

Impact of Social Media on the English Language Writing Abilities of Undergraduates in Ekpoma, Nigeria¹

El Impacto de las Redes Sociales en las Habilidades de Redacción en Inglés de Estudiantes Universitarios en Ekpoma, Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examined the impact of social media on the writing abilities of Nigerian youths in English, which is the language of mass communication in Nigeria. Deploying cultivation theory of the media, this study used quantitative and qualitative methods to unpack the Nigerian youths' opinions on the impact of the use of social media on their writing abilities, using undergraduates in Ekpoma, Nigeria as a study case. To do this, data was collected through the use of 110 copies of a survey questionnaire administered to selected students. Additional information was garnered from focused group discussions (FGDs) with students and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with some tertiary institutions' lecturers as well as the researchers' direct observation of the issue under investigation. The study discovered that a majority of the youths adopt a certain option/brand of English which cannot be located within the matrix of Standard English (SE) or even popular Nigerian English variant which is called Pidgin English (PE). Consequently, expressions such as 'u' for 'you' 'gr&t' for 'great', 'ur/urs' for 'your/yours', among other deviational patterns, have crept into their writing consciousness in classes and examinations, which make a lot of 'sense' in informal settings among the youths, but smacks of sub-literacy in formal

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writing situations under which they are being trained. This development can have serious implications for effective and efficient writing among Nigerian youths, especially in formal situations. The study recommends, amongst others, that further studies should be carried out on the deviational patterns of English words and phrases which are commonly used by youths in Nigeria and elsewhere, with a view to possibly getting the 'new words' standardized by the relevant educational authorities to ensure uniformity in usage, and to keep pace with the dynamically trendy social media culture.

Keywords: Social media, English language in Nigeria, Writing skills, Nigerian undergraduates, Cultivation theory, Educational authorities

Resumen

Este artículo examina el impacto de las redes sociales en las habilidades escritas en jóvenes nigerianos en el uso de inglés en el que el idioma es usado como comunicación masiva en Nigeria. Desplegando la teoría del cultivo de los medios, este estudio usó métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos para descomprimir las opiniones de los jóvenes nigerianos sobre el impacto del uso de redes sociales en sus habilidades escritas, usando a estudiantes universitarios en Ekpoma, Nigeria como un estudio de caso. Para realizar esto, los datos se recopilaron a través del uso de 110 copias de una encuesta administrada para seleccionar estudiantes. Información adicional se obtuvo de discusiones grupales enfocadas (DGE) con estudiantes y una entrevista exhaustiva a profesores de instituciones terciarias. También se tomó en cuenta la observación directa de los investigadores sobre el tema de interés. El estudio descubrió que la mayoría de los jóvenes adoptan una determinada opción de inglés el cual no se puede ubicar dentro de la matriz de inglés estándar ni la variación popular de inglés nigeriano llamado inglés Pidgin (PE). Por consiguiente, las expresiones tales como “u” para “you”, “gr8t” para “great”, “ur/urs” para “your/yours” entre otros patrones de desviación, se han colado en su conciencia de escritura en clases y exámenes, lo que da mucho “sentido” en contextos informales entre los jóvenes, pero da a entender una sub-alfabetización en contextos formales de escritura en el cual están siendo entrenados. Este desarrollo puede tener serias implicaciones para la escritura eficiente y efectiva entre los jóvenes nigerianos, especialmente en contextos formales. El estudio recomienda que estudios adicionales sea realizados sobre los patrones de desviación de las palabras y frases en inglés que son usadas comúnmente por los jóvenes nigerianos y en otras partes con la opción de posiblemente obtener “nuevas palabras” estandarizadas por las autoridades relevantes educativas y así asegurar uniformidad en su uso y para seguir el ritmo de la cultura de las redes sociales dinámicamente de moda.

Palabras clave: redes sociales, inglés en Nigeria, habilidades para la escritura

Resumo

Este artigo examina o impacto das redes sociais nas habilidades escritas em jovens nigerianos no uso de inglês no qual o idioma é usado como comunicação massiva na Nigéria. Desdobrando a teoria do cultivo da mídia, este estudo usou métodos quantitativos e qualitativos para descomprimir as opiniões dos jovens nigerianos sobre o impacto do uso de redes sociais em suas habilidades escritas, usando a estudantes universitários em Ekpoma, Nigéria como um estudo de caso. Para realizar isto, os dados se recopilaram através do uso de 110 cópias de uma enquete administrada para selecionar estudantes. Informação adicional se obteve de discussões grupais enfocadas (DGE) com estudantes e uma entrevista exaustiva a professores de instituições terciárias. Também se teve em consideração a observação direta dos pesquisadores sobre o tema de interesse. O estudo descobriu que a maioria dos jovens adota uma determinada opção de inglês, o qual não se pode situar dentro da matriz de inglês padrão nem a variação popular de inglês nigeriano chamado inglês Pidgin (PE). Em consequência, as expressões tais como “u” para “you”, “gr&t” para “great”, “ur/urs” para “your/yours” entre outros padrões de desvio, infiltraram-se consciência de escritura em aulas e exames, o que dá muito “sentido” em contextos informais entre os jovens, mas dá a entender uma sub-alfabetização em contextos formais de escritura na qual estão sendo treinados. Este desenvolvimento pode ter sérias implicações para a escritura eficiente e efetiva entre os jovens nigerianos, especialmente em contextos formais. O estudo recomenda que estudos adicionais sejam realizados sobre os padrões de desvio das palavras e frases em inglês que são usadas com frequência pelos jovens nigerianos, e em outros lugares com a opção de possivelmente obter “novas palavras” padronizadas pelas autoridades relevantes educativas e dessa forma assegurar uniformidade no seu uso, e para seguir o ritmo da cultura das redes sociais dinamicamente de moda.

Palavras chave: redes sociais, inglês na Nigéria, habilidades para a escritura, estudantes universitários, teoria de cultivo, autoridades educativas.

Introduction

Millions of people around the globe, including Nigerian youths, through social networking are building online local, regional, and global communities to communicate their shared interests and activities, disseminate information, learn and interact through a variety of web-based tools. There appears to be an adversative streak to this publicized social media among Nigerian youths, with regard to their writing abilities in Standard English, which is the language of mass communication in Nigeria. While the mass media and the new media are powerful communication systems that are arguably meeting most of contemporary society's communication and information needs (Meribe, 2015), there appears to be some issues in terms of their impacts on human populations, especially the youth which deserve scholarly attention. This, perhaps, explains why Eggermont and Roe (2014) argue that "recent developments in digital communication have fundamentally affected the research agenda in the field as witnessed by the huge groundswell of studies addressing a broad spectrum of issues from the risks associated with the social media." Social media is quickly arising as a new, popular form of media. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn are some examples of an inordinate number of social media services that are loved and used by people of all walks of life for various purposes such as sharing news, expressing opinions, documenting thoughts, launching political campaigns, maintaining and developing friendships or professional connection courtesy of Web 2.0 technologies.

Okoro, Diri, and Odii (2013) affirm that "Web 2.0 features enable consumers or ordinary people to publish their own websites or weblogs, or feed content into the mainstream media among many other features." Indeed, the Web 2.0 on which the 'citizen journalism,' 'I-report,' 'global instant message,' 'short message service' (SMS), among other phenomenal operations are based has some peculiar features. Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2007) point out that "some of the characteristics often noted as descriptive of Web 2.0 include blogging, RSS-generated syndication, social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, mash-ups, wikis like Wikipedia and other collaborative applications and interactive encyclopedias and dictionaries..." Without a doubt, the world would continue to experience globalisation and technological innovations, with social networking sites (social media) becoming the chief communication tools to everyone, including the learning youths. The social media, with the help of Web 2.0 technologies, have enabled citizens to be active participants in the processes of news gathering and distribution (Okoro, Diri, & Odii, 2013). Some

key characteristics of social media include low entry barrier, instant updates, instant gratification, and a large numbers of friends, free entry, and anonymity. The last two properties make people comfortable to become users but also make social media vulnerable to activities of ill intentions where all kinds of persons can do whatever they like without fear of being caught, arrested or prosecuted for real and unreal offences committed. The multiplicity of these platforms and the accessibility that growing populations around the world, including Nigeria seems to have implications on their writing abilities.

Apart from the varying types of social media platforms (SMPs) of the internet, namely, Facebook, Twitter, RSS, My Space, Skype, 2go, WhatsApp, Yahoo, etc., that Okhakhu and Omoera (2010); Oyedele (2015); and Ehiemua and Omoera (2015) earlier identified, we have several other kinds of SMPs or networks such as Wer- kennt- wen, Sonico, Tumblr, Telegram, Instagram, Badoo, Friendster, Mixi, StudiVZ, Orkut, Hi5, Tagged, Google+, WordPress, BlogSpot, WeChat, and Sina Weibo today, with huge following and use among youths. While some of these social media networks could be said to be really emerging (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.), others appear to be receding (e.g., MySpace, 2go, etc.) and it has been argued that “social media have done as much as harm as good to the peace and stability of the world” (personal communication with Kingsley Ehiemua, a literary technician and social media commentator on 22 December, 2017 in Ekpoma). This is consistent with the earlier observation of Freeborn Odiboh who argued that “some posts seen on social media spaces do not do credit to the writing ability or expressional capacity of those who send them to the media space. The dent or damage that such errors do to the perception by others; and image of the writer of such posts with grammatically skewed structure is incalculable” (Prof Freeborn Odiboh 9 July 2015 on his Facebook page).

The foregoing remark, to a large extent, captures the use of English (in school) in a non-native speaker (NNS) context such as Nigeria, which is fraught with many issues. Interestingly, the native speaker (NS) situation also leaves much to be desired. Humphreys (2007) while looking at the United Kingdom experience on what he calls “...How texting is wrecking our language,” notes that:

It began with some fairly obvious and relatively inoffensive abbreviations: ‘tks’ for ‘thanks’; ‘u’ for ‘you’; 4 for ‘for’. But as it has developed its users have sought out increasingly obscure ways of expressing themselves which, when you think about it, entirely defeats the purpose. If the recipient of the message has to spend ten minutes trying to translate it, those precious minutes

are being wasted. And isn't the whole point to 'save' time? ... Then there's the problem of ambiguity. With my vast knowledge of text language, I had assumed LOL meant 'lots of love', but now I discover it means 'laugh out loud'. Or at least it did the last time I asked.

In today's Nigeria, the youth population, especially undergraduates in universities are head over heels with these social media websites and platforms because by simply acquiring smart phones they are almost instantly catapulted into the virtual world where they can do whatever they like in whatever language they like too. This development appears to have had ripple effects on their educational activities if the reports from various examining bodies in the country are anything to go by. In the *National Mirror* of 16 Nov 2015, poor command of English, and spelling errors were linked to the mass failure of Nigerian students in WAEC exams in recent times. Abimbola Adegboye, an English language lecturer at Samuel Adegboye University, Ogwa (personal communication in 2017) agreed that this situation may not be unconnected with the fact that a growing number of these students spend hours daily on social network sites where they use 'special forms' of English to communicate among themselves. Her position is consistent with the outcome of the study carried out by Ravhuhali, Baloyi, Mutshaeni & Mashau (2015), which claims that learners are addicted to social networking and that social networking is disturbing them when studying since they spend most of their time chatting to friends.

However, Ekundayo (2014) argues that the methods of SMS and e-mail will not ruin effective communication in English. Rather, the methods display a new interesting variety according to a "techno-linguistic" dimension. This variety refers to the creative redeployment of extant language rules and items as constrained by the dynamics of technological or mechanical devices, which should be isolated and taught as such in Standard English, or Educated Nigerian English in this case. Accordingly, he conceptualizes this habit as the intraference of linguistic symbols and rules (Ekundayo, 2014). Other scholars such as Crystal (2009) and Eco (2002) have previously noted this possibility.

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Nonetheless, while examining the influence of social media on the sociology of youth behaviour, Crystal (2009) argues that no other linguistic phenomenon has generated the amount of curiosity, fear, suspicion, confusion, fascination, excitement, and antagonism that texting on SMPs has aroused in a very short space of time, yet very little reliable information is available on it. It is this noticeable gap in scholarship that this article seeks to fill, with specific reference to the

impact of the use of social media on the writing abilities of Nigerian undergraduates in English language.

Research Questions

Do students use coinages and shortened forms of English words to communicate on social media networks?

Do undergraduates use social media coinages and shortened forms of English words in writing term papers, assignments and communicating with their colleagues or other students about their course work?

Does the use of social media coinages and shortened forms of English words by undergraduates have effects on their writing or spelling abilities?

Theoretical Grounding

We have elected to use a social theory called the cultivation theory (also known as cultivation analysis or cultivation hypothesis), which was originally put forward by Gerbner (1973) to foreground the examination of the impact of social media on the writing abilities of Nigerian youths in English language, using undergraduates in Ekpoma, Nigeria as a basis of analysis and discussion. Although cultivation theory (CT) has been revised and updated severally by different communication and media scholars, its kernel still remains: a broad theory of the overall cumulative influence of the media on audiences (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2012; Russell, Russell, Boland, & Grube, 2014). It is on this intellectual nub that this work is anchored.

It does appear that communicative ease facilitated by digitization and conveyed through the new media (social media) has somewhat further extended the 'freedom' of communication in different directions in contemporary world. Habitual users of the social media, as represented in this study, have created and are advancing the use of new, shortened linguistic and other forms of writing for older and more conventional writing. For example, 'U' for you, 'Ur' for your, 'C' for see, and 'D' for the, are gaining widespread usage and some extent of acceptability among younger populations, especially undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. There is thus an emergent transfer of novel and unconventional writing style to the formal context by these students as a consequence of their use of social media.

Within the broader concerns of media effects, the emphasis has always, for obvious reasons, been on mainstream print and broadcast media. Comstock, Chaffe, Katzman, McCombs and Roberts (1978); Russell, Russell, Boland, & Grube (2014) have hypothesised concerning consistent viewer exposure to violent television content with a corresponding behaviour in real life. A consistent finding is that heavy cumulative exposure to media messages shapes viewers' concept of reality, attitudes, and behaviour. In the same vein, Gerbner (1973); Signorelli and Morgan (1990); Morgan & Shanahan (2010); Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli (2012) have put forward the media cultivation hypothesis whose kernel is that audience exposure over time to specific media perspective or point of view (POV) has the potential of making such audience appropriate the media perspective or POV or tendency in everyday living or activities.

One of the main tenets of the CT is that television and media cultivate the status quo, they do not challenge it. Oftentimes, the viewers or users are unaware of the extent to which they absorb media message(s), many times viewing themselves as moderate viewers or users when, in fact, they are heavy viewers or users who are likely to adopt whatever they are exposed to in the media (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Miller, 2005; Russell, Russell, Boland, & Grube, 2014). It is in this connection that this study is anchored on the media cultivation theory, albeit with a slight departure from the position of Comstock, Chaffe, Katzman, McCombs and Roberts (1978); Russell, Russell, Boland, & Grube (2014). Even though it is recognised that deviational patterns of writing in English by some Nigerian youths on social media platforms (SMPs) could be disruptive in some way, we are essentially focused on a non-violent consequence of media exposure.

Social Media and its Impact on Contemporary Youth Populations

Globally, studies have been carried out on the impact of social media. Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich (2013) report that a survey of teachers who instruct American middle and high school students finds that digital technologies are impacting student writing in myriad ways and there are significant advantages from tech-based learning. Some 78% of the 2,462 advanced placement (AP) and National Writing Project (NWP) teachers surveyed by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project say digital tools such as the internet, social media, and cell phones "encourage student creativity and personal expression." In addition, 96% agree that digital technologies "allow students to share

their work with a wider and more varied audience” while 79% agree that these tools “encourage greater collaboration among students.” According to the teachers, students’ exposure to a broader audience for their work and more feedback from peers encourages greater student investment in what they write and in the writing process as a whole (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Robinson, Callahan, Boyle, Rivera and Cho (2017) affirm that social media as a fairly recent major technological revolution has altered the way humans communicate and share information and outlined four different social media platforms that are popular among people to include Facebook, Twitter, Blogs and client hosted forums. They further noted that just as the case in most countries, young adults form the bulk of users on social media networks. Perhaps, this explains why the pervasive use of multiple technological tools (i.e., TV sets, laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.) to engage with media; and political content has deeply altered the way citizens around the world consume information and discuss public affair issues, even as findings reveal that young people tend to second screen more than older counterparts (Gil de Zúñiga & Liu, 2017). This position, though in a slightly different context, shows that digital tools, particularly social media, play a central role in the lives and education of young people in most contemporary societies.

Imade, Elogie and Ikenwe (2016) examined the influence of social media utilisation and addiction on self-perception of undergraduate students at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. The study, which adopted the survey method of ex-post-facto design, found that self-perception had a significant positive relation to social media utilisation just as social media addiction was found to relatively contribute significantly to self-perception of undergraduate students. Ehiemua insisted that social media appears to be a mixed bag, a potpourri of ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’ in Nigeria and elsewhere (personal communication, 2017). Apart from being the fastest means of disseminating information and peddling unfounded and fake news (fastest rumour mills); they serve as predatory sites for paedophiles, sexual perverts and the like. Curiously, the good sides are also legion. For instance, the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration (NAFDAC) recently acknowledged that the social media in Nigeria helped the organization in tracking the imported Garri – cassava flour - illegally brought into Nigeria from India without the approval of NAFDAC, one of Nigeria’s food regulatory bodies (*NTA Newslines*, Feb. 26 2017).

In spite of the above, the situation is becoming worrisome by the inventive social media stylized linguistic abbreviations; where, in its worst and very annoying forms, smileys or emoticon symbols are used in lieu of words by many persons, especially the youth. In a study carried out by Cingeland Sunder (2012), it was found that the perpetual use of mobile devices by adolescents has fuelled a culture of text messaging, with abbreviations and grammatical shortcuts, thus raising a number of questions in the minds of parents and teachers. But the chief question is: does increased use of text messaging engender greater reliance on such 'textual adaptations' to the point of altering one's sense of written English grammar?

Observably, with the popularity of English language and the increasing consciousness to learn it in non-English speaking countries all over the world, English is likely to be the language of choice for international discourse and communication. This is particularly so because college students or undergraduates are taking social media to a new level, using websites such as Facebook to communicate with other students about their coursework, and this is usually done in the English language (Rice, 2011). Hence, whatever disruption in the writing abilities of growing children in English could spell doom because research has demonstrated how writing effectively and efficiently can improve comprehension of content in any discipline.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted the descriptive survey design while the population of the study comprised all the undergraduate students from a public university in Ekpoma, Nigeria. Our choice of the undergraduates as the focus population is because they constitute the prime or active users of social media in Nigeria and other developing and developed societies. A 14-item Likert format questionnaire was used for data collection. The simple random sampling technique was used to administer 135 copies of questionnaire of which 120 were retrieved. However, 10 out of the 120 were not properly filled. Consequently, the properly filled 110 copies of questionnaire were used for analysis in this study.

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The questionnaire was validated by research experts in the Departments of Theatre and Media Arts, English Language and Educational Foundations and Management in a public university in Ekpoma, Nigeria. The Cronbach Alpha, a measure of scale consistency, was used to determine the reliability of the instrument and it yielded correlation coefficient of 0.97 which showed that the instrument was

highly reliable to elicit information for the study. The data was analysed using mean scores and standard deviations to answer the research questions such that if an item scored more than 2.50 cut-off point, the social media had impact on the writing abilities of undergraduate students under investigation.

Additional information was garnered from in-depth interviews (IDIs) with lecturers from within and outside Ambrose Alli University and focused group discussion (FGDs) with some students of the institution as well as the researchers' direct observation of the issue under investigation. In this regard, a total of one thousand three and fifty six examination scripts, aside three hundred forty four assignments and term papers of undergraduate students from the Departments of Theatre and Media Arts, English, Educational Foundation and Administration at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, were randomly selected and closely examined by the researchers and the spelling errors or deviational writings patterns were noted over a period of ten years.

Result

Qualitative Research

Procedure for the FGD Session and In-depth Interview

The FGD guide consists of sentences, in the form of questions, that the researchers asked the participants. The guide helped the researchers in moderating the sessions of the FGD. The guide was used to obtain the required information and ideas from participants, which were used to arrive at each of the research questions. A total number of 8 students (four male and four female undergraduates) were randomly selected as participants in the FGD. After familiarisation, explanations of the essence of the research were handed down to the participants, the researchers sought for the consent of the participants before proceeding with the session. The researchers also told the participants that they are free to opt out during the proceedings if any of them felt uncomfortable with the discussions. Thereafter, participants were given opportunity to respond to what the moderator posed in relation to writing abilities of undergraduates. Information and opinions gathered from the FGDs were synchronised into statements in accordance with the theme of the study. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with lecturers from within and outside the university. These IDIs served the purpose of complementing the information provided during the FGDs. The same FGD guide was used during the interview sessions with slight modifications. For instance, "Have you ever come across any of these

shortened forms of English words or abbreviations (‘u’ for ‘you’ ‘gr8t’ for ‘great’, ‘ur/urs’ for ‘your/yours’) when marking your students’ scripts?” “Do you think they use such words unconsciously in their writings,” etc.

The three research questions posed for the study were analyzed as follows:

Research Question One

Do students use coinages and shortened forms of English words to communicate on social media networks?

Table 1: Mean ratings and standard deviations of respondents on the use of coinages and shortened forms of English words on social media network.

Item No	Item description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
1.	Surfing the internet is my favourite pastime	50	40	18	2	3.25	0.795	Accepted
2.	I visit the internet mainly for social network activities	27	30	44	9	2.68	0.938	Accepted
3.	I use of social media to communicate	64	36	8	2	3.47	0.713	Accepted
4.	I do not use correct spelling while chatting	35	46	15	14	2.93	0.983	Accepted
5.	I use short forms or misspelled words while chatting to save time	62	34	12	2	3.42	0.759	Accepted
Cluster Mean/ Standard Deviation						2.62	0.83	

Table 1 showed that items 1,2,3,4 and 5 have mean ratings of 3.25, 2.68, 3.47, 2.93 and 3.42 with standard deviation of 0.795, 0.938, 0.713, 0.983 and 0.759; all are greater than the cut-off point of 2.50 which implied that surfing the internet was the students’ pastime. Students visit the internet for social network activities and to communicate among themselves. They also do not use correct spellings while chatting because they believe that using short forms of words or coinages or deliberate wrong spellings while chatting saves time. The cluster mean of 2.62 and standard deviation of 0.83 which is greater than the cut-off point of 2.50 implied that the population under investigation use coinages and shortened forms of words on social media networks.

Research Question Two

Do undergraduates use social media coinages and shortened forms of English words in writing term papers, assignments and communicating with their colleagues other students about their course work?

Table 2. Mean ratings and standard deviations on the use of social media coinages and shortened forms of English words in writing term papers, assignments and examinations.

Item No	Item description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
1.	It does not matter if we use social media language when writing assignments, term papers or examinations	6	17	25	62	1.70	0.924	Rejected
2.	We deliberately use misspelled words or shortened forms of English words because it is convenient to do so	10	15	25	60	1.77	1.001	Rejected
3.	We intentionally use shortened forms of English words and sentences because they save time	11	26	23	50	1.98	1.049	Rejected
Cluster Mean /Standard Deviation						1.81	0.99	

Table 2 showed that items 6, 7 and 8 have mean ratings of 1.70, 1.77 and 1.98 with standard deviation of 0.924, 1.001 and 1.049. The mean for each item is less than 2.50 which implied that the use of social media language when writing assignments or examinations matters to the students. Nonetheless, in items 7 and 8, the finding indicates that they do not deliberately misspell words or use short forms of words or sentences while writing their assignments and examinations. Also, they do not believe that the deliberate use of short forms of words and sentences while writing term papers or assignments saves time. It is likely that the sampled population is grandstanding as in-depth interviews conducted with some tertiary institutions’ lecturers revealed that there are many instances of students using coinages, short forms of words and abbreviations in their term papers and assignments.

Research Question Three

Does the use of social media coinages and shortened forms of English words by undergraduates have effects on their writing or spelling abilities?

Table 3. Mean ratings and standard deviations of respondents on the effect of social media coinages and shortened forms of English words on their writing abilities.

Item No	Item description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
9.	Students' writing/spelling abilities are enhanced by their activities on social media	22	34	29	25	2.48	1.056	Rejected
10.	Lecturers complain about students' spellings	7	9	39	55	1.71	0.871	Rejected
Cluster Mean /Standard Deviation						2.095	0.961	

Table 3 showed that items 9 and 10 have mean ratings of 2.48 and 1.71 with standard deviation of 1.056 and 0.871. Here, the data shows that the sampled students' opinion is not necessarily what is really happening. A majority of them opine that social media activities have not impinged on their writing or spelling abilities in English. They further say that their lecturers do not complain about their spellings. However, this position is inconsistent with the outcome of the IDIs with lecturers, and the researchers' direct observation of the situation on the ground: undergraduate students tended to use shortened forms of English words or abbreviations in writing assignments, term papers and examinations.

Discussion

The first finding of the study revealed that students use coinages and shortened forms of English words to communicate on social media. Many a time, students tend to abbreviate or use acronymic words while chatting on social media platforms. The second finding showed that students are aware that it is inappropriate to use social media language when writing assignments and examinations but some traces of deviational patterns of writing which are inconsistent with standard English are a common feature in many of their writings both on social

media and in many of the terms papers, class assignments and essays which students submit to us as university lecturers in the last ten years.

Furthermore, in the FGDs that we conducted with some students, we found that in spite of the fact that many undergraduates are aware that it is inappropriate to use social media coinages many of them still do in their writing unknowingly or unconsciously. The presupposition here is that a majority of the youths adopt a certain option/brand of English which cannot be located within the matrixes of Standard English or even its Popular Nigerian English (PNE) variant which is called Pidgin English. Consequently, expressions such as ‘u’ for ‘you’ ‘gr8’ for ‘great’, ‘ur/urs’ for ‘your/yours’, among other deviational patterns, have crept into their writing consciousness in classes and examinations, which make a lot of ‘sense’ in informal settings among the youths, but smacks of sub literacy in formal writing situations under which they are being trained. As well, these deviational patterns of writing or spelling in English among undergraduates that is occasioned by their use of social media are common sights in their term papers, assignments and examination scripts as our direct observations indicate.

The third finding revealed that the students reported what they think but that is not necessarily a true position because the IDIs and the researchers’ direct observation show that many undergraduate students do use shortened forms of English words in writing assignments, term papers and examinations. From the foregoing, it is likely that over time the sampled students’ writing skills or spelling abilities could be impacted harmfully by their activities on social media. In fact, students’ frequent use of coinages and shortened forms of English words on social media does not improve their writing abilities as undergraduates in any considerable manner. As well, it is the opinion of the sampled population that the lecturers, who teach and examine their term papers and assignments, do not complain about their spelling. This result is inconsistent with the outcome of the in depth interviews (IDIs) conducted among some three lecturers in Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogoja and Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, who roundly complained about students’ frequent use of short forms of words or coinages such as 4gt, wch, gr8, etc., in the term papers, examination scripts and other formal communications between them and their students. The possible explanation for the conflictual opinions between the lecturers and students may be located in the view that the sampled students’ population is grandstanding and wanting to be on the defensive. However, the result also speaks to the need for further research to be carried out on the matter among other students’/

lecturers' populations to either confirm or disconfirm the outcome of this investigation.

Conclusion

This study has examined the impact of social media on the writing abilities of Nigerian youths by mainly using the opinions of undergraduate students in Ekpoma, Nigeria as fulcra of analysis and discussion. The study discovered that a majority of the youths tend to adopt a certain brand of English which cannot be located within the matrix of Standard English (SE) or even popular Nigerian English variant which is called Pidgin English (PE). Consequently, expressions such as 'u' for 'you' 'gr8t' for 'great', 'ur/urs' for 'your/yours', among other deviational patterns, have crept into their writing consciousness in classes and examinations, which make a lot of 'sense' in informal settings among the youths, but smacks of sub-literacy in formal writing situations under which they are being trained. This development can have serious implications for effective and efficient writing among Nigerian youths, especially in formal situations. The study recommends, amongst others, that further studies should be carried out on the deviational patterns of English words and phrases which are commonly used by youths in Nigeria and elsewhere, with a view to possibly getting the 'new words' standardized by the relevant educational authorities to ensure uniformity in usage, and to keep pace with the dynamically trendy social media culture.

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Appendix

Focused Group Discussion (FGD) Guide

Are you familiar with social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, etc?

How often do you use social media networks?

Do you use any of the social media platforms to communicate with your course mates and friends?

Do you misspell or use shortened forms of English words such as ‘u’ for ‘you’ ‘gr8t’ for ‘great’, ‘ur/urs’ for ‘your/yours’, etc., while using social media platforms?

If yes, do you intentionally or unintentionally use such non standard English words while conversing with friends and course mates on the internet?

Would you say that your intentional or unintentional use of such deviational patterns of English words have positively affected your writing abilities as an undergraduate?

Would you say that your intentional or unintentional use of such deviational patterns of English words have negatively affected your writing abilities as an undergraduate?

Have your lecturers complained about your spelling or writing of English words in your assignments, terms papers, and examination scripts?