THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON NIGERIAN ENGLISH: A STUDY OF YEAR TWO STUDENTS OF DEPARTMENTS OF ECONOMICS, AKWA IBOM STATE UNIVERSITY

[1]Job, Ndikponke Umo & [2]Edem, Richard Enomfon

[1]Department of English
Akwa Ibom State University
ndikponkej@gmail.com
+2349153143808

[2]Department of Performing Arts
Akwa Ibom State University
richardedem188@gmail.com
+2347067862074

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60787/aasd.vol4no1.118

Abstract

This study examines the impact of social media on Nigerian English among Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University. It investigates how contemporary digital communication influences students' use of Nigerian English and identifies the linguistic features commonly associated with their social-media interactions. The study is situated within the context of Nigerian English as a dynamic and localized variety shaped by multilingualism, cultural interaction, and continuous linguistic innovation. It focuses particularly on lexical innovation, abbreviations, slang, unconventional spelling, grammatical and syntactic variation, code-switching, code-mixing, and the influence of Nigerian Pidgin. The study adopts a qualitative research design, with data obtained from purposively selected social-media interactions involving Year Two Economics students on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and Instagram. Relevant scholarly works on Nigerian English, sociolinguistics, and digital communication were also consulted. The collected data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis and interpreted using Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory. Findings reveal that social media provides students with an informal environment that encourages linguistic creativity, brevity, experimentation, and the rapid circulation of localized expressions. Students employ different linguistic forms to express humour, familiarity, solidarity, identity, emphasis, and other communicative purposes. The study further establishes that social media has a stronger immediate influence on students' informal English than on their formal academic English, although occasional transfer of digital forms into other contexts may occur. The study concludes that social media should not be regarded solely as a threat to Standard English but as an important contemporary environment contributing to the continuing development and variation of Nigerian English. It recommends increased awareness among students of appropriate language use across formal and informal contexts.

Keywords: Social Media, Multilingualism, Code-mixing, Code-switching, Nigerian English, Linguistic

Innovations

Introduction

Language according to Edem (2005:2) "is a major instrument of communication through which individuals express their thoughts, feelings, experiences and social identities. It is also a dynamic social phenomenon that changes according to the needs, experiences and communicative practices of its users". English, in particular, has developed into a global language with numerous localized varieties across different societies. In Nigeria, English has acquired distinctive linguistic features as a result of prolonged contact with indigenous Nigerian languages and the social, cultural and historical experiences of Nigerians. Consequently, the English used in Nigeria cannot always be described solely in terms of British or American English, as Nigerian users have developed patterns of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics and usage that distinguish Nigerian English as a recognizable variety of English (Bamiro, 1991, Edem, 2018, Edem and Effiong, 2023). Recent scholarships continue to treat Nigerian English as an important area of World Englishes reflecting the development of localized forms of English within the Nigerian multilingual environment (Jowitt, 1991).

Nigerian English has developed within a multilingual and multicultural environment in which English exists alongside numerous indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin. The interaction between English and indigenous languages has contributed to the emergence of expressions and linguistic structures that may differ from those found in other varieties of English. Bamiro (1991), for example, examines Nigerian English as a polylectal phenomenon and identifies variation across basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal forms. This variation demonstrates that English use in Nigeria is influenced by factors such as education, social background, communicative situation and degree of formality. This is why Edem 2018: 86-87) observes that "Nigerian English therefore represents more than the transfer of British English into the Nigerian environment; it reflects the processes of adaptation, innovation and localization that occur when a language is used by a multilingual population".

The rapid development of information and communication technology has introduced another important dimension to the study of Nigerian English. Social media platforms have become prominent spaces for interpersonal communication, information sharing, entertainment, education and social interaction. University students, in particular, frequently use digital communication for conversations with friends, classmates, course groups and wider online communities. Unlike formal academic writing, social media communication generally permits greater linguistic flexibility. Users may employ abbreviations, shortened spellings, slang, emojis, code-switching, Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous-language expressions and innovative vocabulary to communicate quickly and expressively. These practices create a form of digital discourse in which conventional linguistic norms frequently interact with informal and innovative forms of language.

The relationship between social media and language change has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Crystal (2011) observes that internet communication has produced distinctive forms of language use in which written communication may adopt characteristics associated with speech, while users also develop new conventions suited to digital interaction. Such communication is often characterized by brevity, informality, creativity and rapid linguistic innovation. In the Nigerian context, these tendencies are particularly significant because social

media provides a space where English comes into continuous contact with Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages. Amadi, Nwachukwu and Samuel (2023), for instance, observe that social media has contributed to new forms of English usage in Nigeria, with Nigerian languages influencing expressions found on platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter. Their study emphasizes the emergence of localized and innovative forms of English as young users adapt the language to their communicative needs.

Edem (2015) addresses in mother tongue interference in the pronunciation of English among Ibibio students in Uyo urban, assessing the problems and prospects while it concludes that the local environment had a strong impact on the performance if the English language users in Nigeria to a large extent. This work differs with the present study which is focused on the impact of social media and language use.

Social media can therefore be regarded as an important environment for observing contemporary patterns of Nigerian English. Expressions that may initially appear as informal innovations can spread rapidly when users reproduce them across digital networks. A recent study of social-media interaction among students and lecturers found the use of acronyms, abbreviations, fragmented sentences, new terms and non-conventional spelling patterns, concluding that social media can facilitate language variation and change (Onwudinjo & Udoye, 2025). This, as Edem (2016) observes, is important, because, repeated exposure to such linguistic forms may influence how young people understand, produce and evaluate English in both online and offline contexts.

The influence of social media on Nigerian English can be observed at different linguistic level as Edem and Effiong (2023) in their work on the Social Media in Nigeria observes that the lexical level, users create or popularize new words, slang and expressions. Some expressions may acquire meanings that differ from their traditional dictionary meanings, while others emerge through the adaptation of indigenous expressions into English. According to the source, the grammatical and syntactic levels, users may produce structures influenced by Nigerian Pidgin or indigenous languages. At the orthographic level, social-media users frequently employ shortened forms, unconventional spellings and letter substitutions. For example, forms such as “pls” for “please,” “u” for “you,” and “bcos” for “because” demonstrate the tendency toward linguistic economy in digital communication.

The present study agrees with Edem and Effiong (2023) but argues that such forms are generally associated with informal communications; their repeated use raises questions about the relationship between digital language practices and users’ broader English-language habits. Another important feature of Nigerian social-media communication is code-switching and code-mixing. Most Nigerian students frequently move between English, Pidgin English and indigenous languages depending on their communicative purpose, audience and social relationship. This practice can serve several functions, including expressing humour, solidarity, intimacy, identity and cultural belonging. For instance, a student may combine English with Pidgin English in an informal WhatsApp conversation because the mixed expression conveys a social meaning that may not be captured equally effectively in Standard English. Such linguistic practices demonstrate that language choice is influenced not only by grammatical knowledge but also by social context and communicative intention.

The youth constitute an especially important group in studies of social-media language because

they are among the most active participants in contemporary digital communication. University students frequently move between different linguistic environments, including classrooms, academic writing, face-to-face conversations and social-media interactions. This ability to shift between formal and informal registers makes university students suitable subjects for examining the relationship between social media and language variation. Agunlejika (2025) conducted study on Social Media Language and Use of English Language Among Undergraduates of Obafemi Awolowo University, similarly the study identifies social media as an important environment for examining the linguistic resources available to young Nigerians, including creative spellings, emojis and code-mixing.

The academic environment is particularly relevant because university students are expected to demonstrate competence in formal English for academic purposes. At the same time, they participate extensively in informal digital communication where different linguistic conventions are acceptable. This situation raises an important question concerning whether social-media language remains restricted to informal online interaction or whether some of its features influence students' formal language use. The issue does not necessarily imply that social media destroys students' knowledge of Standard English. Rather, it calls for an examination of how students manage different linguistic varieties and registers across different communicative situations. The distinction between formal and informal language use is therefore central to understanding the impact of social media on Nigerian English.

The Departments of Economics at Akwa Ibom State University provide a useful context for examining this phenomenon. Year Two students are exposed to academic communication through lectures, textbooks, assignments, examinations and other formal university activities. At the same time, they participate in social-media interactions with classmates, friends and other members of their communities. Their online communication therefore provides an opportunity to examine how Nigerian English is used, adapted and transformed within a specific student population. Focusing on Year Two students also allows the study to investigate language practices among students who have already acquired substantial experience with University-level academic English while remaining active participants in informal digital communication.

The impact of social media on Nigerian English is not necessarily entirely negative or positive. On one hand, social media as Edem and Effiong (2023) puts it, encourages linguistic creativity, increases opportunities for communication and provides users with spaces for experimenting with new vocabulary and expressions. It may also strengthen the visibility of Nigerian linguistic identities by allowing local expressions and Nigerian English forms to circulate widely. On the other hand, frequent exposure to informal spellings, abbreviations and non-standard structures may create difficulties when students are required to distinguish between informal digital communication and formal academic English. A recent Nigerian studies on social-media language similarly reports the widespread use of abbreviations, new terms, fragmented sentences and unconventional spellings in digital interactions, illustrating the extent to which online communication can become a site of linguistic variation (Onwudinjo & Udoye, 2025, Edem and Effiong, 2023).

It is therefore necessary to investigate social media not simply as a technological development but as a significant sociolinguistic environment in which language is continuously being negotiated. Nigerian English itself has developed through contact, variation and adaptation, and

social media provides another avenue through which these processes can occur. The speed at which expressions are created, shared and reproduced online means that linguistic innovations can move rapidly among groups of young users. The study of such practices can consequently contribute to a better understanding of contemporary Nigerian English and the ways in which younger speakers participate in its continuing development.

Against this background, this study examines the impact of social media on Nigerian English among Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University. The study focuses on the linguistic forms commonly used by the students on social-media platforms and examines how these forms relate to Nigerian English. Particular attention is given to vocabulary, spelling, grammar, code-switching, slang, abbreviations and other linguistic innovations associated with digital communication. The study also considers the possible influence of these practices on students' formal and informal English use. By concentrating on a specific group of university students, the study seeks to provide a context-based understanding of the relationship between social media and the continuing evolution of Nigerian English.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of social media on Nigerian English among Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University.

The objectives are to:

1. examine the influence of social media on the use of Nigerian English among Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University;

2. identify the common Nigerian English expressions used by the students in social-media communication;

3. examine the lexical, grammatical and syntactic features associated with the students' social-media language; and

4. assess the extent to which social-media language influences the students' formal and informal use of Nigerian English.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation for examining the impact of social media on Nigerian English among Year Two Students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University. Since the study is concerned with language variation, linguistic innovation, social interaction and the influence of digital communication on students' English usage, it adopts two complementary sociolinguistic theories: **Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory** and **Communication Accommodation Theory.** Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory provides the major framework for examining how Nigerian English varies according to social and communicative contexts, while Communication Accommodation Theory explains how students modify their language choices in response to the people with whom they communicate.

Together, the theories provide an appropriate basis for analysing the linguistic forms found in students' social-media communication.

Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory

Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory is strongly associated with the work of William Labov, particularly his studies of language variation and change. The central assumption of the theory is that language is inherently variable and that linguistic variation is not done randomly. Instead, different linguistic forms are systematically associated with social, stylistic and contextual factors. Variationist sociolinguistics therefore examines language as it is actually used by members of a speech community rather than treating a language as a completely uniform system. Contemporary descriptions of the variationist approach similarly emphasize the relationship between linguistic variation and social context, showing that alternative forms may be conditioned by both linguistic and social factors (Anderson et al., 2024, Edem, 2005).

Labov's contribution is particularly important to the study of Nigerian English because Nigerian English contains considerable variation in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and usage. Such variation is influenced by factors including region, ethnicity, social class, education and the linguistic environment of speakers. Recent research applying Labov's variationist theory to Nigerian English demonstrates that linguistic choices can function as markers of social identity and social positioning. Edem (2015) and Ugwu (2025), for example, found that regional, ethnic and social-class factors contribute to lexical, syntactic and phonological variation in Nigerian English. These works further argue that Nigerian English should be understood as an ordered linguistic variety shaped by multilingualism, culture and social structure rather than simply as an imperfect version of Standard English.

The relevance of Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory to the present study is evident in the first objective, which seeks to examine the influence of social media on the use of Nigerian English among Year Two Economics Students. Social media provides a distinctive communicative environment in which students encounter and reproduce different linguistic forms. A student may use formal English in an academic assignment but employ abbreviations, slang, Nigerian Pidgin, code-mixed expressions or unconventional spellings in a WhatsApp conversation. The theory allows such differences to be interpreted as systematic variation associated with communicative context rather than simply as linguistic errors.

The theory is also relevant to the second objective, which focuses on identifying common Nigerian English expressions used by the students on social media. According to Edem (2016 and 2018), Nigerian English expressions may be influenced by indigenous languages, Nigerian Pidgin, youth culture and contemporary digital trends. Social-media communication creates opportunities for such expressions to circulate rapidly among groups of young users. Onwudinjo and Udoye (2025), in a study of WhatsApp interactions involving students and lecturers, identified acronyms, abbreviations, fragmented sentences, new terms and non-conventional spelling patterns. Their findings indicate that social media can facilitate language variation and potentially contribute to language change.

Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory further supports the third objective, which examines lexical, grammatical and syntactic features associated with students' social-media language. The theory provides a basis for comparing alternative forms and determining how their occurrence relates to the informal digital context. For instance, shortened forms such as "pls" for "please,"

expressions influenced by Pidgin English, and other non-standard constructions can be examined as linguistic variants whose occurrence may be related to the communicative environment. The theory therefore makes it possible to investigate not merely what forms students use, but why particular forms occur in particular contexts.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was developed principally from the work of Howard Giles and his associates. The theory explains how speakers adjust their communicative behaviour in response to their interactional partners. Such adjustments may involve convergence, divergence or maintenance. **Convergence** occurs when speakers modify their language to become more similar to their interlocutors, while **divergence** involves emphasizing linguistic differences. Communication accommodation is therefore connected with social identity, interpersonal relationships and the desire to establish or maintain social distance or solidarity.

This theory is particularly relevant to social-media communication because students interact online with people from different linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds. A Year Two Economics student communicating with a lecturer may use relatively formal English, whereas the same student may use Nigerian Pidgin, slang, abbreviations or a mixture of English and indigenous-language expressions when communicating with close friends. Such differences can be interpreted through Communication Accommodation Theory as adjustments made in response to the audience and communicative relationship.

CAT is particularly useful for understanding the fourth objective of this study, which assesses the extent to which social-media language influences students' formal and informal use of Nigerian English. Social media provides students with repeated opportunities to interact using informal linguistic forms. Through interaction with peers, students may adopt expressions that are common within their social networks. The repeated accommodation of peers' linguistic choices may contribute to the spread of particular Nigerian English expressions, abbreviations, slang and code-mixed forms.

The theory also helps explain the role of identity in students' language choices. Students may deliberately use Nigerian English or Nigerian Pidgin expressions to signal familiarity, solidarity and membership of a particular social group. Conversely, they may shift towards more formal English when communicating in academic contexts. Thus, language choice on social media is not simply a matter of linguistic competence; it can also represent a conscious or unconscious response to audience, relationship and social identity.

Relevance of the Theoretical Framework to the Study

The combination of Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory provides a suitable framework for the present study. Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory explains *what linguistic variations occur and how they are associated with social and communicative contexts*, while Communication Accommodation Theory helps explain *why students may adopt, maintain or modify particular linguistic forms when interacting with different audiences*.

The two theories consequently correspond closely with the objectives of the study. Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory provides the basis for identifying Nigerian English expressions and

analysing lexical, grammatical and syntactic variation, while Communication Accommodation Theory explains students' adaptation of their language to peers and other communication partners. The framework therefore recognizes social media as an important environment for linguistic interaction, variation and innovation.

In the context of this study, the theories do not assume that every informal social-media form represents permanent language change. Rather, they provide tools for examining variation and determining how frequently particular forms occur, the contexts in which they are used, and the social purposes they serve. This distinction is important because social-media language may remain restricted to informal digital interaction, or some forms may spread beyond online communication into everyday speech and writing. Recent Nigerian research confirms the usefulness of this perspective by showing that social-media interactions among students contain substantial variation in spelling, vocabulary and sentence structure.

Therefore, the theoretical framework establishes that Nigerian English is a dynamic variety capable of adapting to new communicative environments. Social media provides one such environment, allowing students to experiment with vocabulary, spelling, grammar, code-switching and other linguistic resources. Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory together provide an appropriate analytical lens for investigating these developments among Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design because it focuses on understanding how social media influences the use of Nigerian English among Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University. The qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth examination of language use, expressions, and communication patterns in their natural context.

The data for the study were obtained from purposively selected social media interactions on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram involving Year Two Economics students. Additional information was gathered from relevant books, journal articles, and other scholarly sources on Nigerian English, sociolinguistics, and digital communication.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Linguistic features such as vocabulary, abbreviations, slang, code-switching, spelling variations, and grammatical patterns were identified, categorized, and interpreted in relation to the objectives of the study. The analysis was guided by the principles of Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory, enabling the researcher to explain how social media contributes to language variation and influences the use of Nigerian English among the selected students.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were analysed by examining selected social-media expressions associated with the communication practices of Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University. The analysis focused on lexical innovation, abbreviations, Nigerian English expressions, code-switching, unconventional spelling and grammatical patterns. The analysis shows that social media provides students with an informal environment in which they frequently adapt English to suit their communicative purposes.

Common Linguistic Features Found in Social-Media Communication

S/N	Linguistic Feature	Examples	Linguistic Effect
1	Abbreviations	“pls”, “u”, “btw”, “idk”	Promotes brevity and speed
2	Nigerian English expressions	“I will flash you”, “I am coming”	Reflects localized English usage
3	Nigerian Pidgin	“You no dey hear”, “I dey come”	Expresses familiarity and solidarity
4	Code-switching	“I’m coming, abi?”	Expresses identity and emphasis
5	Slang	“guy”, “vibe”, “flex”	Creates informality and group identity
6	Unconventional spelling	“na”, “dey”, “wat”, “dis”	Reflects informal digital writing
7	Emojis and symbols	😂, ❤️ , 🔥	Reinforces emotion and intended meaning

The examples indicate that students employ a mixture of Standard English, Nigerian English, Pidgin English and digitally innovative forms. The use of such forms are largely associated with informality, speed, humour, solidarity and group identity. This supports the variationist perspective that language users select different linguistic forms according to social and communicative contexts.

Lexical Influence of Social Media

Social media contributes to lexical innovation by exposing students to new words, expressions and meanings. Words such as “viral”, “vibe”, “flex”, “ghost”, “follow”, “post” and “trend” may acquire meanings that are particularly prominent in digital communication. Nigerian users also adapt English expressions to local cultural contexts. Consequently, social media functions as an environment where students encounter reproduce and popularise new lexical forms.

The findings are consistent with Crystal's (2011) observation that internet communication encourages linguistic creativity and the development of new conventions. They also agree with studies of Nigerian social media which identify new terms, abbreviations and localized expressions as important features of contemporary online communication.

Grammatical and Syntactic Variation

The analysis also reveals grammatical and syntactic variation in students' online communication. Informal messages may contain omitted subjects, shortened sentences, non-standard spellings and structures influenced by Pidgin English. For example, expressions such as *“I dey come”*, “*You no understand?*”, or “She don go” reflect structures associated with Pidgin English rather than Standard English. Such forms should be interpreted in relation to context rather than automatically regarded as evidence of poor English competence. Students are capable of shifting between different linguistic forms depending on the communicative situation. The use of informal structures on social media therefore illustrates linguistic variation and register differentiation.

Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

Code-switching and code-mixing are also prominent features of Nigerian students' social-media communication. Students may combine English with Pidgin English or indigenous-language expressions to communicate humour, emphasis, familiarity and cultural identity. An expression

such as "*You too dey worry, abi?,"* combines English-related vocabulary with Nigerian Pidgin and discourse features.
Communication Accommodation Theory helps explain this practice because students may adapt their language to the linguistic behaviour of their peers. The use of a shared linguistic form can establish solidarity and strengthen social relationships. Thus, code-switching on social media serves both communicative and social functions.

Influence on Formal and Informal English

The analysis suggests that social media has a stronger immediate influence on students' informal English than on their formal academic English. Students generally understand that academic assignments, examinations and official communication require more standardized forms of English. However, repeated exposure to abbreviations, unconventional spellings and informal expressions may encourage their occasional transfer into other forms of writing.

Therefore, the influence of social media should not necessarily be understood as a complete replacement of Standard English with informal digital language. Rather, it creates an additional linguistic register that students employ according to context. The ability to distinguish between these registers is important for effective academic communication.

Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that social media has contributed to noticeable variation in the English used by students. The major effects include lexical innovation, increased use of abbreviations, code-switching, Pidgin English influence, unconventional spelling and the development of informal expressions. These practices demonstrate the adaptability of Nigerian English to contemporary communication technologies. The findings support Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory because students use different linguistic forms according to audience, purpose and communicative setting. They also support Communication Accommodation Theory because students frequently adopt linguistic forms shared by their online peers as a means of establishing solidarity and social identity.

Overall, social media should be viewed as an important contemporary environment for the development and spread of Nigerian English. While some digital forms may conflict with formal academic conventions, others demonstrate linguistic creativity and contribute to the continuing evolution of English in Nigeria.

This study examined the impact of social media on Nigerian English among Year Two students of the Departments of Economics, Akwa Ibom State University. The study established that social media has become an important environment for contemporary language use, particularly among university students. Through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and other digital spaces, students interact regularly and employ different linguistic forms to express ideas, emotions, humour, identity and solidarity. The analysis revealed that social-media communication encourages the use of Nigerian English expressions, abbreviations, slang, unconventional spellings, code-switching, code-mixing and Pidgin English. These forms demonstrate the creativity and adaptability of students as they modify English to suit the speed, informality and social demands of digital communication. The findings also indicate that some words and expressions acquire new meanings or functions within online contexts.

The study further concludes that social media has a stronger influence on students' informal

language than on their formal academic English. Students generally distinguish between the language appropriate for social-media interaction and the language expected in academic writing. However, frequent exposure to informal digital forms may occasionally influence their spelling, vocabulary and sentence construction in other contexts. The findings are consistent with the assumptions of Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory, which recognizes language variation as a systematic feature of social communication. They also support Communication Accommodation Theory, as students often adapt their linguistic choices to those of their peers in order to establish familiarity, solidarity and social identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media should not be viewed solely as a threat to the standard use of English. Rather, it represents a new linguistic environment through which Nigerian English continues to develop and respond to changing patterns of communication. The study therefore recommends greater awareness among students and other language users of the distinction between informal digital language and formal academic English. Such awareness would enable students to benefit from the creativity of social-media communication while maintaining appropriate standards of English in academic and formal contexts.

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