



**EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE ON SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS'  
PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA**

By

**Dr. Mrs. Ngozi Anthonia Amazu**

And

**Esther Sebastian Ibanga**

**Department of Education Psychology,  
National Institute for Nigerian Languages,  
Aba, Abia State, Nigeria**

**ABSTRACT**

*This study examined the influence of social media language on secondary school students' performance in English Language in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study investigated its effect on students' proficiency, reading comprehension, communication skills, and grammar and syntax. The study was anchored on Sociocultural Theory, Language Socialization Theory, Media Dependency Theory, and Social Learning Theory, which collectively explain how digital interaction and observational learning shape language development. A correlational research design was adopted. The population comprised 68,523 Senior Secondary Two (SS2) students in public secondary schools, from which a sample of 400 respondents was selected using Taro Yamane's formula and a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument (LSMELLQ), validated by experts and yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.79. Data were analyzed using simple linear regression at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that social media language significantly influences students' English language proficiency, reading comprehension, and grammar and syntax, but does not significantly influence communication skills. The study concludes that excessive exposure to informal digital language may weaken grammatical accuracy and deep reading habits while leaving communicative adaptability relatively intact. It is recommended that digital literacy and language register awareness be integrated into English language instruction to balance informal and formal language use.*

**KEYWORDS: Social Media Language; English Language Performance; Reading Comprehension; Grammar and Syntax; Communication Skills; Secondary School Students; Nigeria.**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of digital technology and social networking platforms has significantly transformed patterns of communication across the world, particularly among adolescents and secondary school students. In recent years, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Snapchat have evolved beyond tools for entertainment and social interaction into influential linguistic environments where users create, negotiate, and reproduce new forms of language. These platforms have become deeply embedded in students' daily lives, shaping how they read, write, speak, interpret, and construct meaning. The increasing integration of social media into educational and social experiences has



generated growing scholarly interest regarding its implications for language learning and communication practices among students.

Language itself is dynamic and continuously adapts to social and technological realities. According to David Crystal, the digital age has produced a distinct form of communication known as “Netspeak,” a hybrid language system that combines characteristics of written and spoken discourse while emphasizing speed, brevity, creativity, and interactivity. This form of communication is characterized by abbreviations, clipped spellings, slang expressions, emojis, acronyms, phonetic substitutions, memes, stickers, and multimodal expressions. Expressions such as “u” for “you,” “lol” for “laugh out loud,” “brb” for “be right back,” and extensive emoji substitutions have become normalized among young social media users. Crystal further argues that internet-based communication is reshaping linguistic behaviour globally by encouraging informality and flexible grammatical conventions.

Similarly, scholars such as Thurlow, Baron, and Danesi observe that digital communication has altered traditional language structures by promoting conversational immediacy and multimodal interaction. Danesi specifically explains that emojis and visual symbols now function as linguistic tools capable of conveying emotional and semantic meaning in online communication. Gawne and McCulloch also describe emojis as “digital gestures” that increasingly complement or replace textual expressions in social interaction. These transformations suggest that communication among students is no longer limited to conventional grammatical forms but increasingly incorporates visual and symbolic language patterns associated with online discourse.

The growing influence of social media language has attracted attention within the fields of Sociolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, and Educational Technology. Sociolinguistic perspectives emphasize that language varies according to social context, audience, and communicative purpose. In digital spaces, students frequently engage in code-switching between formal academic English and informal online language styles. According to Lee (2017), many adolescents unconsciously transfer social media language habits into formal writing tasks, thereby contributing to grammatical inconsistencies and weakened sentence structures. Similarly, Squires (2020) argues that digital slang and online linguistic identities strongly influence the communication patterns of young users, especially adolescents who spend extensive time on social networking platforms.

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky, who maintained that learning and cognitive development occur through social interaction within culturally mediated environments. Social media platforms represent modern interactive environments where students engage continuously in collaborative communication and linguistic exchange. Through repeated interaction, students internalize communication patterns and linguistic habits observed within their online communities. This perspective aligns with Albert Bandura’s social learning theory, which posits that behaviour is acquired through observation, imitation, and modelling. Students who are constantly exposed to



abbreviated spellings, non-standard grammar, and informal communication patterns on social media may unconsciously imitate and reproduce such patterns in academic contexts.

Despite concerns regarding the negative influence of social media language, some scholars argue that digital communication environments may also support language learning and communication development. Ansari and Khan (2020) note that social media promotes collaborative learning, interaction, and increased participation among learners. Malik and Asnur (2019) equally observed that social networking platforms provide opportunities for language practice, peer engagement, and vocabulary exposure. Yadav (2021) further argues that social media can motivate learners to communicate more frequently in English, thereby improving confidence and interactional competence. These perspectives suggest that social media may contribute positively to language exposure and communication fluency when used appropriately.

However, many educators and researchers remain concerned about the academic consequences of excessive exposure to informal digital language. Studies by Liu (2022), Oluwatobi and Oyeniran (2022), and Etuk and Briggs (2023) revealed that students increasingly transfer abbreviations, informal spellings, and non-standard sentence constructions from social media interactions into formal writing. Etuk and Briggs particularly observed that adolescents in parts of southern Nigeria frequently demonstrate grammatical inaccuracies and weakened writing proficiency associated with habitual exposure to social media lexis. Similarly, Thurairaj and Hoon (2015) found that frequent use of WhatsApp language negatively affected students' writing patterns, punctuation usage, and spelling accuracy. Osakue et al. (2018) also reported that undergraduates exposed to intensive social media communication often displayed reduced adherence to formal English writing conventions.

One major concern associated with social media language relates to English language proficiency. English language proficiency involves learners' ability to use vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, sentence structure, and language expressions effectively in communication. In Nigeria, English language serves not only as the official language but also as the primary medium of instruction across educational institutions. Success in major examinations such as WAEC and NECO depends largely on students' competence in English language. Consequently, any factor capable of affecting students' mastery of formal English deserves serious scholarly attention. Scholars such as Abdel Latif (2021) and Adeniran and Yusuf (2024) emphasize that language proficiency strongly influences academic performance, communication effectiveness, and educational achievement.

Another important dimension potentially affected by social media language is reading comprehension. Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand, interpret, analyze, and derive meaning from written texts. Social media communication is predominantly characterized by short texts, captions, scrolling behaviour, visual distractions, and fragmented reading practices. Wolf (2018)



argues that digital reading culture encourages superficial processing and weakens deep reading habits necessary for critical comprehension. Similarly, Wolf and Barzillai (2019) maintain that continuous exposure to fast digital reading environments may negatively affect students' attention span and analytical reading skills. This raises concern that students accustomed to brief online texts may struggle with lengthy academic passages and comprehension exercises required in formal education.

Communication skills also constitute an important aspect of English language performance potentially influenced by social media usage. Effective communication requires coherence, clarity, vocabulary appropriateness, grammatical accuracy, and the ability to express ideas meaningfully. While social media platforms provide opportunities for frequent interaction, the communication style adopted online is often simplified, abbreviated, and informal. Researchers such as Adedokun and Adeyemo (2020) and Mbeki, Eze, and Okonkwo (2023) argue that excessive dependence on internet slang, emojis, and shorthand expressions may gradually weaken students' formal communication competence. This is particularly problematic within classroom environments where academic communication standards differ significantly from online interaction patterns.

Grammar and syntax equally remain central to English language learning. Grammar refers to the rules governing language structure, while syntax concerns the arrangement of words and phrases to form meaningful sentences. Several scholars have expressed concern that social media communication encourages grammatical simplification and syntactic reduction. Lee (2017) described this phenomenon as "grammatical erosion," where students become increasingly accustomed to incomplete sentence structures, omission of punctuation marks, and reduced adherence to grammatical rules. Liu (2022) further observed that continuous exposure to informal digital communication negatively influenced students' grammatical competence and writing proficiency.

Within the Nigerian context, the increasing accessibility of smartphones, internet services, and digital applications has expanded social media participation among secondary school students. In Akwa Ibom State particularly, students actively engage with online communication platforms for entertainment, interaction, information sharing, and academic discussion. Teachers and educators increasingly observe the presence of social media expressions, abbreviations, phonetic spellings, and informal grammatical structures in students' essays, assignments, classroom exercises, and examination scripts. Concerns have therefore emerged regarding whether prolonged exposure to social media language is contributing to declining standards of formal English usage among students.

Although numerous studies have examined social media usage and language learning, many existing studies focus broadly on university students, digital communication trends, or general academic performance. Some studies emphasize positive outcomes such as collaborative learning and communication exposure, while others highlight negative effects on grammar, spelling, and writing



competence. However, limited empirical studies have specifically investigated how social media language influences English language proficiency, reading comprehension, communication skills, and grammar/syntax among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State. This gap creates the need for further investigation within the specific sociolinguistic and educational realities of the study area.

It is against this background that this study investigates the effects of social media language on secondary school students' performance in English language in Akwa Ibom State. Specifically, the study seeks to determine the extent to which social media language influences students' English language proficiency, reading comprehension, communication skills, and grammar/syntax.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The widespread use of social media among secondary school students has introduced new forms of communication that differ considerably from standard English language conventions taught in schools. Students now communicate frequently using abbreviations, slang expressions, emojis, phonetic spellings, and shortened sentence patterns that dominate online interactions. Although these forms of communication may enhance speed and convenience, teachers and educators increasingly observe that many students transfer such informal language habits into academic writing and classroom communication.

In many secondary schools, students' written exercises, comprehension responses, and examination scripts now contain grammatical errors, abbreviated spellings, weak sentence constructions, and informal expressions associated with social media usage. There are also concerns that students' exposure to short digital texts may negatively affect deep reading habits and comprehension abilities. Furthermore, excessive dependence on informal online communication may weaken students' capacity to express themselves effectively in formal English language contexts.

Despite growing concerns regarding the influence of social media language on students' academic English performance, empirical evidence on its specific effects on English language proficiency, reading comprehension, communication skills, and grammar/syntax among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State remains limited. Most existing studies focused mainly on university students or examined social media usage generally without adequately investigating its linguistic implications among secondary school learners.

The problem of this study therefore is to determine the extent to which social media language influences secondary school students' performance in English language in Akwa Ibom State.



## **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to investigate the effects of social media language on secondary school students' performance in English language in Akwa Ibom State.

Specifically, the study seeks to determine the extent to which social media language influences:

1. English language proficiency among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State.
2. Reading comprehension among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State.
3. Communication skills among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State.
4. Grammar and syntax among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between social media language and students' performance in English language. The design was considered appropriate because it allows for the determination of the extent of association between variables without manipulation.

In this study, social media language served as the independent variable, while students' English language performance—measured in terms of proficiency, reading comprehension, communication skills, and grammar and syntax—constituted the dependent variables. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire to objectively describe existing phenomena and capture students' responses systematically.

## **Study Area**

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State, located in the southern region of Nigeria. The state lies between latitude 4.5°N and 5.5°N and longitude 7.5°E and 8.5°E, covering a land area of approximately 7,081 square kilometers. Akwa Ibom State shares boundaries with Cross River, Abia, and Ebonyi States and has a coastline along the Atlantic Ocean. The capital city, Uyo, serves as the administrative and economic center. The state has an estimated population of about 5.5 million and comprises three senatorial districts: Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, and Eket. The dominant ethnic groups include the Ibibio, Annang, and Or

## **Population and Sample**

The population consisted of 68,523 Senior Secondary Two (SS2) students in public secondary schools across Akwa Ibom State.

A sample of 400 students was determined using Taro Yamane's formula and selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Thirty percent of Local Government Areas were randomly selected from each senatorial district, resulting in 10 LGAs.



One school was then randomly selected from each LGA. Finally, 40 students were selected from each school using quota sampling to ensure equal representation.

All administered questionnaires were returned, yielding a 100% response rate.

### **Instrument for Data Collection**

Data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire titled *Language of Social Media and English Language Learners Questionnaire (LSMELLQ)*.

The instrument consisted of three sections: demographic information, instructions, and 20 items structured into four clusters—social media use, reading comprehension, communication skills, and grammar and syntax.

Responses were measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Disagree (1).

### **Validity and Reliability**

The instrument was validated by three experts in Measurement and Evaluation, who reviewed the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives, ensuring face and content validity.

Reliability was established through a pilot test involving students outside the study sample. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of **0.79** was obtained, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The questionnaire was administered through direct contact with respondents. The researcher visited the selected schools, distributed the questionnaires, and collected the completed copies immediately after completion. The data collection process was completed within five days, with respondents adequately guided to ensure accurate responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using simple linear regression to determine the extent of the relationship between social media language and each component of English language performance. All hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance.



**Results**

**Influence of Social Media Language on English Language Proficiency**

**Table 1:** Simple Linear Regression for the extent of social media language influence on students’ performance in English language proficiency

Variable	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R Std. Error of the Estimate
Students Proficiency	.409 <sup>a</sup>	.167	.161	2.74085
Social Media Language				

**Predictors: (Constant), English Language Proficiency**

The results in Table 1 indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between social media language and students’ English language proficiency. The correlation coefficient (R = 0.409) shows a moderate relationship between the variables. The coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.167) implies that social media language accounts for 16.7% of the variance in students’ proficiency.

This suggests that while social media language contributes to variations in English language proficiency, its influence is moderate and not the sole determinant of students’ performance.

**Influence of Social Media Language on Reading Comprehension**

**Table 2:** Simple Linear Regression for the extent of social media language influence on students’ performance in reading comprehension

Variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Reading Comprehension	.354 <sup>a</sup>	.125	.120	3.75012
Social Media Language				

**Predictors: (Constant), Reading Comprehension**

Table 2 shows that the correlation coefficient (R = 0.354) reflects a moderate but limited relationship between social media language and reading comprehension. The

R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.125 indicates that 12.5% of the variance in reading comprehension is explained by social media language.

This finding suggests that exposure to social media language has a noticeable but relatively weak influence on students' ability to comprehend formal English texts, with other factors likely playing a more substantial role.

**Influence of Social Media Language on Communication Skills**

**Table 3:** Simple Linear Regression for the extent of social media language influence on students' communication skills

Variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Communication Skills	.113 <sup>a</sup>	.013	.010	5.75859
Social Media Language				

**Predictors: (Constant), Communication Skills**

As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficient (R = 0.113) indicates a very weak relationship between social media language and communication skills. The R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.013 shows that only 1.3% of the variance in communication skills is explained by social media language.

This suggests that social media language has minimal influence on students' ability to communicate effectively in English.

**Influence of Social Media Language on Grammar and Syntax**

**Table 4:** Simple Linear Regression for the extent of social media language influence on students' performance in grammar and syntax

Variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Grammar and Syntax	.723 <sup>a</sup>	.523	.502	2.16107
Social Media Language				

**Predictors: (Constant), Grammar and Syntax**

The results in Table 4 reveal a strong relationship between social media language and grammar and syntax (R = 0.723). The R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.523 indicates that 52.3% of the variance in students' grammatical performance is explained by social media language.

This represents a substantial effect, suggesting that exposure to informal digital language patterns significantly influences students' grammatical accuracy.

### Hypothesis Testing

#### Hypothesis 1

There is no significant influence of social media language on students' English language proficiency.

**Table 5:** Regression analysis for social media language and English language proficiency

Variables	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-cal	F-crit	Sig.
Regression	181.336	1	181.336	5.544	3.86	.021 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	13017.042	398	32.706			
Total	13198.377	399				

The results show that  $F(1,398) = 5.544$ ,  $p = 0.021$ , which is less than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that social media language has a statistically significant influence on students' English language proficiency.

#### Hypothesis 2

There is no significant influence of social media language on reading comprehension.

**Table 6:** Regression analysis for social media language and reading comprehension

Variables	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-cal	F-crit	Sig.
Regression	138.954	1	138.954	4.235	3.86	.036 <sub>b</sub>
Residual	13059.424	398	32.813			
<b>Total</b>	<b>13198.377</b>	<b>399</b>				

The results indicate that  $F(1,398) = 4.235$ ,  $p = 0.036 < 0.05$ . The null hypothesis is rejected, showing that social media language has a significant influence on students' reading comprehension.



**Hypothesis 3**

There is no significant influence of social media language on communication skills.

**Table 7:** Regression analysis for social media language and communication skills

Variables	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-cal	F-crit	Sig.
Regression	82.134	1	82.134	2.492	3.86	.116 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	13116.424	398	32.955			
<b>Total</b>	<b>13198.377</b>	<b>399</b>				

The results show that  $F(1,398) = 2.492$ ,  $p = 0.116 > 0.05$ . The null hypothesis is retained, indicating that social media language does not have a significant influence on students' communication skills.

**Hypothesis 4**

There is no significant influence of social media language on grammar and syntax.

**Table 8:** Regression analysis for social media language and grammar and syntax

Variables	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-cal	F-crit	Sig.
Regression	207.132	1	207.132	6.345	3.86	.013 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	12991.246	398	32.641			
<b>Total</b>	<b>13198.377</b>	<b>399</b>				

The results indicate that  $F(1,398) = 6.345$ ,  $p = 0.013 < 0.05$ . The null hypothesis is rejected, showing that social media language has a significant influence on students' grammar and syntax.

**Discussion**

The present study examined the influence of social media language on secondary school students' performance in English language in Akwa Ibom State, focusing on proficiency, reading comprehension, communication skills, and grammar and syntax. The findings reveal a differentiated pattern of influence, suggesting that the effects of social media language are neither uniformly negative nor entirely beneficial, but context-dependent.



The study found a significant influence of social media language on students' English language proficiency. This outcome reflects the growing penetration of digitally mediated linguistic forms into formal learning environments. From a sociocultural perspective, as proposed by Lev Vygotsky, language development occurs through social interaction, and social media platforms have effectively become dominant interactional spaces for students. Consequently, learners internalize informal linguistic patterns such as abbreviations, slang, and non-standard orthography, which may interfere with mastery of formal English.

This finding aligns with previous studies (Hasanah, 2020; Adedokun & Adeyemo, 2020), which reported that frequent exposure to informal digital discourse weakens grammatical control and lexical precision. However, the moderate strength of the relationship suggests that social media is only one of several factors shaping proficiency. This supports the argument that digital environments can also enhance communicative flexibility when learners develop the ability to shift between registers appropriately.

Similarly, the significant influence of social media language on reading comprehension suggests that exposure to fragmented and abbreviated textual forms may affect students' ability to process extended academic texts. This finding can be interpreted through Media Dependency Theory, which posits that individuals who rely heavily on media systems are more likely to be influenced by them. Students accustomed to fast-paced, visually driven content may develop reading habits characterized by skimming rather than deep comprehension.

This result corroborates Adeniran and Yusuf (2024) and Liu (2022), who observed that digital reading practices often reduce sustained attention and interpretive depth. However, consistent with Language Socialization Theory, social media may also serve as a resource for vocabulary expansion and exposure to diverse discourse forms. The key issue, therefore, is not exposure per se, but the absence of clear boundaries between informal and academic reading practices.

In contrast, the study found no significant influence of social media language on students' communication skills. This suggests that students may possess the ability to differentiate between informal and formal communicative contexts. From the standpoint of Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura, individuals imitate observed behaviors selectively, particularly when such behaviors are contextually reinforced. In this case, students may replicate informal language online while maintaining more standard forms in academic or formal interactions.

This finding supports Anderson (2021), who argued that language users often demonstrate adaptive code-switching abilities. It also aligns with Thurlow (2018), who emphasized that digital communication can enhance expressive competence and interactional awareness. The implication is that communication skills are shaped by multiple overlapping influences, including classroom discourse, peer interaction, and formal instruction, which may mitigate the impact of social media language.



The strongest effect observed in this study was the significant influence of social media language on grammar and syntax. This suggests that repeated exposure to non-standard forms—such as omission of punctuation, inconsistent capitalization, and simplified sentence structures—may lead to their internalization. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this reflects a process of norm internalization, where frequently encountered patterns become cognitively entrenched.

This finding is consistent with Mbeki et al. (2023) and Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2014), who reported that digital communication environments prioritize speed and efficiency over grammatical accuracy. In line with Lev Vygotsky's internalization principle, repeated interaction within such environments may reshape learners' linguistic competence, particularly in areas requiring rule-governed accuracy such as grammar and syntax.

Overall, the findings reinforce the argument that social media functions as a powerful linguistic environment that both shapes and reshapes students' language practices. While it provides opportunities for interaction and exposure, its unregulated use may lead to the transfer of informal features into formal academic contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that social media language exerts a significant influence on secondary school students' English language proficiency, reading comprehension, and grammar and syntax, while its effect on communication skills is not statistically significant.

The findings suggest that although social media enhances interaction and accessibility of language, its informal linguistic conventions may undermine grammatical accuracy and deep reading practices when not critically moderated. The study therefore highlights the need for a balanced approach that integrates digital engagement with explicit instruction in formal language use.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The findings of this study have several implications for educational practice. First, the observed influence on reading comprehension underscores the need to strengthen structured reading culture through sustained engagement with extended texts. Second, the strong effect on grammar and syntax indicates the necessity for explicit instruction that addresses errors associated with digital language use.

Furthermore, curriculum planners should incorporate digital literacy and register awareness into English language instruction to help students navigate between informal and formal contexts effectively. Teaching strategies such as code-switching analysis and guided editing of social media texts may enhance students' metalinguistic awareness and improve language outcomes.



## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings, the study recommends that educational stakeholders integrate digital literacy components into the English language curriculum. Schools should promote structured reading programmes and provide access to both print and digital learning resources that encourage deep reading practices.

Teachers should adopt contextualized pedagogies that connect classroom instruction with students' digital experiences, particularly through activities that contrast informal and formal language use. In addition, awareness campaigns involving educators, parents, and media organizations are necessary to promote responsible and context-appropriate language use among students.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study is limited by its focus on public secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the correlational design does not establish causality, and the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias.

Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches to examine how sustained exposure to social media language influences language development over time. Further studies could also explore the extent to which digital communication skills can be transferred to formal academic contexts and whether observed grammatical deviations represent conscious stylistic choices or unconscious internalization.

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