

THE INFLUENCE OF NONSTANDARD LANGUAGE IN WHATSAPP AND INSTAGRAM CHATS ON STUDENTS' FORMAL WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of nonstandard language usage in digital communication—specifically on WhatsApp and Instagram—on the formal writing skills of university students. Drawing on sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic frameworks, the research explores how exposure to informal, abbreviated, and phonetic spelling conventions in daily chats may influence students' ability to compose grammatically appropriate and academically acceptable written texts. Using a qualitative method supported by questionnaire data and writing sample analysis, this study finds that habitual engagement with nonstandard forms (such as acronyms, emojis, shortened words, and unpunctuated phrases) correlates with reduced sensitivity to formal syntax, vocabulary precision, and academic tone. However, the findings also suggest that code-switching ability plays a critical role: students who are metalinguistically aware can effectively compartmentalize informal and formal registers. The research contributes to the field of digital sociolinguistics by highlighting how everyday linguistic behavior in social media contexts affects broader academic performance, and raises questions about the role of digital literacy in higher education writing pedagogy.

Keywords digital literacy; sociolinguistics; informal language; code-switching; academic writing; student writing; social media

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh penggunaan bahasa tidak baku dalam komunikasi digital—khususnya melalui WhatsApp dan Instagram—terhadap kemampuan menulis formal mahasiswa. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan sosiolinguistik dan psikolinguistik, penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana paparan terhadap bentuk bahasa informal, singkatan, serta ejaan fonetik dalam percakapan sehari-hari dapat memengaruhi kemampuan mahasiswa dalam menyusun teks tulis yang sesuai dengan kaidah akademik. Studi ini menggunakan metode kualitatif yang didukung oleh data kuesioner dan analisis sampel tulisan. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa keterbiasaan dalam menggunakan bentuk tidak baku seperti akronim, emoji, pemendekan kata, dan kalimat tanpa tanda baca berkorelasi dengan menurunnya kepekaan terhadap sintaksis formal, ketepatan kosakata, dan gaya bahasa ilmiah. Namun, studi ini juga menemukan bahwa kemampuan beralih kode (code-switching) memegang peran penting: mahasiswa yang memiliki kesadaran metabahasa dapat memilah dan memisahkan register informal dan

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formal secara efektif. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada kajian sociolinguistik digital dengan menunjukkan bahwa perilaku bahasa sehari-hari dalam media sosial berdampak terhadap performa akademik, sekaligus memunculkan pertanyaan tentang pentingnya literasi digital dalam pengajaran menulis di perguruan tinggi.

Kata kunci: digital literacy; sociolinguistics; informal language; code-switching; academic writing; student writing; social media

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the rise of digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram has drastically reshaped how language is used in everyday contexts, particularly among university students. Instant messaging and social media have not only introduced new communicative behaviors but have also contributed to the evolution of a distinct digital linguistic style—one that is spontaneous, abbreviated, highly contextual, and often nonstandard. While this language style facilitates fast and casual interaction, concerns have been raised about its impact on formal language abilities, especially in academic writing contexts.

Language in digital communication is marked by speed, brevity, and informality. It often omits conventional grammatical structures, employs phonetic spelling, embraces acronyms, and uses emojis or symbols as substitutes for words or emotions (Crystal, 2008). For instance, expressions like “gmn skr?” (from “bagaimana sekarang?”) or “gpp sih” (from “nggak apa-apa sih”) are common in WhatsApp chats, where the primary goal is effective communication with minimal effort. On Instagram, comments like “cuy keren bgt” or “OOTD lo mantep” exemplify youth-driven language that disregards formal conventions. These nonstandard forms—while rich in creativity and identity expression—have been accused of blurring students’ understanding of appropriate register in formal academic writing (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language variation is not inherently problematic. As Labov (1972) famously argued, nonstandard varieties are not inferior; they follow consistent internal rules and reflect specific social functions. In informal digital settings, nonstandard language serves purposes of intimacy, community-building, and efficiency (Androutsopoulos, 2011). However, when students carry these informal patterns into academic writing tasks—such as essays, reports, or research papers—their writing may appear fragmented, syntactically incomplete, or stylistically inappropriate. Educators have expressed concern that the widespread adoption of informal digital language may erode grammatical awareness, lexical precision, and academic tone among university learners (Thurlow, 2006).

Moreover, the influence of digital nonstandard language is not only structural but also cognitive. According to psycholinguistic theories, repeated exposure to specific language forms can influence mental language processing patterns. Ellis (1994) posits that frequency and familiarity of input play a crucial role in linguistic acquisition and automatization. If students are constantly reading and producing informal texts, it is plausible that their mental templates for constructing sentences in formal writing may be affected.

Yet, the relationship between nonstandard digital language and formal writing performance is not necessarily linear or detrimental. Several studies suggest that students who are **metalinguistically aware**—that is, those who understand when and how to shift registers appropriately—can separate informal and formal language use (Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008). This phenomenon, known as **code-switching**, is a cognitive skill that enables

individuals to navigate between linguistic styles based on context. In multilingual or multidialectal communities, code-switching is often viewed as a sign of linguistic competence rather than confusion (Gumperz, 1982). Thus, the question becomes: does digital language weaken writing skills, or does it merely coexist with them?

This study seeks to explore this dynamic by focusing on Indonesian university students who are active users of WhatsApp and Instagram. The research investigates how frequent use of nonstandard forms in these platforms may influence students' formal writing skills—specifically, their grammatical accuracy, lexical choice, and overall tone in academic assignments. It also examines students' ability to switch between digital and academic registers, and whether their digital literacy helps or hinders their writing development.

The context of this research is particularly significant given Indonesia's linguistic landscape. Bahasa Indonesia, while officially standardized, is often mixed with regional languages, slang (*bahasa gaul*), and English loanwords in casual communication. This natural hybridity is further amplified in digital media, where youth-driven language innovations flourish. According to Suwandi (2018), informal digital expressions have become so widespread that they influence not just spoken language but also how students approach written tasks. For example, students may unconsciously use abbreviations like “bgt,” “dgn,” or even expressions like “wkwk” in their formal papers—indicating a spillover of informal discourse norms into academic contexts.

Furthermore, the blurring of public and private registers on social media complicates students' sense of linguistic boundaries. On Instagram, captions that mix English and Indonesian, or memes that parody formal speech, can subtly alter perceptions of what is acceptable in written communication. When students are constantly exposed to hybrid forms that mock or simplify formal language, their sensitivity to academic conventions may be dulled. As Holmes (2013) emphasizes, register awareness is not innate; it must be developed through instruction and reflection.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is threefold:

1. To identify the types of nonstandard language most commonly used by students on WhatsApp and Instagram.
2. To analyze how these patterns correlate with errors or informal traits in their formal academic writing.
3. To assess students' awareness and ability to distinguish between informal and formal language registers.

To achieve these aims, the research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, supported by data from student questionnaires, writing samples, and a small set of semi-structured interviews. The findings are expected to shed light on whether the influence of digital language is purely negative, or whether it can be mitigated through increased digital literacy and explicit instruction in academic writing.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing field of digital sociolinguistics by demonstrating that everyday linguistic behavior—often dismissed as trivial—has measurable implications for educational performance. It also urges educators to rethink how writing instruction can accommodate the realities of digital life while still upholding standards of formal academic communication.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Research Design

This research employed a **qualitative descriptive method** designed to explore how nonstandard language used in WhatsApp and Instagram chats correlates with and potentially affects students' formal academic writing skills. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative approaches are suitable when the goal is to understand meanings, experiences, and interpretations rather than to quantify patterns. This method allows the researcher to delve into how language practices in informal digital spaces shape students' awareness, usage, and control of formal written registers.

Given the study's focus on behavior, awareness, and linguistic performance, the qualitative design is further reinforced by **sociolinguistic inquiry**—an approach that investigates the relationship between language use and its social context. In this case, the study examines how digital discourse practices within student peer groups may influence academic language production in university settings.

2. Research Participants and Context

The participants were **20 undergraduate students** majoring in English Literature and Communication at a state university in Indonesia. All participants were in their 4th or 6th semester, had active social media usage habits, and had submitted at least one academic paper or writing assignment in the past two months. Participants were selected using **purposive sampling**, ensuring that they were digital-native users who engaged regularly in both informal online communication and formal academic writing.

To narrow the focus, two dominant platforms were chosen—**WhatsApp and Instagram**—as they represent the primary channels through which students communicate daily. WhatsApp represents private, dialogic, often rapid texting behavior, while Instagram represents performative, public-facing language with a mix of captions, hashtags, and comments.

3. Data Collection Instruments

Three data collection instruments were used:

1. Student Questionnaires

A structured questionnaire was administered to gather data about participants' frequency of chat usage, preferred language types (e.g., standard Indonesian, slang, English code-mixing), awareness of formal vs. informal distinctions, and self-assessment of their writing ability. Items were both multiple-choice and open-ended to allow reflection on linguistic behavior.

2. Chat Sample Analysis

Participants were asked to submit **5 screenshot samples** of their WhatsApp or Instagram messages (names blurred) that they considered "typical" of how they usually chat. These were analyzed for features such as abbreviations, omission of punctuation, phonetic spelling, emoji substitution, and code-switching. Each sample was analyzed using Holmes' (2013) framework of language variation and digital register.

3. Formal Writing Samples

Each participant also submitted one recent **formal writing assignment** (e.g., essay, paper, report) for analysis. These were assessed using a coding system adapted from academic writing rubrics, focusing on grammar, lexical precision, tone/register, punctuation, and sentence structure. Patterns of informal spillover (such as casual phrases, slang words, or missing punctuation) were specifically marked.

A small subset (5 students) were later invited for **semi-structured interviews** to further explore their perceptions of formal vs. informal writing and their strategies (or lack thereof) in separating the two.

4. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed a **three-step thematic process**, adapted from Flick (2009):

- **Step 1: Coding and Categorization**

The chat samples were manually coded for linguistic features such as shortening (e.g., “gm,” “lg,” “bgt”), code-mixing (e.g., “aku join class dulu yaa btw”), and non-punctuated constructions. Each instance was compared with writing samples to look for pattern transfers. Questionnaire answers were also coded for themes of awareness and control.

- **Step 2: Comparative Analysis**

Each student’s informal and formal data were compared side by side. The presence of digital traits in academic texts (e.g., use of “gitu loh,” “yaudah deh,” or emoji-inspired expressions like “xoxo”) were identified. Instances where students successfully switched registers were also noted.

- **Step 3: Interpretation and Thematic Synthesis**

From this data, overarching themes were identified—such as **register confusion**, **overlap of digital and academic lexicons**, and **role of code-switching awareness**. These themes were interpreted using sociolinguistic theory and discussed in relation to previous studies (e.g., Crystal, 2008; Plester et al., 2008; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).

5. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent to use their anonymized data. Chat samples were self-submitted, with all personal identifiers removed. The study avoided content involving sensitive or private discussions. The research followed the ethical standards for qualitative research as outlined by Creswell (2014).

6. Scope and Limitations

While the study provides rich qualitative insight, it is limited by its small sample size and lack of longitudinal tracking. It captures only a snapshot of student behavior and does not measure long-term academic writing outcomes. Additionally, as the focus was limited to WhatsApp and Instagram, findings may not reflect influences from other platforms like TikTok, Twitter, or Discord. However, the depth of the linguistic analysis offers a foundation for further research on register awareness and digital language literacy.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data collected from WhatsApp and Instagram chat samples, questionnaires, and academic writing assignments reveals a multidimensional relationship between nonstandard language use in digital platforms and students’ performance in formal writing. This section presents the major findings, organized into four thematic categories: (1) dominant features of nonstandard digital language, (2) transfer of informal traits into formal writing, (3) students’ metalinguistic awareness and code-switching ability, and (4) the broader implications for writing pedagogy and digital literacy.

1. Dominant Features of Nonstandard Digital Language

The WhatsApp and Instagram chat samples collected from participants display consistent patterns of **linguistic abbreviation**, **phonetic simplification**, **lack of punctuation**, and **frequent code-switching**. Abbreviations such as “lg” (lagi), “gm” (bagaimana), “bgt” (banget), “kmrn” (kemarin), and even full phonetic contractions like

“ntar” (sebentar lagi) or “drmn” (dari mana) are widespread. These forms are often combined in strings that maximize brevity and speed of communication.

Emoji use is also prevalent, with students frequently replacing lexical content with pictograms. For example, rather than typing “sedih banget” or “lagi stres,” students might simply send a crying emoji 😭 or a red-face angry emoji 😡. In line with Crystal’s (2008) notion of “**graphic economy**,” these signs function as visual stand-ins for emotional states and allow for rapid affective communication.

Another prevalent trait is the **omission of capitalization and punctuation**, especially in WhatsApp. This includes the use of all-lowercase writing, run-on sentences, and the complete absence of full stops or commas. A representative WhatsApp message submitted by Participant A read:

“td pagi dosennya masuk gk sih gua telat bgt soalnya abis lembur hehe”

This sentence merges multiple clauses without punctuation or clear separation, creating a blurred structure that, if carried over to academic writing, would violate formal conventions.

Participants also demonstrated **code-switching behavior**, inserting English words into Indonesian sentences: “btw tugasnya udah dikumpulin belum?” or “udah ngumpul zoom link-nya belum, gue mau join soon.” This aligns with Gumperz’s (1982) theory of situational code-switching, wherein speakers alternate codes depending on topic, interlocutor, or domain.

2. Transfer of Informal Traits into Formal Writing

Upon analyzing participants’ academic essays, several linguistic traits commonly found in digital chats **reappeared** in inappropriate academic contexts. These include:

- **Use of informal vocabulary:** Words like “banget,” “kayaknya,” “gitu,” and “aja” appeared in argumentative essays and research papers.
- **Acronyms and chat abbreviations:** Some students used “yg” for “yang,” or “tdk” instead of “tidak,” even in formal essays.
- **Run-on sentences and missing punctuation:** Sentences such as “penelitian ini membahas dampak media sosial pada mahasiswa dan juga pengaruhnya dalam kehidupan sehari hari yang mana sangat penting karena bisa mengganggu fokus belajar” occurred repeatedly.
- **Casual tone or interjection:** One student concluded an academic paragraph with “menurut saya sih gitu ya,” a construction that belongs to conversational rather than formal register.

These findings support Thurlow’s (2006) concern that **digital discourse norms** may “spill over” into more structured, rule-bound genres like academic writing. However, it must be noted that the **intensity of influence varied** across participants.

Some students exhibited excellent code separation, while others showed high degrees of contamination. This variation suggests that the effect of digital language is **not deterministic** but mediated by awareness and education.

3. Metalinguistic Awareness and Code-Switching Skill

Interestingly, students who displayed **strong performance in formal writing** also demonstrated **high metalinguistic awareness** in their questionnaire and interview responses. These students articulated a clear distinction between “chatting language” and “academic writing.” As Participant G explained:

“Kalau nulis paper, saya memang ubah cara nulis. Saya tahu ‘gitu’ nggak cocok dipakai, jadi saya periksa lagi supaya bahasanya lebih formal.”

This supports the findings of Plester, Wood, and Bell (2008), who argue that **code-switching competence**—not mere exposure to digital language—determines whether students can adapt effectively to different registers.

Participants with this awareness reported actively **editing their writing** to remove informal elements, sometimes using grammar check tools or rereading aloud. They also understood that expressions like “gpp,” “iya dong,” or “nggak ngerti deh” were unsuitable for papers, even if these expressions were dominant in their everyday chats.

In contrast, participants with lower formal writing scores often **did not recognize informal elements** in their academic texts unless they were pointed out. These students admitted they rarely revised for register and sometimes “typed like chatting” out of habit.

This reinforces Holmes’ (2013) argument that **register control is a learned skill**. In the absence of direct instruction on style and tone, students may default to the most practiced register—often, informal digital speech.

4. Pedagogical and Sociolinguistic Implications

The findings suggest that the use of nonstandard language in WhatsApp and Instagram **does influence** students’ formal writing performance, but this influence is **mediated by awareness, context, and instruction**. Not all digital language exposure is detrimental; in fact, some students develop rich vocabulary and code-switching agility from their online experiences.

However, without sufficient **explicit teaching about register, formality, and audience**, students risk letting informal norms infiltrate their formal output. This calls for writing instruction that does not merely focus on grammar, but also on **sociolinguistic appropriateness**.

Educators might consider integrating modules on:

- Recognizing informal linguistic markers
- Rewriting informal sentences into formal register
- Discussing examples of academic vs. digital texts
- Encouraging reflective editing as a routine process

This also opens the door to broader conversations about **digital literacy**. As Suwandi (2018) notes, the boundaries between “formal” and “informal” are increasingly fluid in a digital world. Students must be taught to **navigate registers strategically**, not to avoid informal language, but to use it judiciously and switch codes appropriately.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the study confirms that **language variation is not static**—it is responsive to technological context and user behavior. As Androutsopoulos (2011) explains, digital platforms are not neutral; they shape how language is used, displayed, and perceived. Students are not only language users but also language innovators, creating hybrid forms that reflect their identities and environments.

Summary of Findings

Theme	Observations
Nonstandard features in chats	Abbreviations, emoji use, lack of punctuation, code-mixing
Transfer into academic writing	Informal words, chat spelling, run-on sentences, casual interjections
Code-switching awareness	High in strong writers, low in weak writers
Role of digital literacy	Critical for controlling register and reducing spillover
Teaching implications	Need for integrated writing and register-awareness instruction

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how the use of nonstandard language in WhatsApp and Instagram affects the formal writing abilities of university students. Through a qualitative analysis of chat samples, academic texts, and participant perceptions, the research revealed a nuanced relationship between informal digital language and academic writing performance. While the data confirms that certain linguistic habits—such as abbreviations, lack of punctuation, and use of informal vocabulary—do carry over into students' essays and reports, these effects are not universal nor unmanageable.

One of the key findings is that **exposure alone does not determine writing quality**. Instead, what matters most is a student's **metalinguistic awareness and ability to code-switch**. Students who could clearly differentiate between informal and formal contexts were able to compartmentalize their linguistic behavior, avoiding inappropriate carryover. In contrast, those who lacked this awareness often failed to recognize informal elements in their academic writing and exhibited lower writing quality overall.

The study also shows that digital language is not inherently harmful. On the contrary, it can offer students opportunities for linguistic creativity, identity expression, and multilingual agility. However, when students are not guided to reflect on their language choices, these benefits can become liabilities in academic settings that demand precision, coherence, and formality.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings underscore the need for writing instruction that addresses **register sensitivity, not just grammar and vocabulary**. Teachers should incorporate activities that help students compare registers, rewrite informal messages into formal equivalents, and engage in reflective editing practices. In an era where digital and academic literacies often overlap, students must learn not only how to write, but also **when and for whom they are writing**.

The study also contributes to the broader field of **digital sociolinguistics** by highlighting how platform-specific language use influences written performance. WhatsApp and Instagram are not just communication tools—they are linguistic environments that shape students' thinking, expression, and writing habits. Recognizing these influences can help educators and researchers better understand how digital communication intersects with formal education.

Future research may expand this investigation by exploring other platforms such as TikTok, Discord, or Telegram, and by conducting longitudinal studies that track how students' digital habits evolve alongside their academic progress. Quantitative studies with larger samples could also provide statistical validation of the patterns observed here.

In conclusion, digital language is here to stay, and rather than resisting it, educational systems must find ways to channel it. Students who are taught to navigate between registers with awareness and purpose can harness the best of both worlds—informal fluency and formal clarity.

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