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The Influence of Social Media on Linguistic Evolution among University Students

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Abstract

The evolution of the social networking platform, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Tik Tok, and X, has changed the definition of communication, especially amongst university students who frequently move between digital and academic language ecologies. These new media contribute to the emergence of new linguistic practices that do not comply with traditional norms. The study under consideration examines the impact of social media on the linguistic development of university students, focusing on changes in vocabulary, syntax, and communicative conventions. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews and real-life social media posts from university students. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns in language usage. The paper has identified some important trends, including the use of internet slang, extensive code-mixing of English and local languages, the heavy use of emojis to convey emotions, and informal syntactic structures. Such habits are an indication of shifting identities and peer group relations. The results indicate that there might be a requirement for the modification of language teaching methodologies, increased digital literacy consciousness, and scholarly guidance on the way to negotiate the official and informal language registers in a more proficient manner.

Keywords: *Code-Mixing, Digital Communication, Emoji Usage, Informal Syntax, Internet Slang, Language and Identity, Linguistic Evolution, Qualitative Research, Social Media, University Students.*

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Introduction

Background of the Study

The rapid expansion of digital technology has transformed the way that people communicate with one another. The most considerable change in the twenty-first century has been the development and proliferation of social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Social media platforms have impacted the way that people connect with other people, and they have also influenced the way language is used in online spaces (Crystal, 2011; Salfin, Kurniadi, & Erwin, 2024). University students are some of the most active users of social media platforms, and their online interactions impact how they use language in both informal and formal spaces, such as academic locations on their university campuses.

Social media platforms create unique spaces of fast language change. Unlike printed newspapers or television, social media, as unique forms of communication, are often interactive, user-generated, snap-shot experiences of communication that emphasize quick and mixed forms of communication (Androutsopoulos, 2011). Users employ a range of short forms such as "LOL," "BRB," emojis, memes, hashtags, and diverse manners of speaking and writing, which diverge from traditional ways of using the language (Huseynova et al., 2024). These moments of freedom, unique to online culture, provide opportunities for new forms of writing and speaking.

As social media takes a greater role in everyday life, the distinction between written and spoken language is becoming increasingly fuzzy. Students tend to move fluidly between formal academic language and informal, casual language online, determined by the context (Muslimawati, 2022). Consequently, students convey other forms of language, such as code-switching (moving from one language to a different language or language style), the co-creation of words, new syntactic structure, and visualizations or visual tools (e.g., emoji) to provide meaning (Shahwani et al., 2024; Montes-Alcalá, 2024).

While social media has become an outlet for new and creative forms of language, this development is not only about making new or fun words. The development reflects a fundamentally different view of how young people make their identities, treat other people, and understand messages. For

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those university students who have only known a digital world and/or complete their online communication via the computer, young people experience their online communication as simply another form of interaction that supplements face-to-face communication (Gros et al., 2012). As a result of their exposure to digital communication and social media, behaviors related to the student's speech, academic writing, and work communication may reflect what they demonstrate on social media (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011).

While social media is in use universally, the impact of social media on language has not been widely studied in available academic literature, particularly studies involving university students in contexts where English is not a primary language. To explore these differences in language use, we must draw on perspectives from different areas, such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and digital communication.

Problem Statement

The widespread use of social media among students at university has certainly changed the way we use language. Students incorporate informal language, words, internet slang, code-switching (the mixing of languages), and emojis in everyday dialogue (Gkotsis et al., 2016). While it is easy to see how languages have changed, there is not enough research done to understand why these changes are taking place, what impact they have had, and what they might mean. Most research has, thus far, studied the social or psychological effects of social media and has not explored how it has affected language use (Kern et al., 2016).

The significant problem here is the gap that exists between what we are doing with language and how much this gap has been researched. Traditionally, changes in language occurred at a slow, steady pace over a long span of time. Digital communication is speeding up the rate at which language is changing. Now, a word or phrase can go viral in a matter of hours. Still, we do have sufficient knowledge about the extent to which language is changing or how long the changes might last. We also do not know where all of this was lead (Massaroni et al., 2023; Androutsopoulos, 2011). This matters in education, especially when the attention is on the use of a particular formal language. It is also important to know how digital language habits negatively or positively impact student's academic and professional language skills.

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In Pakistan and similar countries, where the use of English is a second language or a foreign language, the combination of indigenous languages with global sociolect, or internet-speak, is producing language influences that have yet to be researched. It is important that we discover whether these modifications are detrimental to the language, developing the language, or merely a demonstration of language change—and how students view these changes.

Without this kind of understanding, teachers, curriculum developers, and language specialists may not be able to meet the needs of students who live in a digital world.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the changes in the spoken language of university students as a result of social media engagement.
2. To determine and investigate common features associated with language change in social media discourse.
3. To investigate students' perceptions of the effect of social media on their formal and informal communication.

Research Questions

1. What effect has social media had on the language of university students?
2. What particular language alterations (vocabulary, grammar, style) can be observed in their message?
3. What do students think of these changes in language?

Significance of the Study

This work is significant in several ways: academically, educationally, and socially. From a socio-linguistic perspective, it enhances our understanding of how language is evolving in online spaces and how young people are coming to invent new modes of communication. As digital media continues to be normative in everyday life, it is increasingly important to study these changes so as to modernly analyze language use (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015).

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In the educational context, this study can be useful for teachers, language practitioners, and curriculum developers to understand how students' language habits are changing. Our context suggests that students use social media and was often being influenced in their language use by such platforms (Kuure et al., 2016; Akayoğlu, 2016). Teachers can implement their knowledge of changes happening in the students' communication practices into their classroom learning. For instance, they might embed writing and grammar into some of the students' digital lives (Bui, 2022).

At a practical level, the focus of this research reflects emerging trends in the use of language among youth and provides insight for future language studies and directions for developing policies in digital fluency, media education, and language instruction. It might also help students understand the varying degrees of situational appropriateness of using formal versus informal language, as well as encourage more careful and measured attention to how they use these forms of language in various contexts.

Ultimately, this research contributes to an understanding of the relationship between technology, language, and youth culture. The changes and growth brought about through digital tools and technologies are not only changing the means of communication but also changing the language itself.

Literature Review

Language and Social Media

The way people use and understand language on social media is very different than in books, newspapers, or other forms of formal writing. Users on apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) use casual, rapid, and possibly personal ways to communicate. In formal, traditional writing, users are likely to use proper grammar, sentence structure, and spelling. In social media, users choose to convey their thoughts or ideas without as many of the same considerations. The shift away from formal writing on social media is not only in how users

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write but also reflects a larger shift in beliefs about how language is used and considered today (Crystal, 2011).

One main aspect of social media language is to be abbreviated. Many social media apps have limits on how many characters they were allow (e.g., X), but also users do not want to spend a lot of time writing, and they want quick responses. As a result, users were use shorthand and abbreviations, including OMG (Oh My God), LOL (Laughing Out Loud), and BRB (Be Right Back) (Qureshi et al., 2021). They was also drop portions of speech, such as "Going to class" instead of "I am going to class," and have even adapted images to convey meaning. For example, a smiling face 😊 represents happiness, and a thumbs up 👍 can express approval/ agreement (Khasawneh, 2024).

Technology also shapes how people use language. New features like predictive text, autocorrect, voice typing, and gifs (which are short animated pictures) change language use. While it's hard to create comparisons, typically, many individuals are now speaking into their phones to send a text message, and that changes their complete sentences from typing one in. Emojis have become a typical writing feature and often replace words that show emotion or describe things (Jolić, 2023; Choi & Aizawa, 2018). An emoji, like a crying face 😭, can replace an entire idea: "I'm sad."

Hashtags (like #MondayMotivation or #ThrowbackThursday) have also become a part of social media language. Hashtags allow people to bundle their posts and associate them with larger conversations. But they also relay an additional purpose: they are a way for individuals to share their ideologies, call out something spurious, or emphasize their messages (Kumar et al., 2022). People get creative with hashtags and develop their own meanings to use them effectively.

Every platform also generally has its own style or way of speaking - we call this "platform vernacular." For instance, TikTok users tend to sometimes structure videos based on music, popular sounds, or memes that can be fun and playful, while Instagram is more about containing stories via images, short captions, and visual design. Ultimately, X (Twitter) is based on short and sharp messages that often include humorous, new, or personal opinions. Because of these potential differences, people often change how they write depending on the platform they are using (Blommaert & Varis, 2015).

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Social media doesn't homogenize language, it passes it through a unique lens to create even more forms of diversity. This includes ways of playing with spelling, punctuation, sentence length, or tone. To illustrate, writing "heyyyyy!!!" may convey excitement, while writing "hey." with a full stop may present as serious or even annoyed. Therefore, it can be said that a playful and expressive style of language and writing creates interesting and multifaceted language on online platforms.

And it is not only that social media reflects the way the language is evolving; it also causes it to evolve even more. A new word, a tendency, or a phrase may become popular within a very short period of time and be employed by millions of users. Once online-originated terms are now being used in daily conversations or even appearing in dictionaries. Good examples are words such as selfie, hashtag, and viral.

In the modern, rapidly developing world, language is not only a manner of speaking but also a manner of expressing what and who you are, a manner of finding a common language with people, and a manner of being a part of a certain trend in the development of culture. People (young people in particular) are fast to change, create new words, follow trends, and influence the way the language functions on the Internet. These trends demonstrate how dynamic, imaginative, and strong the language might be if it is utilized with the recent technology and speedy communication.

Linguistic Evolution and Youth Culture

Language is continuously changing; however, presently, language is changing faster than ever before in the digital landscape—and it has much to do with the leadership of younger generations. Young people, in particular, university students and adolescents, are typically at the forefront of changes in how language is used and viewed online. They are often the first to adopt new words, phrases, or ways of speaking, with the practice of fusion being utilized, among other things. Young people's online communication practices reflect not only who they are and their beliefs but also which groups they align or affiliate with (Wielk & Standlee, 2021). Therefore, youth language is a powerful way to develop identity and a sense of belonging.

From a wider perspective, the prevalence of slang, acronyms, memes, and emojis is a clear marker of change. Many times, these influences are not just for fun or entertainment; they deliver social

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messages. Thus, when someone uses "FOMO" (Fear Of Missing Out) or says "TBH" (To Be Honest), they are communicating and displaying their understanding of online culture. Applying an appropriate meme or slang implies that you are "in the know" and accepted by others. In fact, popular sayings or memes can propagate rapidly across countries and cultures, aiding in the development of an internationalized youth language (Erastus et al., 2022).

Emojis, specifically, are like a new type of language. They help to communicate feelings, reactions, or even humor in ways that sometimes words cannot. As (Chiedu, 2024) states, emojis function like "visual grammar"—they aid in completing a message, similar to how animated facial expressions accompany spoken language during in-person communication. For example, the same sentence can feel very different if it ends with a 😊, 😄, or 😏 at the end. Emojis allow people to play with tone and emotions, creating a more personal and expressive experience for the receiver of a message.

The internet also gives license to play and creativity with language. You might notice that young people often alter the spelling of words, use unconventional or humorous grammar, or come up with entirely new words. These are conscious, deliberate alterations, not accidental mistakes! For example, saying "soooo good" rather than "so good" indicates a more explicit reference to excitement. Using "gurl" instead of "girl" or "thicc" instead of "thick" can indicate that someone "fits in" with a certain group or culture existing online (Shahbaz et al., 2024). Such playful interpretations of language go a long way to drawing meaning, significance, and style to digital language use.

An additional key point is how people embrace language to perform or show who they are. Social media enables people to show their personality with every post, comment, or caption. Their personality may include a displayed sense of humor, identity, background, gender, or style. A notion called "stylization" (Nani, 2024) involves how people select their language when they perform, and this influences the image they create of themselves. A student might choose to write captions for examples in both English and their home language to proudly immerse their audience in their background. Another student may access a specific online community with emoji use,

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sarcasm, or casual use in their captions to feel included in a group. In this way, our use of language is accomplished through a type of performance that aids in expressing and constructing identity.

Creating a presence online through semiotic choices influences the offline world, too. Studies show how youth written language engages their writing in school or work (Abdelhadi & Bellag, 2024). Sometimes, students can bring their casual, informal written language habits to their written work, such as using emojis, omitting punctuation, being too casual at times, or being too rigid. However, digital writing can also provide students with the confidence to think and act creatively in using language. Students are being explorers of sorts; their freedom of expression because of digital writing may compel them to be more authentic in their overall interest in writing!

The blending of online language and real-world language reveals the closeness between the real world and the online world. University students move between online language and more formal language quite easily as their writing shifts from writing informally with WhatsApp to writing formally in essays for school. It is important for teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers of language to understand language change and how students shift their language in those different spaces. This is useful because it helps ask questions like: Not only are online language and messaging making formal writing worse but Are online language and messaging leading people to find different ways of communicating?

In conclusion, the changes in language led by youth in the digital age are not only about adding words; it is about constructing new thinking, new ways of speaking, and new ways of linking with other people. The creative and social ways that youth are using language in university show wider cultural change. The language was continued to grow and continues to change, and youth was remain at the center of that change.

Code-Mixing and Code-Switching

In multilingual societies like Pakistan, English is taught as a second language, while Urdu or regional languages are still people's everyday language. People regularly mix and switch languages, which occur using two linguistic terms: code-mixing and code-switching. Code-mixing incorporates elements from one language into another language contained within one sentence or

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clause, while code-switching entails switching back and forth between two or more languages within each sentence, phrase, or turn in a conversation (Mabule, 2015).

When using digital platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and X, university students routinely and naturally mix and switch languages. For instance, a WhatsApp message from a student might say, "Kal class miss hogayi because I overslept." This is an intrasentential example of code-mixing. Students use hybrids like this without any concern, likely because of the linguistic environment in which they grew up and were educated. Code-mixing and switching are not accidents! They are not random or arbitrary; rather, they are meaningful actions taken for a variety of reasons: easiness and simplicity, expression, identity, and social alignment (Oliinyk et al., 2024).

Digital media represents a space in which the full potential of code-mixing and code-switching can thrive. Unlike classrooms or the workplace, where there may be constraints or expectations to use language in a formal way, social media abounds with non-prescriptive norms. It allows individuals to be themselves and use their entire linguistic repertoire. In particular, university students live in a multitude of linguistic and cultural worlds every day—navigating spaces of academic English with ready access to Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, or Balochi. The mixed code can encourage comfortable boundary crossing.

The choice to code-switch is not simply an arbitrary behavior; there is a significant sociolinguistic meaning behind it. Eid (2024) explains that the choice to switch from one language to another can index different identities, roles, and relationships. Changes in language can express a change in formality, prestige, or a specific connection to a globalized culture at a particular moment in time. A Cushy student who has gone to English can be an indication of a kind of academic or social solidarity, that is, as a privileged person; they are cognizant of their privilege and morally responsible. Conversely it can be a show of intimacy, informality, humour or cultural bonding. To give an example, a student can write Yeh assignment bohat boring hai. I mean, I do not even know now,—an emotive level of frustration and informality with a bilingual form that also adds an emphasis to their emotional underlining of how dull and uninteresting to them the assignment appears to be. The given example also demonstrates that the process of code-switching can be

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utilized not only as the means of communication but as the tool of creating the layered meaning and social indicators.

Another aspect that may be considered in regard to these shifts in language use and preferences is the issue of the symbolic power of English in the postcolonial space. The students in the countries including Pakistan tend to perceive English as a symbol of education, social success, and mobility. English is the language of business, government, universities, and literature. In many contexts, proficiency in English is positioned as an indicator of education and intelligence or professionalism. In contrast, Urdu and local languages have culturally-emotional and familialized resonance. Thus, the blend of English and local language(s) in digital spaces provides students the space to navigate a dynamic space of global aspiration and local identity. This is the linguistic negotiation from the students' sociocultural reality.

Social media facilitates and certifies the hybridization of language practices and resources. The informal nature of social media, the absence of linguistic gatekeepers (meaning not regulated by teachers or editors), and multi-modal combinations of content (text, voice notes, video, meme) are highlighted in Androutsopoulos's (2011) use of "mixed-code registers." That is community-level stable language-use patterns that are recognized and accepted by specific communities, with particular reference to youth. In other words, the digital dialect itself emerges where group identity and belonging are symbolized and reified.

The consequences of code-mixing and code-switching in educational contexts are multifaceted and sometimes contentious. Some educators are concerned that students may transfer informal language use into formal academic writing (which typically asks for standard English). For example, students might use the phrases "I'm like bas kar yaar" or "He said ke woh nahi ayega" - though maybe not in every essay or report, they do reflect "digital discourse norms." Some have suggested that digital bilingualism is detrimental to academic language and writing, while others argue that it should not be viewed as a deficit but as a type of linguistic creativity (a resourceful use of style). Students who use code mixing demonstrate competence in multiple linguistic systems and an ability to adapt language to context and audience. In fact, code-switching is evidence of a high level of communicative competence rather than limited communicative competence.

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Therefore, educators and curriculum developers are challenged to embrace a more expansive view of multilingualism today. Instead of highlighting a rigid distinction between "correct" and "incorrect" language, they might consider how they could utilize students' bilingualism to foster learning. Language instruction could be an explicit discussion of the hows and whys of students' code-switching, perhaps moving between formal and informal registers. This language use acknowledges students' linguistic realities and provides students with critical language awareness.

Existing Studies

Numerous investigators have analyzed how digital communication has changed the way people communicate verbally, particularly young people. Studies conducted in Western countries emphasize that the advance of social media has led to numerous new typographic ways of writing and speaking, for instance, "netspeak" or "textspeak," which often violate traditional writing rules involving grammar and vocabulary (Crystal, 2011). There is also research looking at how writing via the Internet affects the spelling, punctuation, and reading skills of teens (Asare et al., 2022).

In countries with two or more speakers of different languages, research has shown users often digress from a single language, especially if submitted on social media. For example, Shahwani et al. (2024) examined how users in Pakistan were purposeful with code-switching between English and Urdu on Facebook. They found users employed code-switching for humor, emphasis, or identity reflection. Likewise, Schuring and Zenner (2022) researched code-switching by young German users of English intertwined with their languages as a marker of subcultural identity.

However, it must be noted that there is still a lack of research in several situations in particularly underdeveloped countries or non-English speaking places, with most literature produced from the West or Western countries. This creates a challenge when extrapolating findings to places like South Asia or the Middle East, where historically, culturally, and multilingual scenarios are in stark contrast.

In addition, very few studies have researched what students themselves may think about how their language is shifting. Further, most studies examine language predicated on word choice— perhaps by collecting a data set based on survey responses. However, this process may overlook what

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students may actually feel about their own language use. Thus, there may still be a need for research that encourages students to reflect on and articulate their own experiences.

This research contributes to these gaps in the field of language within digital spaces as it examines university students in a multilingual society and discusses how students believe social media impacts their language use. It adds to the notions of a more global and inclusive understanding of how language is changing in the digital space.

5. Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory research design was used to better understand university students' experiences and perceptions related to their social media use. The exploratory design offered the researchers freedom and flexibility to discover information they did not anticipate to come from the research. The qualitative method of study served the purpose of gathering a depth of description through rich situated data. Qualitative exploratory was a fitting design to address the complexity of social media usage as a social phenomenon at a time when little is known in the literature.

Participants

The research was conducted with approximately 12 to 15 university students from various academic departments to optimize differences in the data. Participants were selected through purposive sampling; students were purposively selected for the study if they were active users of modern social media applications; this purposive hit the mark for creating a relevant experience in the participation frame.

Data Collection Methods

All data from students in the study contained semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were structured enough to provide guided questions as well as offer perceptions that

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were less guided to allow for open responses. This guided/open interview provided students an opportunity to express their experiences and perceptions using their personal vocabulary, which better facilitates rich qualitative data. The researchers asked participants permission to share samples of content on social, i.e., samples of WhatsApp chat or Instagram conversations; the permission provided context around the messages and became contextual evidence in the triangulation of the data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was familiarizing myself with the data by reading the transcripts and messages several times. The second step was to code for significant features pertaining to the research questions in the data set. I grouped those codes into potential themes. From that stage, I reviewed the themes and iteratively refined them themes so they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another. The final step involved elaborating on the themes and reviewing them so the data were prepared for presentation and interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was considered an important component of this study. Participants were provided with a detailed account of the study's aims, procedures, and rights prior to giving consent, and their informed consent was retained prior to participating in the study. The researcher assured participants' privacy by removing or anonymizing all personal identifiers, securing data with limited access, and restricting access to the data to the research team. Because participation was strictly voluntary, the researcher provided participants the ability and right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

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Findings

Theme 1: Adoption of Internet Slang and Abbreviations

Many participants talked about how students use texting shorthand (i.e., 'LOL,' 'BRB,' 'BTW,' 'IDK'). Abbreviation usage is not limited to just a written or typed word – often, participants discussed how these forms carry over into a spoken word; a critical finding here is that informal language norms are changing in how students communicate (Crystal, 2011; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). One participant stated, "I even say 'LOL' when I am talking in real life now because it just feels right when I am around friends that do the same" [Participant 3, Female, 21 years]. Another participant illustrates how these types of language are time-saving while also fostering a sense of belonging with their peer groups. When you say things like 'BRB' or 'BTW,' it just feels like you are part of the online youth generation. Everyone knows what it means, and can carry the conversation forward quicker" [Participant 8, male, 22 years].

The theme marks a shift in language use, whereby brevity, efficiency, and group identity supersede formal grammar rules in informal interactions. These patterns imply that technological platforms are establishing new language norms, and students are adapting to them with ease (Akayoğlu, 2016; Canagarajah, 2012).

Theme 2: Code-Mixing and Hybrid Language

One type of linguistic behavior that appeared frequently among participants was the code-mixing of mainly English and Urdu languages. It was not uncommon for students to switch between languages in the middle of a sentence; this code-mixing seemed to happen naturally and without thought. This shifting from one language to another reflects a bilingual or multilingual experience that most Pakistani students are used to (Mabule, 2015; Montes-Alcalá, 2024).

For instance, one participant stated, "Sometimes I was say something like, "Mujhe yaad nahi, I forgot." It's not like I'm thinking about it; it just happens" [Participant 2, Female, 20 years]. Another participant said, "In texting, I was write like "Kal class bunk karni hai, want to chill?" I don't realize until someone calls you out." [Participant 6, Male, 21 years].

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The students indicated that the use of digital media did accommodate this hybrid language experience, which did not require them to follow formal language rules. The informal nature of the media allows for nonstandard fluency and creativity, thus enhancing students' view that hybrid language is acceptable and effective in digital contexts (Erastus et al., 2022; Huseynova et al., 2024).

Theme 3: Emoji and Symbolic Communication

An additional significant finding was the use of emojis as replacements for words, feelings, and sometimes phrases. Participants stated that emojis are integral to conveying tone and mood and subtle social cues that are typically absent from telegraphic text (Chiedu, 2024; Khasawneh, 2024).

For example, a participant stated, "Sometimes I don't write even a word. I just send a laughing emoji, and everyone gets it" [Participant 4, Female, 22 years]. Another said, "I use emojis because they communicate what I mean. A heart emoji makes my message softer, or if I am joking, I send the 'face with tears of joy' emoji" [Participant 10, Male, 23 years].

Participants expressed that emojis add clarity and emotional content to digital messages, often replacing writing efforts and long explanations. This has become such a typical style of communication that students can interpret emojis fluently. Emojis also contribute to a wider redefinition of literacy that increasingly includes visual semiotics (Abdelhadi & Bellag, 2024; Jolić, 2023; Choi & Aizawa, 2018).

Theme 4: Impact on Academic Language Use

One of the more alarming features is that informal digital languages, along with informalities, increasingly affect writing in an academic context. Many participants admitted that most of the time, the habits they acquired through social media were further carried into their serious academic assignments.

Participant 1, Female, 19 years: "I once mistakenly wrote 'u' instead of 'you' in my assignment. My teacher wasn't happy." Another participant said, "I really have to reread all my emails now because sometimes I write way too casually, like saying 'Hey' or using smileys without thinking" [Participant 11, Male, 24 years].

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This theme speaks of blurry boundaries found in both formal and informal registers that, at times, even some students could not compartmentalize their different styles in terms of communication. Being aware of the inappropriateness of using informal language while in an academic institution, the often-frequent use of such language in daily digital communication seems to make those kinds of slips more common. Implications of these findings include the need for increased awareness, possibly through pedagogical intervention, to develop students' abilities to differentiate and appropriately switch between registers (Muslimawati, 2022; Gros et al., 2012).

Theme 5: Perception of Identity and Belonging

Participants frequently described language use—especially on social media—as a vehicle of self-expression and belongingness. The participants associate the way they write, the words they choose, and how they interact online with their digital self-presentation (Androutsopoulos, 2001; Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Eid, 2024). For example, one participant stated, "The way I type on Instagram or WhatsApp shows who I am. Like, I use Gen Z slang and emojis because that's my vibe" [Participant 7, Female, 21 years]. Another participant said, "When I talk to friends in our group chat, we all have this specific way of writing like our inside language" [Participant 5, Male, 20 years old].

Thus, the responses indicate that the use of language is more than a functional tool—it is a social marker. The choice of certain slang words, emojis, or hybrid expressions could serve to create intimacy within the sometimes-distant walls of peer group membership, reaffirm a modern or youth identity, and mark a contrast with older generations and formal institutions. This theme demonstrates how digital language is used not only to communicate but also to enact identity and to negotiate social relationships in a fast-changing linguistic terrain (Androutsopoulos, 2011).

Discussion

Comparison with Existing Literature

The results align with previous studies that have shown online media promotes informal, creative, and dynamic language. For example, Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) noted that communication

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between young people on the Internet often contains slang and abbreviations, as well as multimodal features (emojis), which was also confirmed by our participants. The dominance of internet abbreviations in the text of this study, such as LOL, BRB, IDK, etc., substantiates the claim of Kawther (2019), who states that digital media promotes faster and more efficient languages that value convenience and shortcuts.

In the same vein, the present code-mixing and hybrid language use can be compared to the findings of Androutsopoulos (2015), who discovered that bilingual or multilingual young people often alternate languages in use in social media, which often represents a matter of style or even identity. Considering the Pakistani setting, where English and Urdu are used in both scholarly and social contexts, this code-mixing is not only a linguistic necessity but also a cultural proclamation, which supports the assertion of Nguyen (2014) that English in Pakistan is often localized through hybridization.

Emojis and symbolic communication are also helpful in terms of the idea suggested by Kawther (2019) visual language revolution, as more and more meaning is transmitted through images and symbols. The meanings of emojis used by the students in this research serve similar purposes, as displayed by Logi and Zappavigna (2021), namely to supplement or substitute for verbal communication, to subtly negotiate emotions and to sustain social connections.

Sociolinguistic Implications

Sociolinguistically, the identified linguistic behaviors suggest a significant shift in the way young people use language in the digital environment. A significant one of them consists in the fact that a new social dialect, a sociolect, emerges; it is influenced by both online communication and technological limitations. This online sociolect is distinguished by its brevity, informality, visual symbolism, and repetitive multilingualism.

These phenomena, the normalization of informal forms and hybrid structures, may also play a role in language change on a macro level, as language users are internalizing them and eventually have an impact on mainstream communication standards. According to Stoika and Pitovka (2025), language change typically originates in informal, non-standard settings and then spreads to more

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general use. Social media, hence, serves as a breeding ground for such linguistic innovation, especially among young people who are the first to embrace any new linguistic behavior.

In addition, digital identity and group belonging, as implemented through language use, indicate the performativity of language. Language plays a central role in identity formation, and the online environment amplifies this process by providing new channels for self-expression, as Zhakin (2023) suggest. It is the particular linguistic forms that students use on the Internet that enable them to negotiate membership in peer groups, make generational claims, and distinguish themselves between establishments such as academia or authority figures.

Influence on Vocabulary, Syntax, and Communication Norms

Social media has a tremendous effect on linguistic elements. As far as the vocabulary is concerned, new lexical units (acronyms, abbreviations, and borrowings) are being continuously introduced and recycled. The presence of words like "savage," "cringe," or "vibe," which carry certain cultural connotations, demonstrates how social media influences lexical growth and semantics.

At the syntactical level, students tend to simplify sentence structure when engaging in digital communication. Complex sentences have been cut into short fragmented clauses or even single-word replies (e.g., Same, Mood, Bet). Such trends can simplify grammar structure at the cost of enhancing communicative convenience and relatability, in line with what Crystal (2008) has noted about the grammatical economy of the texting language.

The rules of communication have changed, too. As an example, punctuation is applied in a stylistic, not conventional, way: ellipses (...) can show sarcasm or hesitation, and capital letters can show emphasis or yelling. However, more than this, emojis and GIFs are being used to replace entire verbal interactions, ushering in a new multimodal paradigm in which text and image are integrated to convey meaning. This aligns with Nagpal et al. (2024) opinion, which viewed communication in the digital era as more multimodal and situated within specific contexts.

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Student Awareness of Linguistic Shifts

An interesting aspect of the results is also the varying levels of awareness among students regarding these linguistic changes. Although the majority of them were aware of their active use of slang, abbreviations, and emojis, not all of them were aware of the influence that these habits had on their formal language use. Some students have confessed to unintentionally using informal expressions in academic texts or official emails, which indicates a deficiency in register awareness.

Such a restricted consciousness implies the need to possess a more metalinguistic consciousness or the capacity to reflect upon and manage the use of language in various situations. Indeed, language users, particularly in multilingual and digital societies, need to acquire the competence of moving across registers and appreciate the suitability of various forms, as Abir (2023) contends. Otherwise, there is a danger that students may blur the boundaries between informal and official communication, which can negatively impact their academic or professional reputations.

Furthermore, whereas other students considered such language changes as beneficial signs of identity and creativity, others were worried about the future consequences for their grammar and writing ability. This ambivalence reflects broader societal debates about the extent to which society should be open to linguistic innovation versus the degree to which it should maintain linguistic standards.

Conclusion

This research has extensively discussed the nature of changing language use among university students, particularly in light of the widespread use of social media. Among the interesting features of language usage highlighted by the findings are those that have emerged during the digital age. The use of internet slang and abbreviations proved to be widespread, along with the tendencies of code-mixing in English and local languages, the use of emojis as a means of expressiveness in digital communication, and the rise of informal syntactic patterns in written texts. Such language changes are not accidental or random, but they represent the social and cultural shifts that are in the process of redefining how youths interact with one another. Particularly, the changes are

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intimately associated with identity building and peer group identification, as well as a need to belong to a fast-digitizing society.

Social media platforms are considered the arena where the rules of communication are continuously negotiated and reconstructed. Within such digital settings, users are encouraged to be creative, impromptu, and multimodal in their communications. This forms a good background for the development of new forms of language that do not conform to grammatical traditions. The thing that comes out of this analysis is that these changes do not just scratch the surface of grammar; this is more of a linguistic adjustment to the needs and potentials of digital communication. The result, then, is that social media is not only a channel of informal communication but a phenomenon that has brought about or is bringing about linguistic creativity and change in the 21st century.

Among the most important findings of this study is the fact that the digital context accelerates linguistic change. The language change has always been a natural and continuous process; however, the digital space, particularly social media, has accelerated and intensified this change. The constantly active contact, instant communication, and worldwide connectivity that platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have established have presented the language with unprecedented opportunities to develop at an unprecedented speed. The platforms modify the traditional distinctions between speaking and writing, and as a consequence, a mixed version of expression is created that contains characteristics of both types.

The language practices examined in this study have significant educational and policy implications for language. Specifically, the study highlights the acute necessity of reconstructing the conceptualization of teaching and assessing language, as well as how language is perceived in the modern digital environment. The traditional paradigms of language teaching might be unable to completely reflect the dynamic, informal, and multimodal qualities of how students communicate in the real world. Consequently, teachers and curriculum developers need to consider ways to incorporate digital literacies and modern language practices into their pedagogical approaches to remain current and effective.

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Overall, the impact of social media on language is massive and extensive. It is transforming the language standards of a new generation and is indicative of wider social change. The awareness of these changes is crucial both to the study of linguistics and to the practice of education, as it allows for treating the language in the modern world more subtly and realistically.

Implications

For Educators: Educators should be aware of the role of digital talk in students' language practices. Rather than deploring the informal forms as "wrong," teachers can utilize students' digital fluency to develop their criticality of language, enabling them to transition appropriately between formal and informal registers.

Curriculum Developers: Language learning should encompass the topics of digital styles of communication, literacy in emojis, and code-switching in educational contexts. Incorporating real-life communication texts can make the curriculum more realistic and inclusive of the linguistic realities of the students.

For Researchers: The current research raises opportunities for subsequent research on digital language use. There is a particular need for longitudinal studies to evaluate the way online linguistic practices change over time and whether they have long-term effects on formal language proficiency.

Limitations

Several limitations are worth noting. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, which limits its generalizability. Its results are grounded in the self-experience of 12-15 college students, which cannot be generalized to wider populations. Two, like any other qualitative study, there is subjectivity in the responses given by the participants and memory bias. Finally, the research considered only several social media platforms, mainly WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X. It would be possible to investigate more platforms, such as YouTube, Snapchat, or Discord, in the future to obtain a more detailed digital linguistic trend image.

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Recommendations for Future Research

In order to expand on this study, there are several future research propositions:

- **Comparative Studies:** Comparative research on linguistic changes across various age groups, educational levels, or geographical locations would reveal how social media influences language changes among different populations.
- **Mixed-Methods Research:** The integration of qualitative knowledge with quantitative methodology can be used to confirm the themes as well as to offer a more statistical view of the language tendencies that occur.
- **Academic Writing Impact:** The specific topic that needs to be investigated through focused research is the effect of digital language practices on the quality, structure, and formality of academic writing, especially in second-language situations.

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