

The Influence of Social Media on Generation Z's Writing Skills at the University of Mianwali: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the sociolinguistic impact of social media on the formal English writing skills of Generation Z English Language Learners (ELLs) in a rural Pakistani context. Framed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the study investigates how digital platforms operate as cultural tools that fundamentally mediate and reshape cognitive writing schemas. Utilizing a descriptive research design, the study integrates quantitative data from 111 self-reported student surveys with an empirical corpus analysis of 33 handwritten academic essays from the University of Mianwali. While participants report that social media significantly aids vocabulary acquisition and fosters writing confidence through peer scaffolding, it simultaneously drives "orthographic atrophy" and grammatical degradation. The corpus analysis provides stark empirical evidence of this phenomenon, demonstrating how digital User Interface (UI) formatting, text-message shorthand, and syntactic fragmentation physically infiltrate unassisted, handwritten academic prose. Furthermore, despite students reporting high metalinguistic awareness, the ubiquitous practice of code-switching (English and Urdu) frequently results in register instability and casual tone shifts during formal assessments. The paper concludes that informal digital communication habits have deeply colonized students' formal writing behaviors, indicating that modern English pedagogy must evolve to explicitly address and bridge the gap between digital literacies and standard academic discourse.

Introduction

The 21st century brought a tremendous transformation in human behavior and communication patterns with the arrival of digital communication technologies, primarily changing the sociolinguistic environment worldwide. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube are intensively used by the young generation, which was born between 1997 and 2010, who engaged with the digitized environment and experienced socialization, and this cohort is called the digital natives. The digital natives use social media not only for entertainment but also for study purposes, identity building, knowledge acquisition, and linguistic enhancement. English maintains the status of official language in Pakistan and functions as a status symbol of socioeconomic mobility; the effects of using social media for English Language Learners (ELLs) attain special significance, particularly in areas where formal English language instruction is confronted with major resources and teaching difficulties. The current research established an exploratory sociolinguistic study into the influence of social media on Gen Z ELLs' English writing skills at the University of Mianwali, a public sector university situated in the rural district of Punjab, Pakistan.

Background of the Study

From a sociolinguistic point of view, social media platforms created what Herring (2013) termed "computer-mediated discourse," which is influenced by technology and transformed linguistic production and interpretation patterns. The increasing trend of digital

social media introduces novel characteristics in language learning. Social media sites offer individuals with diverse linguistic traits and different forms, such as Contemporary spelling, abbreviations, code-switching, emojis, and culturally specific phrases. Limited character on Twitter (now X), an emphasis on Instagram reels, conversation in WhatsApp groups, and a video-oriented nature of TikTok each induced distinct communicative norms that deviated significantly from conventional written or spoken registers. The social media platforms served as “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2004) where users collectively construct and share their knowledge, and exchange meaning and increase linguistic proficiency through continuous connection with friends, classmates, and more knowledgeable others.

Mianwali, Punjab, Pakistan, offers a unique setting for exploring and investigating how social media impacts English writing abilities. Although Punjabi and Urdu function as the leading languages in the region, English is essential for education, job opportunities, and an increasing amount of online social interaction. There is a difference between urban elite class educational institutions and rural educational institution, where the main difference is the medium of instructions, where elite class institutions convey English medium instructions with experienced staff rather than the rural institutions convey urdu medium instruction with less experienced and poorly trained staff, facilities and socioeconomic landscape, where Urdu or regional language dominantly play its role in everyday communication (Kousar, Naqvi, & Afzaal, 2022; Mirza & Gottardo, 2023). For such students, social media platforms formed a conflicting environment; they once offered developmental intervention to English while possibly empowering nonstandard English usage trends.

Statement Of the Problem

Social media usage is consistently increasing in Pakistan, and excessive usage of various social media platforms by Gen Z ESL learners usually impacts their academic writing because English language proficiency is necessary for the educational success of the students in District Mianwali. The usage of formal language to informal language in everyday life, such as slang, code switching, abbreviations, and emojis, has influenced the writing patterns of ESL learners. Through a sociolinguistic lens, the problem is massively unexplored in the context of rural districts, and examines how students acquire English language proficiency through social and cultural factors. This study aims to explore the contribution and impact of online social media platforms on ELLs’ writing abilities through a sociolinguistic lens, highlighting how students cultivate English language proficiency through a socio-cultural perspective.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore Gen Z ELLs' perceptions in the University of Mianwali regarding social media's influence on their English writing skills.
- To investigate sociolinguistic trends in Gen Z ELLs’ English writing in the University of Mianwali linked to social media interaction.

Significance of the study

This study contributed to applied linguistic and sociolinguistic theory in four different ways. First, it elaborated Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory into the digital era by providing empirical evidence on how online social media platforms assist in language learning as a cultural tool within Gen Z ZPD. Second, the research filled a critical geographical gap by creating the first empirical research on the impact of social media from rural Punjab, thus challenging the urban-dominated research perspective and empowering the understanding of language learning in marginalized contexts. Third, the primary focus on quantitative data integration with qualitative data, illustrating the mixed method approach, could get both a broad

and a deep understanding of sociolinguistic phenomena. Fifth, this study introduces a crucial empirical dimension by incorporating a corpus analysis of actual, handwritten academic essays. By examining handwritten texts rather than digitally typed assignments, this research isolates students' internalized cognitive language habits from the immediate mediation of technology (such as autocorrect or predictive text).

Literature Review

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) by Lev Vygotsky (1978), which holds that second/foreign language learning is truly a social process embedded deeply in the individual's relationship with cultural resources, is the guiding theoretical framework for this study. According to SCT, interaction with others in particular cultural contexts, enhanced through skills and gestures, is how cognitive development, which includes learning languages, takes place (Vygotsky, 1978). Social media sites are powerful "cultural tools" and "social contexts" that help Gen Z ELLs learn languages in the context of digital communication (Hafeez et al., 2023). The concept of Zone of Proximal Development defines that the difference between a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with the scaffolding and assistance of more knowledgeable other (MKO) or through collaborative interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Social media provides a platform for students to collaborate and work together, sharing their ideas and improving their language skills with the assistance of their classmates (Ajmal et al., 2023).

The population which was born between 1997 to 2012 are categorized as Generation Z and immense engaging with online platforms pushed them as digital natives in current era (Ramzan et al., 2023). Gen Z are more lenient and comfortable with technology because engagement with different social media platforms plays an important role in their daily life conversation. (Amin et al., 2024; Khaliq et al., 2022). The communication across the globe has been deeply transformed due to the arrival of social media, exploring the new digital era specially influencing the sociolinguistic patterns. As Zhou (2021) described, how social media changed people's thoughts globally, their communication styles and its impact on the development of language learning. These platforms have not only transformed what we communicate but also how we communicate, leading towards the arrival of different linguistic characteristics in digital discourse (Saha, 2019).

The informal conversation on social media has negative effects on traditional and concise linguistic traits. Whereas a conventional academic setting required standard English in traditional classroom, social media supports often informal and feasible writing style. This informal method of conversation categorized in simple phrases, paucity of punctuation and non-standard grammar, can both support feasible communication for ELLs and potentially lead towards acceptance of informalities in formal and traditional settings, creating difficulties for teachers in standard writing. Code switching and code mixing is observed as a significant element in sociolinguistic phenomenon. Dilshad (2006) identified language hybridization in the form of code mixing have been influenced by social media and early form of digital communication. Kamran and Mansoor (2017) discovered globalization and use of language on social media in Pakistan, observing how students commonly shift their language between English and their native language (Urdu, Punjabi) using online social media platforms.

The social media sites have integrated as an important component for vocabulary acquisition and lexical fortification among ELLs. Students are consistently uncovering the new words, phrases, and trends that are included in daily life spoken and written language (Abbas et al., 2019; Khaliq et al., 2022). This online setting leads to a specific kind of lexicon, such as "tweet," "selfie," "hashtag," and "viral", which have become trending on social media, a smooth transition from online platforms to daily conversation (Saeed, 2021). Furthermore,

social media platforms are gradually identified as an inevitable means of developing and scrutinizing elements to language exposure. Hafeez et al. (2023) explore social media platforms as a “fast way of material development” in Pakistani ELT context, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube can be utilizing as a smooth means of exchanging the information (Usman, et al.).

The influence of social media and ESL learning, specifically writing abilities, has acquired greater attention within the Pakistani academic environment. Globally, these patterns facilitate a vast comprehension of regional research and present critical awareness, particularly in sociolinguistic dynamics that play a pivotal role within Pakistan’s multilingual setting. Khaliq et al. (2022) performed mixed-method research at the university level in South Punjab that showed that social media platforms entirely affect learning and developing the English language. This localized approach explores a complicated interconnection between the trends across the globe and regional sociolinguistic facts, emphasizing the requirements for context specific research.

Here is the **Theoretical Framework** paragraph, reconstructed using verbatim sentences from pages 22, 23, and 53 of your thesis. I have placed it immediately following the "Objectives of the Study" section.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Sociocultural Theory (SCT), namely Vygotsky's (1978) theory that language learning is a social process that depends on social relationships and resources. Socio-cultural theory of human learning describes learning as a social process and the origin of human intelligence in socio-cultural settings. Vygotsky’s theoretical framework revolves around the idea that social interaction has a fundamental role in developing cognition. Furthermore, SCT emphasizes how cultural tools influence cognitive processes and the use of language; in this research, the norms and behaviors of digital communication. This theoretical framework presents a systematic approach understanding how interpersonal relationships on social media influence language acquisition and language practice among ESL learners in Mianwali, enabling the study to view language development not as an isolated process, but as one deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts. The study examines how social media norms and behaviors of digital natives (the requirement to be brief, witty, or informal) contribute to the cognitive enhancement of the learners’ writing skills.

Methodology

This section of the research describes the methodology, techniques, and processes to accomplish the research objectives. For this study, a descriptive, mixed-methods research design was adopted, with a predominant emphasis on quantitative inquiry. Primarily, the descriptive approach is suitable for this research because the main goal is to describe the ongoing state of the phenomenon, namely, the writing patterns and habits of Gen Z learners, without manipulating the variable. In sociolinguistic research, the researcher looks towards characterizing what changes are adopted by young learners and how students understand these transformations in their writing proficiency. The quantitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of empirical data, whereas qualitative data present an in-depth understanding of the meanings and complete theme of the learners’ sociolinguistic consciousness. The multiple data sources enhance the validity of findings, ensuring that empirical trends are supported by students’ self-experiences.

The population of this research is the undergraduate students at the University of Mianwali. The targeted sample of this questionnaire was between 100 and 150 undergraduate students. The purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, is implemented. Data was collected through the questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. To cross-reference the self-reported survey data with actual linguistic output, a corpus of 33 handwritten academic essays was also collected from a subset of the BS English respondents. The essays were collected in-person under controlled classroom conditions. Students were provided with standard academic prompts (e.g., Pollution, Unemployment, National Unity) and were asked to self-report their most frequently used social media platform at the top of the page. Collecting handwritten data was a deliberate methodological choice to eliminate the interference of digital mediation tools (like autocorrect) and capture the students' true internalized cognitive orthography and syntax. The quantitative data were analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 26.

Data Analysis

This section presents the statistical analysis of the survey questionnaire administered to 111 Generation Z English Language Learners (ELLs) at the University of Mianwali. Employing a descriptive, mixed-methods design with a quantitative emphasis, this analysis foregrounds the frequency distributions and percentage responses for each item, providing a comprehensive snapshot of participants' self-reported behaviors, perceptions, and competencies. The analysis proceeds from demographic profiling to core thematic domains, culminating in a summary of key patterns that will be further illuminated through corpus analysis.

The demographic composition of the sample (N=111) reveals a predominantly female cohort of undergraduate and graduate students who demonstrate varying levels of English proficiency and intensive social media engagement. Table 1 presents the complete demographic breakdown, establishing the contextual foundation for understanding how social media usage patterns intersect with academic writing development among this specific population.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=111)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	16-19 years	15	13.5
	20-22 years	34	30.6
	23-25 years	34	30.6
	26-28 years	28	25.2
Gender	Female	77	69.4
	Male	34	30.6
Academic Qualification	BS (Hons)/Undergraduate	64	57.7
	M.Phil.	35	31.5
	Other	12	10.8
English Writing Proficiency	Advanced	27	24.3
	Intermediate	61	55.0
	Beginner	23	20.7
Daily Social Media Usage	Less than 1 hour	11	9.9
	1-3 hours	47	42.3

3-5 hours	39	35.1
More than 5 hours	14	12.6

The age distribution demonstrates that the majority of participants (61.2%) fall within the 20-25 year range, aligning with the Generation Z definitional span (born 1997-2010) and representing the core university-going demographic. The significant female representation (69.4%) reflects broader trends observed in Pakistani higher education enrollment patterns, particularly in humanities and social science disciplines where language studies are concentrated. Critically, self-assessed English writing proficiency reveals a predominantly intermediate-level population (55.0%), with advanced writers comprising 24.3% and beginners accounting for 20.7%. Regarding social media engagement, the data reveals near-universal intensive usage: 89.0% of participants report spending 1-5 hours daily on platforms, with 12.6% exceeding five hours. Only 9.9% report usage under one hour, suggesting social media has become an unavoidable linguistic environment for this cohort. Platform preferences indicate WhatsApp dominates as the primary textual medium (70.6% of cases), followed by Instagram (31.2%) and Facebook (14.7%), reflecting the shift toward mobile-first, visually-oriented communication documented by Saha (2019).

Table 2

Social Media Platform Usage Patterns

Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage of Cases	Percentage of Responses
WhatsApp	77	70.6%	56.2%
Instagram	34	31.2%	24.8%
Facebook	16	14.7%	11.7%
TikTok	7	6.4%	5.1%
Twitter (X)	3	2.8%	2.2%
Total Responses	137	125.7%	100.0%

The language format students employ on social media platforms provides fundamental insight into emerging sociolinguistic trends. Question 3 asked participants to identify their predominant language format when posting or chatting, revealing significant divergence from standard English conventions. As Table 3 demonstrates, only 22.5% of respondents report using standard English consistently, while the overwhelming majority (77.5%) adopt hybrid or non-standard forms.

Table 3

Predominant Language Format on Social Media

Language Format	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Mixed/Code-switching (English + Urdu)	47	42.3
Roman Urdu (Urdu in English script)	29	26.1
Standard English (proper grammar/spelling)	25	22.5
“Net-speak” English (e.g., “u r”, “plz”, “gr8”)	10	9.0
Total	111	100.0

This distribution validates critical observations in Pakistani sociolinguistic literature. Code-switching and mixing, identified by Dilshad (2006) and Hussain, Rubab, and Tufail (2019) as prevalent in Pakistani digital discourse, emerge as the dominant practice (42.3%). The substantial use of Roman Urdu (26.1%) and “net-speak” English (9.0%) further illustrates the “computer-mediated discourse” framework proposed by Herring (2013), wherein technological constraints and platform conventions reshape orthographic norms.

The role of social media in vocabulary expansion represents a primary research concern, with three survey items directly addressing this phenomenon. The findings reveal a complex picture of incidental learning, contextual comprehension, and transfer confusion that characterizes digital language exposure.

Table 4

Vocabulary Acquisition Through Social Media

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Social media has helped me learn new English words used in academic assignments.	31.5	47.7	16.2	4.5	0.0
I find it easier to understand new vocabulary when I see it used in social media contexts than textbooks.	28.8	56.8	11.7	2.7	0.0
I often check the meaning of English words I see on social media.	29.7	45.9	18.9	5.4	0.0

The data indicates robust vocabulary development: 79.2% of participants agree or strongly agree that social media facilitates acquisition of new English words applicable to academic work. However, the contextual learning advantage reported is particularly striking: 85.6% find social media contexts more effective for vocabulary comprehension than traditional textbooks. This preference aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept, where authentic, meaningful interaction accelerates learning beyond decontextualized instruction. Nevertheless, the findings reveal a critical tension: while 75.6% actively consult dictionaries or translation tools for social media vocabulary, the informality of this digital lexicon creates transfer difficulties. This proactive meaning-checking behavior indicates metalinguistic awareness, yet simultaneously suggests students recognize the lexical register gap between digital and academic domains.

Three items assessed perceived negative impacts of social media on grammatical competence and writing mechanics, revealing significant self-reported deterioration in formal accuracy. These findings directly address concerns raised in the literature regarding the “language deterioration” hypothesis.

Table 5

Grammar and Mechanical Accuracy Impacts

Survey Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Capitalization neglect	16 (14.4%)	41 (36.9%)	11 (9.9%)	26 (23.4%)	17 (15.3%)
Auto-correct dependency	21 (18.9%)	35 (31.5%)	20 (18.0%)	25 (22.5%)	10 (9.0%)
Grammar suffering	14 (12.6%)	31 (27.9%)	26 (23.4%)	32 (28.8%)	8 (7.2%)

Over half of respondents (51.3%) acknowledge neglecting capitalization rules during digital communication, with 36.9% explicitly agreeing and 14.4% strongly agreeing. Auto-

correct dependency presents an equally pressing concern: 50.4% of students believe predictive technology has weakened their autonomous spelling skills. This technological mediation creates what could be termed “digital orthographic atrophy,” where cognitive spelling processes are outsourced to algorithms. Most critically, 40.5% report that their formal university grammar has directly suffered from casual online writing habits, while 28.8% disagree, suggesting a polarized experience. The neutral response rate of 23.4% indicates substantial uncertainty, possibly reflecting students’ difficulty in accurately diagnosing causal relationships between digital habits and academic performance.

Two survey items examined students’ metalinguistic awareness and code-switching practices, central concerns for sociolinguistic analysis in Pakistan’s multilingual context.

Table 6

Register Awareness and Code-Switching Practices

Survey Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Conscious register switching	25 (22.5%)	58 (52.3%)	20 (18.0%)	7 (6.3%)	1 (0.9%)
Code-switching frequency	14 (12.6%)	53 (47.7%)	26 (23.4%)	12 (10.8%)	6 (5.4%)

Strikingly, 74.8% of participants report conscious register switching between digital and academic contexts, demonstrating robust metalinguistic awareness. This finding partially mitigates concerns about uncontrolled register contamination, suggesting that many students actively modulate their linguistic choices based on context. However, the ubiquity of code-switching presents complications: 60.3% acknowledge frequently mixing English and Urdu in online writing. This practice, while facilitating communication and identity expression within “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2004), may impede development of monolingual English academic competence.

Three items assessed the integration of emergent digital conventions, emojis, abbreviations, and preference for brevity, into students’ writing repertoires. These features represent the “novel format for written representation” that Saha (2019) identified as characteristic of social media discourse.

Table 7

Digital Communication Convention Adoption

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
I use emojis to replace words or express feelings I cannot easily describe in English	21.6	40.5	20.7	12.6	4.5
I often use abbreviations (e.g., bcuz, btw, idc) in personal notes or rough drafts	8.1	32.4	14.4	30.6	14.4
I find short-form content (tweets, captions) more engaging than long academic texts	18.0	47.7	25.2	7.2	1.8

Emoji usage is widespread, with 62.1% employing pictorial symbols to supplement or replace lexical items. Abbreviation usage shows more restraint: 40.5% incorporate “textisms” into personal notes, but substantial disagreement (45.0% combined disagree/strongly disagree) suggests resistance to transferring these forms to academic-adjacent writing. The overwhelming preference for short-form content (65.7% agreement) reflects what Zhou (2021) described as social media’s transformation of communication styles toward “conciseness and explicitness.”

Four items explored the motivational, confidence-related, and social dimensions of social media language learning, crucial elements within Vygotsky’s (1978) framework emphasizing social interaction’s fundamental role in cognitive development.

Table 8

Affective and Social Learning Outcomes

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
I feel less anxious about making grammar mistakes on social media than in the classroom.	18.0	42.3	22.5	11.7	5.4
Interacting with peers in English on social media has increased my confidence to write in exams.	14.4	52.3	24.3	7.2	1.8
Receiving positive comments or likes motivates me to write more in English.	27.0	46.8	24.3	1.8	0.0
I learn from the writing mistakes or corrections of others in comment sections.	18.0	52.3	23.4	5.4	0.9

Reduced anxiety characterizes the digital learning environment, with 60.3% reporting lower stress when writing on social media compared to formal classroom settings. Peer interaction emerges as a powerful confidence-building mechanism: 66.7% report increased exam-writing confidence through English-language social media engagement. The social approval dimension is equally potent: 73.8% acknowledge that likes and positive comments motivate increased English writing output, demonstrating the “scaffolding” function of social reinforcement hypothesized in SCT. Most significantly, 70.3% actively learn from observing peer errors and corrections in comment sections, directly manifesting Vygotsky’s concept of learning through interaction with “more knowledgeable others” (MKOs).

To bridge the gap between students’ self-reported perceptions of their writing skills and their actual linguistic output, a corpus-based analysis of handwritten academic essays was conducted. This section evaluates 33 essays written by a subset of the original survey respondents, comprising Gen Z undergraduate BS English students from various semesters at the University of Mianwali. The primary objective of this corpus analysis is to empirically investigate the “leakage” of digital registers into formal academic prose. By analyzing handwritten texts, this study isolates cognitive and sociolinguistic internalization from immediate technological mediation (such as autocorrect or predictive text). A detailed sociolinguistic coding of the 33 essays identified recurrent deviations from Standard English conventions. These deviations were categorized into four primary domains: Social Media

Abbreviations/Slang, Spelling Mistakes, Grammar Mistakes, and Inconsistent Punctuation/Digital Formatting. Table 9 summarizes the macro-level error frequencies observed across the corpus.

Table 9

Frequency of Social Media-Induced Linguistic Errors in Essay Corpus (N=33)

Linguistic/Stylistic Category	Frequency of Occurrence (Essays)	Percentage (%)	Key Examples from Corpus
Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	18	54.5%	“Science play,” “people is,” “unemployment increase”
Article Omission/Misuse	15	45.4%	“In field of medicine,” “due to lack of knowledge”
Digital Formatting Intrusions	10	30.3%	=>, :-, =, bulleted infographics in prose
Effects/Affects Confusion	8	24.2%	“Pollution effects our environment,” “different affects”
Orthographic Atrophy (Spelling)	5	15.1%	“now a days,” “thankyou”
Informal Syntactic Connectors	4	12.1%	“&” instead of “and” in titles/text

The quantitative distribution reveals that syntactical fragmentation (subject-verb disagreement and article omission) is the most pervasive issue, followed closely by the intrusion of digital formatting and deep-rooted orthographic errors. The corpus provides stark evidence of “orthographic atrophy”, the erosion of standard spelling conventions due to prolonged exposure to unedited, user-generated digital text. Because these essays were handwritten, the misspellings cannot be attributed to typographical errors or smartphone keyboard constraints; rather, they represent internalized cognitive misrepresentations of English vocabulary. The most prominent example across the corpus is the conflation of “effects” (noun) and “affects” (verb), which appeared in nearly a quarter of the essays (N=8). Another striking orthographic artifact of social media is the phrase “now a days,” which appeared in 5 separate essays. These morphological corruptions, splitting “nowadays” and merging “thank you”, are textbook examples of Herring’s (2013) “computer-mediated discourse.”

The syntactic structure of the essays heavily mirrors the constraints of the digital “attention economy,” where content is optimized for scrolling, skimming, and immediate consumption. Academic writing traditionally demands hypotactic structures, complex sentences with subordinate clauses that develop sustained arguments. In contrast, the essay corpus is dominated by paratactic, highly fragmented sentence structures characteristic of social media captions and tweets. Furthermore, grammatical subjects and verbs frequently disagree, particularly when dealing with collective nouns. Article omission is also rampant.

Perhaps the most fascinating finding in the corpus is the physical reproduction of digital formatting conventions in handwritten, ink-on-paper essays. Students actively utilized symbols, markers, and spatial arrangements that do not exist in formal academic writing but are foundational to digital User Interface (UI) design.

Table 10

Digital Formatting Conventions Identified in Handwritten Essays

Digital Convention	Handwritten Application	Source Platform / Digital Context
The Colon-Dash (: -)	“Topic:- Unemployment its causes” (Essay 18) “=> Platform: Instagram”	WhatsApp shared notes, Facebook informal announcements
The Bullet Arrow (=>)	(Essay 33) “=> (Whatsapp) - I use this platform” (Essay 30)	Text-messaging bullet points, Discord, gaming chats
Title Decorators (= Title =)	“= The Role of Science in Daily Life =” (Essay 10)	Discord channel naming conventions, WhatsApp status stylings
Trailing Chat Ellipsis (- - -)	“But unfortunately - - - - .” (Essay 13)	WhatsApp/Messenger indicating a trailing thought or dramatic pause
The Ampersand (&)	“Pollution & its Harmful Effects” (Essay 23)	Character-saving text shorthand, YouTube video titles

The use of the => symbol by Student Y (Essay 30) and Student BB (Essay 33) is a direct import from digital keyboards. On a smartphone, users often combine an equals sign and a greater-than sign to create an arrow for lists because standard bullet points require navigating to a secondary keyboard menu. Seeing a student physically draw an “equals-greater-than” sign on paper to denote a new paragraph is profound evidence of how deeply digital interfaces have colonized their cognitive mapping of written structure. Similarly, the “colon-dash” (: -) used by Student Q (Essay 18) for section headings (“Causes:-”, “Solution:-”) is a relic of informal internet typography often used in forwarded WhatsApp messages in Pakistan. The appearance of these symbols confirms that Generation Z ELLs do not segregate their digital literacies from their academic literacies. To them, the formatting that organizes a viral WhatsApp forward is deemed perfectly acceptable for organizing a university essay.

The self-reported platform data provided a unique opportunity to cross-reference writing styles with specific social media architectures. The corpus reveals that students do not just absorb general “internet slang”; their writing physically morphs to replicate the architectural affordances of their preferred platforms. Students who reported using TikTok and Instagram predominantly produced essays that abandoned narrative paragraph structures in favor of fragmented, bulleted lists. This layout mirrors the “carousel” or “infographic” post format highly popularized on Instagram, where complex topics are distilled into swipeable, discrete slides containing 1-2 sentences.

WhatsApp’s influence is characterized by a highly conversational tone, the use of religious/emotional framing, and the verbatim sharing of texts. Crucially, WhatsApp’s affordance for instantaneous information sharing also facilitates new avenues for academic dishonesty. A comparative analysis of Essay 10 (Student I) and Essay 32 (Student AA) reveals that they are virtually identical. Both essays use the exact same Discord/WhatsApp-style title decorator (“= The Role of Science in Daily Life =”), the same numbered subheadings, and identical grammatical errors (“It decrease distance, increase fast communication”). Given that these were handwritten in a physical setting, this strongly suggests that a pre-written text was circulated via a WhatsApp class group, which multiple students then memorized and reproduced.

In stark contrast to the fragmentation of TikTok and Instagram users, students who cited YouTube as their primary platform produced the most academically sophisticated essays in the corpus. YouTube’s affordance for long-form, video-essay content exposes users to structured argumentation, advanced vocabulary, and coherent transitions. An unexpected finding was the classification of ChatGPT as a “social media platform” by multiple students. This categorization indicates a paradigm shift in how Gen Z ELLs interact with technology. AI

language models are no longer viewed simply as software tools, but as conversational agents, a form of “social” interaction where the MKO (More Knowledgeable Other) is an algorithm. However, despite self-reporting the use of ChatGPT, these students’ handwritten essays still contained significant spelling and grammatical errors (e.g., Student Z’s inconsistent capitalization of “Chat gpt” and misspelling of “fierstly”).

Applying Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory to this corpus analysis reveals a profound reality regarding modern ESL acquisition. Vygotsky posited that human cognition is mediated by the “cultural tools” available within a society. For Generation Z in Mianwali, social media platforms are the dominant cultural tools. The handwritten essays prove that social media does not merely influence what students write on the internet; it fundamentally rewires how they conceptualize written language in the physical world. The intrusion of the => symbol, the fragmentation of paragraphs into swipeable bullet points, and the normalization of “effects/affects” errors demonstrate that the visual interface of the smartphone has become the cognitive schema through which these students process the English language.

Conclusion

This exploratory sociolinguistic study has illuminated the complex, contradictory, and contextually situated relationship between social media engagement and English writing development among Generation Z learners at the University of Mianwali. The evidence confirms that digital platforms function as double-edged swords: they serve as vibrant “linguistic playgrounds” that expand vocabulary, reduce anxiety, and provide unprecedented access to authentic language use and peer scaffolding, while simultaneously normalizing orthographic laxity, grammatical informality, and register hybridity that complicate academic literacy development. The findings illuminate both the affordances and constraints of digital communication environments, demonstrating that while social media serves as a dynamic “linguistic playground” expanding lexical repertoires and reducing language anxiety, it simultaneously precipitates forms of “orthographic atrophy” and register instability that complicate academic literacy development.

The students themselves are not passive victims of digital influence but active “language brokers” who navigate between multiple linguistic economies with varying degrees of success. While they demonstrate commendable metalinguistic awareness and conscious register-switching intentions, the intensity and affective rewards of digital communication create persistent “leakage” between informal and formal registers. The study confirms that for this generation, social media is not merely a supplementary learning tool but a primary linguistic ecosystem that continuously interacts with formal education, producing hybrid competencies that defy simple evaluative categorization. Ultimately, the future of English language education in contexts like Mianwali lies not in resisting the digital tide but in strategically bridging the gap between students’ vibrant digital literacies and the requirements of academic discourse.

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