found 91.51% WhatsApp usage among students in North Central Nigeria. The high usage rates confirm that digital communication has become "an integral part of daily life, particularly among the younger generation".

The urban-rural divide in digital access (5.1 hours daily in urban areas vs. 3.4 hours in rural areas) reflects the digital divide documented by Akabua (2024), who noted that "unequal access to technology exacerbates educational and linguistic disparities". Students in rural areas with limited internet access may be doubly disadvantaged: they have less exposure to English-language content (a potential positive) but also less practice with digital literacy skills that may be increasingly required for academic and economic success.

The linguistic features documented in this study—abbreviations (94%), non-standard spellings (88%), punctuation omission (86%), code-switching (82%)—are consistent with the findings of Obasi and Obasi (2024), who identified "emoji, slang, meme, hashtag, and code-switching" as characteristic features of Nigerian Generation Z digital language. Similarly, Akabuike and Onuh (2025) documented "acronyms, Nigerian pidgins, code switching/mixing, neologism" as common spelling variations in social media discourse.

The prevalence of code-switching between English and Hausa (82%) reflects Bauchi State's unique multilingual ecology. As documented in previous research, students in Bauchi are typically trilingual (indigenous language-Hausa-English), and this multilingual competence manifests in digital communication as fluid code-switching. While code-switching is a natural feature of bilingual discourse, its transfer to formal writing may be problematic.

The moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.51$) between digital communication frequency and English proficiency is consistent with findings from other Nigerian studies. Agunloye (2025) found that social media usage had a "growing concern" impact on language skills. The Nigerian Postal Service explicitly linked social media and SMS to declining writing skills, noting that "many of them cannot spell English words correctly". The 31 percentage point difference between low-frequency and high-frequency digital users (72.4% vs. 41.3%) is educationally massive.

However, the finding that not all digital activities are equally associated with proficiency is crucial. Students who used YouTube for educational content had significantly higher scores (62.4%) than those who used it only for entertainment (48.2%). This finding supports the argument of Akeredolu-Ale et al. (n.d.) that "ICT-mediated teaching and learning stimulates interest and enhances language acquisition and performance in language classes". The difference is not digital engagement per se but the type of digital engagement.

The qualitative findings reveal a dual influence of digital communication on English language use—a finding that echoes Akabua's (2024) description of the "dual-edged impact of digital technology and ICT on English in Nigeria". On the positive side, digital platforms provide

access to English-language content (YouTube tutorials, educational websites) that can enhance vocabulary and comprehension—a finding consistent with Alwehaibi (2015), who recommended YouTube as "an effective instructional tool for enhancing content learning". On the negative side, the transfer of digital language features to formal writing ("digitalese" interference) is a real and documented phenomenon, as noted by the Nigerian Postal Service and Akabua (2024).

The concept of register awareness—the ability to distinguish between informal digital communication and formal academic writing—emerged as a key theoretical construct. Students who lack register awareness transfer WhatsApp conventions to exam scripts; students who develop register awareness switch appropriately between contexts. This finding supports the pedagogical recommendation that explicit instruction on register differences is essential.

The findings of this study both replicate and extend previous research. Replication: Like Agunloye (2025), this study found high rates of WhatsApp and YouTube usage and documented concerns about impact on language skills. Like Obasi and Obasi (2024), it identified abbreviations, code-switching, and non-standard spellings as characteristic features of Nigerian digital language. Like the Nigerian Postal Service's observations in Bauchi State, it found evidence of "digitalese" transfer to formal writing.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; the negative correlation could reflect reverse causality (low English proficiency leads to more digital communication) or confounding variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, prior proficiency). Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported digital practices, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability bias. Third, the sample was limited to six LGAs in Bauchi State; findings may not generalize to other states or regions. Fourth, the EPT measured only written English; the influence of digital communication on spoken English was not examined. Fifth, the study did not include a pre-test measure of English proficiency, making it impossible to control for initial differences.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should: (a) use longitudinal designs to examine causal relationships between digital practices and proficiency development; (b) include spoken English measures; (c) conduct experimental studies testing the effectiveness of register awareness instruction; (d) expand to multiple states for comparative analysis; (e) examine the influence of specific platforms (e.g., TikTok vs. YouTube) on language development.

Conclusion

This study investigated digital communication practices and their influence on English language use among secondary school students in Bauchi State, Nigeria. Using a mixed-

methods design with 300 students and 40 teachers across six LGAs, the study found that digital communication is nearly universal (96% use WhatsApp, average 4.2 hours daily) and characterized by abbreviations (94%), non-standard spellings (88%), punctuation omission (86%), and code-switching between English and Hausa (82%). A moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.51$) was found between digital communication frequency and English proficiency, with students in the top quartile of digital use scoring 31 percentage points lower on the English Proficiency Test than students in the bottom quartile. However, not all digital activities are equally problematic: students who used YouTube for educational content had significantly higher scores than those who used it only for entertainment. The study concludes that digital communication has a dual influence on English language use: it provides access to English-language content and informal learning opportunities but also contributes to the erosion of standard writing conventions when students lack register awareness—the ability to distinguish between informal digital communication and formal academic writing.

Recommendations

1. Integrate digital literacy into the English curriculum across all secondary schools, including explicit instruction on register awareness (distinguishing between informal digital communication and formal academic writing).
2. Provide professional development for English teachers on digital literacy, register awareness instruction, and using digital tools for language teaching.
3. Develop context-appropriate materials that address the specific digital language features prevalent in Bauchi State (including English-Hausa code-switching).
4. Establish guidelines for mobile phone use in schools that balance the educational potential of digital devices with the need to minimize distractions and negative influences.
5. Implement a "register awareness" module in English classes, teaching students to identify the features of informal digital communication versus formal academic writing, and practicing switching between registers.
6. Leverage digital platforms for instruction: Establish class WhatsApp groups for sharing notes and assignments; curate YouTube playlists of educational content; use online quizzes and educational apps.
7. Train teachers to address "digitalese" constructively: Rather than simply condemning abbreviations and non-standard spellings, teachers should explain why different contexts require different language varieties.
8. Establish parental awareness programs to educate parents about monitoring children's digital engagement and encouraging educational use.
9. Explicitly teach register awareness: Use contrastive examples (WhatsApp message vs. exam answer) to show students the differences between informal and formal English.

10. Model appropriate register switching: Demonstrate how you switch between informal language with colleagues and formal language in official communication.
11. Use digital tools for instruction: Create WhatsApp groups for sharing notes; recommend educational YouTube channels; use online quizzes for formative assessment.
12. Provide constructive feedback: When students use digital abbreviations in formal writing, correct them but also explain why the context requires standard English.
13. Develop register awareness: Learn to distinguish between language appropriate for WhatsApp (abbreviations, emojis, code-switching) and language appropriate for exams (standard spelling, complete sentences, punctuation).
14. Use digital platforms for learning: Follow educational YouTube channels, join WhatsApp groups focused on academic subjects, and use online resources to supplement classroom instruction.
15. Practice switching between registers: After writing a WhatsApp message, try rewriting it in formal English. After writing an exam answer, consider how you would say the same thing to a friend.
16. Monitor children's digital engagement: Be aware of how much time your child spends on social media and what platforms they use.
17. Encourage educational use: Ask your child to show you educational content they have found online (YouTube tutorials, educational websites).
18. Discuss register differences: Talk with your child about the difference between how they write to friends and how they should write in school.
19. Model good digital practices: Demonstrate appropriate use of digital devices and language.

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