



Social Media Language and Academic Writing Skills among Secondary School Students in Lusaka, Zambia

Alfred Mabkena¹, Dr. C. Maria Ugin Joseph²

¹Master's Degree Student, DMI-St.Eugene University, Zambia

²Dean, School of Education DMI-St.Eugene University, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed the linguistic environment in which secondary school students communicate, learn and express themselves. This study examined the relationship between social-media language on the academic writing skills of secondary school students in selected schools in Lusaka, Zambia. The study was guided by a pragmatic research paradigm and employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The target population comprised 620 participants, consisting of 600 Grade 10–12 students and 20 English Language teachers from four selected secondary schools in Lusaka. A sample of 240 students was selected using stratified random sampling, while 12 English Language teachers were purposively selected. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, a controlled academic writing task assessed using seven writing components, and semi-structured teacher interviews. The findings showed that WhatsApp was the most frequently used platform (42%), followed by TikTok (26%), Facebook (18%) and Instagram (14%). Abbreviations were the most frequently reported social-media language feature (78%), followed by emojis (71%), non-standard spelling (58%), slang (55%), code-mixing (49%) and punctuation omission (44%). Analysis of 225 usable academic writing scripts showed that punctuation problems (41%) and abbreviations (34%) were the most common social-media-related features occurring in formal writing. Grammar problems associated with informal usage occurred in 28% of scripts, followed by informal spelling (21%), informal vocabulary (19%) and slang (15%). A moderate positive correlation was found between frequency of social-media language use and the occurrence of informal features in academic writing ($r = .52, p < .01$), while a moderate negative correlation existed between social-media language use and overall academic writing performance ($r = -.38, p < .01$). Qualitative findings indicated that students generally understood the distinction between informal and formal registers but sometimes transferred digital language habits into academic writing, particularly under time pressure. The study concludes that social-media language is associated with academic writing outcomes, but its influence is neither uniform nor deterministic. The study recommends explicit register instruction, contrastive writing activities, structured editing practice, timed writing exercises and continuous teacher feedback.

Keywords: social media language, academic writing, secondary school students, digital communication, register, language transfer, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Language is central to education, enabling learners to construct meaning, communicate ideas and demonstrate understanding. In Zambia, English is an important language of instruction; therefore, students need to develop effective academic writing skills for success across the curriculum. Academic writing requires appropriate grammar, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, sentence construction, coherence and cohesion.

The rapid growth of smartphones, internet access and social media has changed students' communication practices. Platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook and Instagram encourage brief and informal communication, often involving abbreviations, emojis, slang, non-standard spelling, and omitted punctuation,



code-mixing and shortened expressions. While these forms are effective in digital communication, they differ from conventions required in formal academic writing.

Research on the relationship between social-media language and academic writing has produced mixed findings. Some studies associate informal digital language with spelling, grammar and abbreviation problems, while others highlight potential benefits such as vocabulary development, creativity and confidence. Crystal (2008) cautioned against assuming that digital communication necessarily indicates declining literacy.

In Africa, Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023) found evidence of social-media language in Ghanaian students' academic writing. Similarly, Madoda, Chitondo and Thelma (2024) reported perceived influences of social-media language on English use among secondary school learners in Chilanga District, Zambia.

However, previous studies have relied largely on perceptions and self-reported data, with less attention to direct analysis of students' academic writing. This study addresses the gap by combining questionnaire data, a controlled writing task and teacher interviews to examine the relationship between social-media language and academic writing among secondary school students in Lusaka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Digital Communication

Social media has become an important part of young people's everyday communication. Unlike traditional forms of written communication, social-media interaction is generally immediate, interactive and socially oriented. Users communicate with peers, share information, comment on content and participate in online communities.

The linguistic practices associated with social media are therefore shaped by the communicative demands of these environments. Abbreviations reduce typing effort, emojis communicate emotions and attitudes, slang establishes peer identity, and non-standard spelling may create speed or expressiveness. The result is a flexible digital register that differs from the formal conventions expected in school writing.

The existence of a digital register should not automatically be interpreted as linguistic deficiency. Different contexts require different forms of language. The central educational concern is therefore students' ability to move appropriately between registers.

Social Media Language

Social-media language includes a wide range of linguistic practices. Common examples include abbreviations such as "u" for "you" and "b4" for "before", phonetic spellings, slang, emojis, shortened sentences, informal vocabulary and reduced punctuation. In multilingual contexts such as Zambia, code-mixing between English and local languages can also form part of digital communication.

Crystal (2008) argued that digital communication represents a new form of language use rather than simply a deterioration of literacy. From this perspective, students may be developing additional linguistic resources rather than abandoning standard English. The educational challenge is to ensure that learners understand when particular forms are appropriate.

Research by Luaran et al. (2025) similarly suggests that social-media engagement can have both positive and negative dimensions. Students may gain vocabulary and confidence while simultaneously experiencing difficulties with sentence structure, spelling and grammar. This reinforces the importance of examining social media as a complex literacy environment rather than treating it as entirely beneficial or harmful.



Academic Writing

Academic writing is a formal form of communication characterised by accuracy, clarity, coherence, cohesion and appropriate language choice. At secondary school level, students are expected to demonstrate control of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation and sentence construction.

The importance of academic writing extends beyond English Language examinations. Students are required to write answers, explanations, essays, reports and assignments in almost every subject. Weaknesses in written communication can therefore affect academic performance more broadly.

The contrast between academic writing and social-media communication creates the possibility of register transfer. A student may understand the formal form of a word but automatically produce an abbreviated or informal version when writing rapidly. This issue is particularly important during examinations and other timed academic tasks.

Social Media and Academic Writing

The relationship between social media and academic writing remains contested. One perspective holds that repeated exposure to informal language can result in the transfer of abbreviations, slang and non-standard spelling into formal writing. Another perspective emphasises the potential literacy benefits of frequent digital communication.

Verheijen (2013) examined the effects of text messaging and instant messaging on literacy and highlighted the complexity of the relationship between digital communication and conventional literacy. Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023) reported that non-standard social-media language appeared in students' academic writing in a Ghanaian ESL context. Madoda et al. (2024) similarly found evidence of perceived transfer in Zambian secondary schools.

The present study extends this literature by examining actual student writing alongside self-reported social-media practices and teacher observations.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Language Transfer Theory. Vygotsky's theory emphasises the role of social interaction and cultural environments in language and cognitive development. Social media provides an important social environment where students regularly practise communication.

Language Transfer Theory explains how linguistic practices may move from one context to another. In this study, the focus was on the transfer of informal digital language features into formal academic writing. Repeated use of abbreviations and informal forms may sometimes influence students' academic writing.

Together, the theories explain how social interaction, repeated language practice, register awareness and contextual transfer may influence writing, without assuming that social-media use automatically causes poor academic performance.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a pragmatic paradigm and an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine the relationship between social-media language and academic writing and to understand students' and teachers' experiences.

The target population comprised 620 participants, including 600 Grade 10–12 students and 20 English Language teachers from four selected secondary schools in Lusaka. Using Yamane's sample-size procedure, 240 students were selected through stratified random sampling, while 12 teachers were purposively selected for interviews.



Three instruments were used: a structured student questionnaire, a controlled academic writing task, and semi-structured teacher interviews. The writing task assessed grammar, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, sentence construction, coherence and cohesion.

Of the 240 questionnaires distributed, 228 were returned and 220 were usable, giving a 91.7% response rate. Of the 240 writing tasks, 232 were returned and 225 were usable, representing a 93.8% response rate. All 12 selected teachers participated in the interviews, resulting in a 100% response rate.

Table 1. Response Rate

Instrument	Sample Size	Returned/Completed	Usable	Response Rate
Student questionnaire	240	228	220	91.70%
Academic writing task	240	232	225	93.80%
Teacher interview	12	12	12	100%

The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, while qualitative responses were organised thematically. Integration of the different data sources enabled comparison between students' reported practices, observable writing behaviour and teachers' classroom observations.

Operational Definition of Social-Media Language

For the purposes of this study, social-media language was operationally defined as a digital-register feature whose form or conventional use is strongly associated with online peer communication and which departs from the formal academic-English conventions expected in the controlled writing task. The category included platform-associated abbreviations (for example, “u” for “you” and “b4” for “before”), recognisable digital non-standard spellings, online slang, informal vocabulary associated with peer messaging, and reduced punctuation when the pattern resembled common digital-message conventions. Emojis were included in the questionnaire because they are a common multimodal feature of social-media communication, but they were not treated as academic-writing errors merely because they occurred in digital communication.

Distinguishing Social-Media Language from Other Informal or Multilingual Forms

The study distinguished social-media language from ordinary informal English, multilingual code-mixing, youth slang and deliberate stylistic choices. Ordinary informal English was coded separately unless there was evidence that the form represented a recognisable digital convention. Code-mixing between English and a Zambian language was not automatically classified as a deficiency or as social-media language; it was coded as social-media-related only when its occurrence and form were consistent with the digital/informal register being investigated. Youth slang was coded when a recognisable slang item was used in a formal academic task and was associated with the informal peer/digital register under study. Deliberate stylistic choices were not coded as errors where the writer had used an acceptable formal alternative intentionally and appropriately.

Coding Rule for Social-Media-Related Writing Features

A writing feature was classified as social-media-related only when there was positive evidence linking its form to a recognisable digital-language convention. For example, “u” for “you” and “b4” for “before” were coded as digital abbreviations rather than ordinary spelling errors. A conventional spelling error such as “recieve” was not coded as social-media-related unless additional evidence indicated a digital convention. Similarly, omission of a full stop was coded as social-media-related only where the pattern resembled message-style punctuation reduction; an isolated punctuation mistake was treated as an ordinary writing error. Grammar was coded as social-media-related only where the construction reflected an identifiable informal digital usage rather than a general grammatical difficulty. Where the evidence was ambiguous, the feature was not classified



as social-media-related. This conservative rule was intended to reduce over-attribution of ordinary learner errors to social media.

Seven-Component Academic Writing Assessment Framework

The controlled academic writing task was assessed using seven equally weighted components: grammar, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, sentence construction, coherence and cohesion. Each component was scored from 0 to 20, producing a maximum raw score of 140. The overall writing-performance score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the seven component scores and therefore ranged from 0 to 20. Each component contributed 14.29% of the total raw score. The assessment criteria were applied to the complete academic text rather than to isolated sentences.

Writing component	Maximum score	Weight	Scoring focus
Grammar	20	14.29%	Accuracy and control of grammatical structures, agreement, tense, articles and prepositions.
Spelling	20	14.29%	Conventional spelling; digital abbreviations and non-standard digital spellings separately coded.
Vocabulary	20	14.29%	Range, precision, appropriateness and formal academic word choice.
Punctuation	20	14.29%	Sentence boundaries and appropriate use of commas, apostrophes and other punctuation.
Sentence construction	20	14.29%	Completeness, grammatical construction, variety and effectiveness of sentences.
Coherence	20	14.29%	Logical organisation and clarity of ideas across the text.
Cohesion	20	14.29%	Use of linking devices, reference, conjunctions and lexical connections.
Total / overall	140 raw / 20 mean	100%	Overall score = mean of the seven component scores.

Validity and Reliability Procedures

Content validity was addressed through alignment of the questionnaire, interview guide and writing assessment with the study objectives and the seven academic-writing components. For the writing assessment, the coding rules above were intended to strengthen construct validity by separating social-media-related features from ordinary learner errors. The recommended reliability procedure is independent scoring of a subset of scripts by a second trained assessor followed by calculation of inter-rater agreement.

Reliability Reporting

The questionnaire scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$), and independent scoring of 20% of writing scripts showed strong inter-rater agreement (weighted $\kappa = .84$).

Statistical Analysis, Effect Size and Confidence Intervals

Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to examine the linear statistical relationship between students' reported frequency of social-media language use and writing outcomes. The coefficient was calculated from paired student-level observations. The reported $r = .52$ indicates a positive relationship, while $r = -.38$ indicates a negative relationship. The squared correlation coefficient (r^2) was used as an effect-size indicator of shared linear variance: $.52^2 = .2704$, or approximately 27.0%, and $(-.38)^2 = .1444$, or approximately 14.4%.



Statistical Interpretation

The correlation coefficients were interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. The cross-sectional correlational design does not establish temporal precedence or rule out alternative explanations such as English proficiency, reading habits, writing practice, teacher feedback, vocabulary knowledge, motivation and examination experience.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

The 220 usable student questionnaires provided a relatively balanced distribution across the three grades. Grade 10 students constituted 33.6%, Grade 11 students 32.7% and Grade 12 students 33.6%. There were 104 male students (47.3%) and 116 female students (52.7%). In terms of age, 30.9% were aged 14–15 years, 50.9% were aged 16–17 years and 18.2% were aged 18 years and above.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Student Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	104	47.30%
Gender	Female	116	52.70%
Grade	Grade 10	74	33.60%
Grade	Grade 11	72	32.70%
Grade	Grade 12	74	33.60%
Age	14–15 years	68	30.90%
Age	16–17 years	112	50.90%
Age	18 years and above	40	18.20%

Social Media Platform Use

WhatsApp was the most frequently used platform, accounting for 42% of reported primary use. TikTok followed at 26%, Facebook at 18% and Instagram at 14%. Thus, WhatsApp and TikTok together accounted for 68% of primary platform use.

Table 3. Primary Social Media Platforms Used by Students

Platform	Percentage
WhatsApp	42%
TikTok	26%
Facebook	18%
Instagram	14%
Total	100%

The dominance of WhatsApp is significant because messaging environments commonly prioritise speed and brevity. TikTok also exposes learners to written language through captions, comments, hashtags and on-screen text. The findings therefore suggest that students encounter informal digital language through multiple platforms rather than through one application alone.

Forms of Social Media Language

Abbreviations were the most frequently reported social-media language feature, with 78% of students indicat-



ing frequent use. Emojis followed at 71%, non-standard spelling at 58%, slang at 55%, code-mixing at 49% and punctuation omission at 44%.

Table 4. Self-Reported Frequency of Social Media Language Features

Social Media Language Feature	Percentage Reporting Frequent Use
Abbreviations	78%
Emojis	71%
Non-standard spelling	58%
Slang	55%
Code-mixing	49%
Omission of punctuation	44%

The prominence of abbreviations is particularly relevant to academic writing because abbreviated forms depart directly from conventional spelling. Examples such as "u" for "you" and "b4" for "before" may be efficient in informal messaging but are generally inappropriate in formal academic tasks.

The high use of emojis demonstrates that students communicate through multimodal resources. Emojis may communicate emotion, attitude and interpersonal meaning and should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of weak language ability. However, students need to understand that formal academic writing relies primarily on words, grammatical structures and punctuation.

The presence of slang, non-standard spelling and code-mixing further demonstrates the flexibility of students' digital communication. In Zambia's multilingual environment, code-mixing between English and local languages can be a natural feature of social interaction. The educational issue is therefore not multilingualism itself but students' ability to control the language expected in a particular formal task.

Social Media Language in Academic Writing

Analysis of the 225 usable academic writing scripts showed that punctuation problems were the most frequent social-media-related feature, occurring in 41% of scripts. Abbreviations appeared in 34%, grammar problems associated with informal usage in 28%, informal spelling in 21%, informal vocabulary in 19% and slang in 15%.

Table 5. Social Media Language Features Observed in Academic Writing

Feature	Percentage of Scripts
Punctuation problems	41%
Abbreviations	34%
Grammar problems associated with informal usage	28%
Informal spelling	21%
Informal vocabulary	19%
Slang	15%

An important finding is that the occurrence of informal features in academic writing was lower than students' reported frequency of using those features socially. For example, although 78% reported frequent use of abbreviations, abbreviations occurred in 34% of the academic writing scripts. This indicates that transfer was selective rather than automatic. Students did not reproduce social-media language every time they engaged in formal writing.



Punctuation was the most prominent feature observed in academic writing. This finding is educationally important because punctuation contributes directly to sentence boundaries, clarity and the organisation of ideas. Informal digital communication can tolerate reduced punctuation because participants rely on shared context, short messages, line breaks and other contextual resources. Academic writing does not provide the same level of contextual support.

Academic Writing Performance

Students' writing was assessed across seven dimensions. Spelling recorded the highest mean score (14.1/20), followed by vocabulary (13.8), coherence (13.6), cohesion (13.3), grammar (13.2) and sentence construction (13.0). Punctuation recorded the lowest mean score at 12.4/20. The overall mean score was 13.3/20.

Table 6. Mean Academic Writing Performance Scores

Writing Component	Mean Score (/20)	Standard Deviation
Grammar	13.2	2.9
Spelling	14.1	2.6
Vocabulary	13.8	2.7
Punctuation	12.4	3.1
Sentence construction	13	2.8
Coherence	13.6	2.5
Cohesion	13.3	2.6
Overall	13.3	2

The comparatively low punctuation score corresponds with the script analysis, where punctuation problems represented the most frequent social-media-related feature. The standard deviation of 3.1 also indicates comparatively greater variation among students in punctuation performance.

The findings demonstrate that academic writing is multidimensional. A student may demonstrate reasonable spelling and vocabulary while experiencing difficulty with punctuation, sentence construction or organisation. Consequently, the relationship between social-media language should not be reduced to spelling alone.

A Descriptive Statistics for Overall Writing Performance

Across the seven writing components, the overall academic-writing performance score had a mean of 13.3 out of 20 and a standard deviation of 2.0. The component means ranged from 12.4 for punctuation to 14.1 for spelling. The standard deviations ranged from 2.5 to 3.1 across the individual components. These statistics indicate measurable variation in students' writing performance rather than a uniform level of attainment. The overall standard deviation of 2.0 indicates that students' total writing performance varied around the sample mean, with punctuation showing comparatively greater dispersion ($SD = 3.1$) than the other components.

Relationship between Social Media Language and Academic Writing

Correlation analysis showed a moderate positive relationship between frequency of social-media language use and the occurrence of informal features in academic writing ($r = .52, p < .01$). This indicates that students who reported more frequent social-media language use tended to have more informal features appearing in their academic writing.

A moderate negative relationship was also found between frequency of social-media language use and overall academic writing performance ($r = -.38, p < .01$).



Table 7. Correlation between Social Media Language and Academic Writing

Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
Frequency of social-media language use ↔ occurrence of informal features in writing	0.52	< .01	Moderate positive, significant
Frequency of social-media language use ↔ overall academic writing performance	-0.38	< .01	Moderate negative, significant

The first relationship indicates that greater social-media language use was associated with greater occurrence of informal features in academic writing. The second indicates that greater social-media language use was associated with lower overall writing performance.

Importantly, correlation does not establish causation. The findings do not demonstrate that social-media use alone is sufficient to explain weaker academic writing. Other factors, including English proficiency, reading habits, writing practice, teacher feedback, vocabulary knowledge, motivation and examination experience, may also influence writing performance. The appropriate interpretation is therefore that social-media language use is associated with academic writing outcomes within the study population.

A Effect-Size and Confidence-Interval Reporting

The reported association between social-media-language frequency and informal features in academic writing was $r = .52$ ($p < .01$), corresponding to $r^2 = .2704$, or approximately 27.0% shared linear variance. The reported association with overall writing performance was $r = -.38$ ($p < .01$), corresponding to $r^2 = .1444$, or approximately 14.4% shared linear variance. For transparency, an illustrative 95% confidence interval based on $n = 220$ would be approximately 0.40 to 0.62 for $r = .52$ and -0.50 to -0.25 for $r = -.38$. Because the manuscript does not establish that $n = 220$ was the matched-case sample for both correlations, these intervals are examples rather than verified study estimates and should be replaced by intervals calculated from the actual paired n before submission.

Students' Perceptions

Students identified both benefits and challenges associated with social-media language. They reported that social media could improve vocabulary, confidence and communication. However, some informal practices, particularly abbreviations and shortened forms, sometimes entered academic writing. Although many students understood the difference between formal and informal language, transfer still occurred, especially during timed writing when students were under pressure.

Teachers' Perceptions

Teachers reported observing punctuation, spelling and informal vocabulary problems in students' academic writing. Their observations were consistent with the analysis of students' writing scripts. Teachers also indicated that explicit instruction and regular practice could help students distinguish between informal digital language and formal academic English.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that social media is an important part of students' contemporary communication environment. WhatsApp and TikTok were the most commonly used platforms, together accounting for 68% of primary use. Abbreviations, emojis, non-standard spelling and slang were frequently reported, demonstrating students' regular exposure to informal digital language.



However, social-media use did not mean that students had abandoned standard English. The lower occurrence of informal features in academic writing compared with their reported social-media use suggests that transfer was selective rather than automatic. Students generally recognised the difference between formal and informal registers, although maintaining this distinction was more difficult under time pressure.

Punctuation problems and abbreviations were the most common informal features identified in academic writing. The correlation results further showed a moderate positive relationship between social-media language use and informal features in academic writing ($r = .52, p < .01$), and a moderate negative relationship between social-media language use and overall writing performance ($r = -.38, p < .01$). These relationships indicate association rather than causation, as academic writing is also influenced by factors such as reading, English proficiency, classroom instruction, writing practice and teacher feedback.

The findings are consistent with Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023) and Madoda et al. (2024), who reported similar concerns regarding the transfer of informal digital language into academic contexts. At the same time, the findings support Crystal's (2008) view that digital communication should not automatically be regarded as a decline in literacy. Social media can provide vocabulary exposure and opportunities for communication while also creating challenges in formal writing. The key educational need is therefore to strengthen students' ability to switch appropriately between registers.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that schools should strengthen students' awareness and control of formal and informal language. Teachers should:

- Explicitly teach formal and informal registers.
- Use contrastive exercises that transform social-media messages into academic English.
- Incorporate editing and proofreading activities focusing on spelling, punctuation, abbreviations and informal vocabulary.
- Provide timed writing exercises to strengthen formal writing under pressure.
- Integrate students' digital experiences into digital literacy and language instruction rather than treating social media only as a negative influence.

CONCLUSION

The study found statistically significant relationships between reported social-media language use and academic-writing outcomes among the sampled secondary school students in Lusaka. WhatsApp and TikTok were the dominant platforms, while abbreviations and emojis were the most frequently reported digital language features. Punctuation problems and abbreviations were the most common informal features identified in students' academic writing.

The statistically significant correlations indicate that greater reported use of social-media language was associated with more informal features and lower overall writing performance in this sample. However, the findings do not establish a direct causal relationship. Students generally demonstrated awareness of formal and informal registers, but transfer could occur under time pressure. The study therefore concludes that the appropriate educational response is not to reject social media, but to develop students' ability to select language according to context, purpose and audience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- English teachers should provide explicit instruction on formal and informal language.
- Schools should use social-media examples in academic writing lessons.
- Students should regularly edit their work for abbreviations, spelling, punctuation and slang.



- Teachers should use activities that convert informal digital messages into formal academic English.
- Timed writing should be incorporated into regular classroom practice.
- Schools should promote responsible and context-appropriate use of social media rather than blanket prohibition.
- Further research should examine social-media language across different regions, platforms and multilingual contexts.
- Longitudinal studies should investigate changes in digital language practices and academic writing over time.

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