A Study of the Impact of Social Media on ESL Undergraduate Students' Writing Skills

Rabiha Hamid

BS TESOL Research Scholar

Lahore College for Women University

baigrimsha555@gmail.com

Dr Sana Baig

Lecturer in TESOL

Lahore College for Women University

Sana.Baig@lcwu.edu.pk

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of social media use on the writing skills of undergraduate ESL students in a public-sector university in Lahore, Pakistan. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from 42 undergraduate students through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from previous studies. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data using SPSS. The findings indicate that social media use has an overall positive influence on students' English writing development, particularly in vocabulary acquisition, confidence building, and frequency of writing practice. However, excessive exposure to informal language and slang was perceived to negatively affect formal academic writing. The study concludes that social media can serve as an effective supplementary tool for ESL writing development if its use is pedagogically guided.

Keywords: Social media, ESL, writing skills, undergraduate students, English proficiency

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed communication practices worldwide, particularly among younger generations. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube have become integral to students' daily lives and

increasingly influence educational contexts. Scholars argue that digital technologies reshape how learners interact, construct knowledge, and develop language skills (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

In Pakistan, English holds the status of a second official language and serves as the primary medium for higher education, professional communication, and global engagement (Crystal, 2003). Given the dominance of English on social networking sites, ESL learners are frequently exposed to the language through informal, authentic, and interactive contexts. This exposure raises critical questions regarding the impact of social media on students' writing proficiency, particularly the balance between informal digital discourse and formal academic writing.

The present study aims to explore how social media use affects the writing skills of undergraduate ESL students, with specific attention to both its positive and negative influences.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Undergraduate students are extensively engaged with social media through smartphones, laptops, and other internet-enabled devices. While social media offers opportunities for language exposure and practice, the predominance of non-standard English, abbreviations, and slang may interfere with students' formal writing competence. Many students struggle to distinguish between informal digital language and academic writing conventions, which may negatively affect their academic performance.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of social media use on ESL students' English writing proficiency.
2. To identify positive and negative effects of social media on students' writing skills.
3. To explore students' perceptions of social media as a tool for language learning.
4. To suggest pedagogical strategies for improving academic writing in the context of social media use.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What type of English is predominantly used on social media platforms?

2. For what purposes do students use social media?

3. Does social media negatively affect students' formal writing skills?

4. How can the negative effects of social media on writing be minimized?

1.4 Hypothesis

Social media use has a significant impact on undergraduate ESL students' writing skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and Language Learning

Social media refers to interactive digital platforms that facilitate content creation, sharing, and communication within virtual communities. These platforms provide learners with authentic exposure to language use and opportunities for interaction beyond traditional classrooms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

2.2 English Language Proficiency and Writing Skills

Writing is a complex skill requiring grammatical accuracy, coherence, and appropriate vocabulary (Azar, 2007). Effective academic writing depends on learners' command of standard language forms and awareness of genre-specific conventions. Research indicates that frequent writing practice and exposure to authentic language input contribute significantly to writing development (Debboune & Tebib, 2011).

2.3 Social Media and ESL Writing Development

Previous studies highlight both positive and negative effects of social media on ESL learners' writing. Positive effects include increased motivation, vocabulary development, peer feedback, and confidence in written expression (Brandt, 1998; Ahmed & Qazi, 2011). Conversely, excessive use of informal language, abbreviations, and plagiarism has been associated with declining grammatical accuracy and formality in academic writing (Dansieh, 2011; Ochonogor et al., 2012).

2.4 Social Media Use in Pakistan

Research conducted in Pakistani higher education contexts suggests that social media plays a significant role in students' academic and social lives. While some studies report minimal impact on academic performance (Ahmed & Qazi, 2011), others identify time mismanagement and language interference as major concerns (Malaney, 2005).

The reviewed literature indicates a need for context-specific research examining how social media affects ESL writing skills at the undergraduate level in Pakistan, which the present study seeks to address.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, descriptive research design within a positivist paradigm.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population comprised undergraduate ESL students enrolled in a public-sector university in Lahore. Using purposive sampling, 42 female undergraduate students participated in the study.

3.3 Instrumentation

Data were collected using a self-administered, five-point Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 24 items. The questionnaire was adapted from existing studies and designed to measure students' perceptions of social media's impact on writing skills.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed in person, and responses were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to interpret the data.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants' informed consent was obtained. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participation was voluntary.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Key Findings

The findings reveal that the majority of students perceive social media as having a positive impact on their English writing skills. Most respondents reported improvements in vocabulary development, confidence in writing, and frequency of English usage. These findings align with Brandt's (1998) concept of literacy sponsorship, where digital environments support language development through continuous engagement.

However, a notable proportion of students acknowledged difficulties in maintaining formal writing standards due to habitual use of informal language and slang on social media. This finding supports earlier research by Dansieh (2011) and Ochonogor et al. (2012), which highlighted the negative transfer of texting language into academic writing.

4.2 Relationship Between Findings and Literature

Consistent with Ahmed and Qazi (2011), this study found no overwhelmingly negative effect of social media on academic writing. Instead, social media functioned as a double-edged tool: beneficial for language exposure and practice but potentially harmful when informal usage is unchecked. The results also corroborate Azar's (2007) emphasis on grammatical competence as a foundation for effective writing.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that social media has a generally positive influence on ESL undergraduate students' writing skills, particularly in vocabulary enhancement, confidence building, and increased writing practice. Nevertheless, excessive reliance on informal digital language may

negatively affect formal academic writing. Therefore, educators should integrate social media into ESL instruction strategically while explicitly teaching students to distinguish between informal and academic writing styles.

5.1 Recommendations

1. Teachers should incorporate guided social media-based writing tasks into ESL curricula.
2. Students should be trained to differentiate between informal digital discourse and academic writing conventions.
3. Further research using mixed-method approaches and larger samples is recommended.

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