

The interplay of social media exposure and language attitudes in shaping students' academic writing skills

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how social media exposure shapes students' ambivalent language attitudes and influences their academic writing. In the digital era, students are continuously exposed to informal linguistic environments characterized by abbreviations, code-mixing, slang, and non-standard sentence structures. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical design, this study involved 30 undergraduate students at a university in Surabaya, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, analysis of academic writing samples, and non-participant observations of students' digital language practices. The findings identify ambivalent language attitudes as the study's principal contribution. Students recognized the importance of standard Indonesian for academic writing while feeling more comfortable using informal digital language in everyday communication. This tension appeared in their writing through informal vocabulary, fragmented sentences, limited paragraph development, and weak cohesion. However, students with stronger metacognitive awareness, deliberate code-switching, systematic revision, and greater exposure to academic texts were better able to regulate their writing. These findings suggest that language attitudes constitute the key mechanism linking social media exposure and academic writing quality. Writing instruction should therefore promote register awareness and self-regulated writing strategies to help students navigate effectively between digital and academic language.

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Introduction

Language proficiency is fundamental to academic success because it enables students to communicate effectively through reading, writing, speaking, and listening while adhering to established linguistic norms. Academic writing is particularly important in higher education as it requires students to organize ideas logically, construct coherent arguments, and apply formal language conventions consistently (Hamade et al., 2024; Majumder, 2024; Gabi, 2022). Consequently, developing academic writing competence has become a central objective of university education.

The rapid expansion of digital technology has significantly transformed the linguistic environment in which students learn and communicate. Information and communication technologies have reshaped how people access information, exchange ideas, and construct social relationships (Yu, 2024; Timotheou et al., 2023). Social media platforms now function not only as spaces for entertainment but also as environments for academic coordination, collaboration, and identity construction (Pan et al., 2024; Alhajjaj et al., 2025). As students continuously move between informal digital communication and formal academic discourse, they are required to adapt their language to different communicative contexts (Hurbik et al., 2025).

Communication on social media is characterized by abbreviations, code-mixing, slang, emojis, borrowed expressions, and simplified sentence structures that emphasize speed, efficiency, and expressiveness (Sarwar et al., 2025). These linguistic practices differ substantially from the conventions expected in academic writing and may gradually influence students' habitual language use, discourse organization, and writing practices (Di Marco et al., 2024). Rather than viewing digital communication as either entirely beneficial or harmful, it is important to understand how students negotiate these contrasting linguistic environments.

This issue is particularly relevant because university students are expected to produce academic texts using standard Indonesian. Nevertheless, many students continue to experience difficulties in formal writing despite extensive engagement with digital communication (Ningrum et al., 2023; Černý, 2025; Demneri, 2024). Previous studies consistently identify problems such as spelling inaccuracies, inappropriate vocabulary, weak sentence construction, and limited coherence and cohesion (Lee et al., 2024). These recurring challenges suggest that academic writing is shaped not only by linguistic knowledge but also by students' everyday language experiences and perceptions of different language varieties.

Previous research generally demonstrates that digital technologies contribute positively to language development. Studies by Sulyati & Kuswara (2025), Sari & Mahendra (2025), and Fanani et al. (2025) show that digital literacy improves Indonesian reading and writing skills by enhancing motivation, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Similarly, Chairunisa & Hasibuan (2024), Dinihari & Musringudin (2026), Eragamreddy et al. (2024), and Alneyadi et al. (2023) report that digital learning resources strengthen literacy development through collaborative learning, timely feedback, and increased engagement. However, these studies primarily investigate structured educational uses of digital technology and rarely distinguish them from the habitual language practices developed through everyday social media interaction. Consequently, the potentially different influences of educational digital engagement and informal digital communication remain insufficiently understood.

An additional limitation of existing research is that digital literacy, social media use, language attitudes, and academic writing are generally examined as separate constructs rather than as interconnected processes. As a result, little attention has been given to how continuous exposure to informal digital communication shapes students' beliefs, emotions, and values toward language and how these attitudes subsequently influence academic writing. Moreover, the educational benefits of digital technologies cannot automatically be generalized to all forms of digital communication because the linguistic norms cultivated on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X may complement or even conflict with the conventions of academic discourse.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing language attitude as the psychological mechanism through which students interpret and regulate competing linguistic norms. Continuous exposure to informal digital language may influence students' cognitive beliefs, emotional attachment, and behavioral tendencies toward language, resulting in *ambivalent language attitudes*—a condition in which students simultaneously value standard Indonesian for academic purposes while feeling more comfortable using informal digital language in everyday communication. Rather than assuming that social media directly determines writing quality, this study proposes that social media exposure shapes language attitudes, which subsequently influence academic writing alongside metacognitive awareness, academic reading habits, previous writing instruction, and self-regulated writing strategies.

Accordingly, this study investigates the interplay between social media exposure, language attitudes, and academic writing skills among university students. Specifically, it aims to (1) explore how social media exposure shapes students' language attitudes and (2) examine how these attitudes influence academic writing practices. By positioning *ambivalent language attitudes* as the central mechanism linking digital communication and academic writing, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of language development in the digital era and provides practical implications for writing instruction that promotes register awareness, metacognitive regulation, and effective movement between informal digital communication and formal academic discourse.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the interplay between social media exposure, language attitudes, and academic writing skills. Rather than examining these constructs as isolated variables, the study explored how they interact within students' everyday academic experiences. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the research focused on participants' meanings, experiences, and language practices rather than statistical relationships.

The study was conducted at a university in Surabaya, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: undergraduate students, active users of at least two social

media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, or X), and students who had completed or were currently taking courses requiring academic writing. The final sample comprised 30 students from six academic disciplines (education, social sciences, economics, engineering, communication, and health sciences), including 18 females and 12 males. Participants were in their second to fourth year of study, reported using social media for approximately five to eight hours daily, and represented varying levels of academic writing proficiency. This diversity enabled a comprehensive exploration of students' experiences in balancing informal digital communication with formal academic writing.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and non-participant observations. Interviews, lasting 45–75 minutes, explored participants' social media experiences, perceptions of digital language, attitudes toward standard Indonesian, and challenges encountered in academic writing. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Participants also submitted academic writing samples, including essays, course papers, and research proposals. These documents were analyzed not only for vocabulary, sentence structure, cohesion, and paragraph development but also for discourse-level characteristics, including argument development, register appropriateness, and the transfer of informal digital language into academic writing. Interview responses and writing samples were compared through a cross-case analysis to examine whether participants' reported language attitudes and writing practices were reflected in their actual texts, thereby strengthening methodological triangulation.

Non-participant observations were conducted in classroom settings and, with participants' consent, through observations of publicly accessible social media interactions. These observations provided contextual evidence of students' habitual language practices and complemented the interview and document data.

Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Open coding was first applied to interview transcripts, observation notes, and writing samples to identify meaningful units related to social media practices, language attitudes, writing behaviors, and metacognitive regulation. Codes were then compared across data sources, refined through axial coding, and organized into overarching themes through iterative comparison and collaborative discussion until thematic saturation was achieved. The relationships among social media exposure, ambivalent language attitudes, metacognitive awareness, and academic writing were subsequently represented through thematic matrices and narrative displays.

To ensure trustworthiness, data source triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and rich contextual descriptions were employed. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings while minimizing researcher bias. Collectively, they enabled the study to provide a balanced explanation of how social media exposure, language attitudes, metacognitive awareness, and academic literacy experiences interact to shape students' academic writing, rather than attributing writing performance solely to social media use.

Results and Discussion

Results

The data analysis revealed three major themes that capture the intricate relationship between social media exposure, language attitudes, and academic writing skills among university students. These themes are: (1) The Pervasiveness of Social Media and the Formation of Digital Linguistic Habits, (2) The Emergence of Ambivalent Language Attitudes, and (3) The Manifestation of Digital Habits in Academic Writing. Each theme is elaborated below with supporting data from interviews, document analysis, and observations.

Theme 1: The Pervasiveness of Social Media and the Formation of Digital Linguistic Habits

The findings demonstrate that social media has become an integral component of students' everyday communication, shaping not only how frequently they interact but also the linguistic patterns they employ across different contexts. All participants reported accessing social media repeatedly throughout the day, with many describing themselves as being "constantly online." Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, social media served multiple purposes, including interpersonal communication, academic coordination, information seeking, and collaborative learning. Table 1 summarizes participants' social media usage patterns.

Table 1. Social Media Usage Patterns Among Participants

<i>Aspect of Usage</i>	<i>Dominant Pattern</i>	<i>Illustrative Participant Quotes</i>
Frequency of Access	Several times per hour / Continuously	"I check Instagram as soon as I wake up, during class breaks, while eating... basically all the time."
Primary Platforms	Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), WhatsApp	"TikTok for entertainment, WhatsApp for groups, and X for news and trends."
Main Purposes	Communication, entertainment, information seeking, academic coordination	"We have class groups on WhatsApp to share materials and discuss assignments."
Duration of Use	5-8 hours per day on average	"My screen time report always shows 7+ hours daily, mostly on social media."

As shown in Table 1, participants spent an average of five to eight hours per day using social media, with Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X emerging as the most frequently accessed platforms. This extensive engagement suggests that digital communication has become embedded within students' daily routines rather than remaining a peripheral activity. Consequently, social media represents a continuous linguistic environment in which students repeatedly encounter, produce, and negotiate language. Such sustained exposure increases the likelihood that informal digital expressions become habitual and eventually influence broader language practices.

Analysis of interview transcripts, observations, and participants' digital interactions identified several recurring linguistic characteristics that dominated communication across social media platforms. These characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristic Language Features in Students' Social Media Communication

<i>Linguistic Feature</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples from Observations</i>
Abbreviations and Acronyms	Shortened word forms for efficiency	"gws" (get well soon), "otw" (on the way), "bjir" (expression of surprise), "wkwk" (laughter)
Code-Mixing and Code-Switching	Blending Indonesian with English or other languages	"Please chat me for the details," "I'm really bingung with this task"
Informal Lexicon and Slang	Use of trendy, non-standard words	"santuy" (relaxed), "gemoy" (cute), "bestie" (friend)
Non-Standard Sentence Structures	Incomplete sentences, lack of punctuation	"lagi ngapain?? mau makan dulu" (What are you doing?? going to eat first)
Emotive and Visual Elements	Heavy use of emojis, stickers, and capitalization for emphasis	"GA BISA DATANG hari ini!!! 🤔😭" (CANNOT COME today!!!)

The observed linguistic features included abbreviations, acronyms, code-mixing, informal vocabulary, simplified sentence structures, emojis, and expressive capitalization. Rather than being perceived as incorrect, these features were considered appropriate and efficient responses to the communicative norms of different digital platforms. Interview data showed that students consciously adapted their language to fit online environments, while repeated participation gradually made informal expressions automatic. As one participant noted, *"It feels weird to write formally on social media. It would look stiff and out of place."* Another explained, *"Sometimes I don't even realize I'm using slang or mixing languages. It just comes out naturally."* These findings indicate that linguistic behavior is shaped not only by individual preference but also by the collective norms of digital communities.

Observations further revealed that each social media platform fosters distinctive linguistic practices. WhatsApp primarily supported interpersonal communication through abbreviations and conversational language, Instagram encouraged expressive captions and identity construction, TikTok promoted concise, trend-driven expressions, and X favored brief opinion-oriented messages. This demonstrates that social media should not be viewed as a homogeneous environment but as multiple discourse communities with different communicative expectations. Consequently, students repeatedly practiced discourse patterns emphasizing brevity, immediacy, and emotional expression, which gradually became habitual.

Document analysis supported these findings by showing traces of digital discourse in early drafts of academic assignments, including conversational transitions, simplified sentence structures, and limited elaboration of ideas. These patterns suggest that digital habits influence not only vocabulary but also discourse organization, argument development, and textual cohesion.

However, social media exposure alone did not determine students' writing practices. Despite similar levels of digital engagement, participants differed considerably in their ability to separate informal online communication from academic writing. This variation indicates that the influence of social media is mediated by language register awareness, academic writing experience, reading habits, and metacognitive regulation. Overall, Theme 1 demonstrates that social media serves as a pervasive linguistic ecosystem that reinforces informal communication habits. Rather than directly weakening academic writing, these habits provide the linguistic foundation from which students develop the ambivalent language attitudes that subsequently shape their academic writing practices.

Theme 2: The Emergence of Ambivalent Language Attitudes

The analysis revealed that continuous engagement with social media did not simply alter students' language use but also shaped how they perceived, evaluated, and negotiated different language varieties. The most significant finding of this study is the emergence of what is conceptualized as *ambivalent language attitudes*—a condition in which students simultaneously recognize the importance of standard Indonesian for academic purposes while feeling more comfortable and emotionally attached to the informal language commonly used in digital communication. Rather than representing contradictory beliefs, this ambivalence reflects students' continuous effort to navigate two legitimate yet competing linguistic environments.

Interview data consistently demonstrated that participants clearly understood the social and academic value of standard Indonesian. Nearly all participants emphasized that academic assignments, research papers, and theses should follow formal linguistic conventions because these texts represent professionalism, intellectual rigor, and institutional expectations. Table 3 summarizes the three dimensions of students' language attitudes identified through the analysis.

Table 3. Dimensions of Students' Ambivalent Language Attitudes

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Positive Orientation Toward Standard Indonesian</i>	<i>Competing Orientation Toward Informal Digital Language</i>	<i>Manifestation of Ambivalence</i>
Cognitive (Beliefs)	"Indonesian is our national language and must be used correctly in formal settings."	"Social media language is more practical and reflects our generation's identity."	Students intellectually acknowledge the importance of standard language but believe informal language has its own legitimacy and value.
Affective (Feelings)	"I feel proud when I can write a good academic paper in proper Indonesian."	"Formal Indonesian feels stiff, distant, and sometimes unnatural to me."	Students experience pride in using standard language well but feel more emotionally connected to and comfortable with informal language.
Behavioral (Tendencies)	"I try to use standard language in my assignments, especially for final papers."	"In daily chats, even with lecturers sometimes, I accidentally use informal words."	Students intend to use standard language academically but find informal patterns unconsciously slipping into their communication.

As illustrated in Table 3, students demonstrated strong cognitive awareness of the importance of standard Indonesian, recognizing that formal language reflects academic credibility and professionalism. One participant stated, "*Indonesian is our national language and should be used correctly in academic writing*," while another noted, "*If my language is too casual, people may think I don't understand academic writing*." These responses indicate that students clearly understood academic language conventions, suggesting that their writing difficulties cannot be explained simply by insufficient linguistic knowledge.

Despite this awareness, participants also expressed a strong emotional attachment to informal digital language, describing it as more natural, expressive, and representative of their identities. One participant remarked, "*Formal Indonesian feels stiff and distant*," whereas another explained, "*The words I use online feel more like me*." These findings reveal that language choice is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by emotional comfort, identity, and social belonging.

The behavioral data further illustrated this tension. Although students intended to use formal Indonesian in academic writing, many acknowledged that informal expressions often appeared automatically during drafting. As one participant explained, "*I have to stop and think, 'How do I say this more formally?'*" Another reflected, "*It's like I have two different language identities—one for online and one for academics*." These narratives demonstrate that language attitudes operate as an ongoing process of negotiating competing linguistic norms rather than a simple preference for one language variety.

Document analysis reinforced this interpretation. Students who demonstrated stronger awareness of register differences generally produced more coherent texts with consistent academic language, whereas those experiencing greater difficulty separating digital and academic registers showed more conversational expressions, simplified sentence structures, and weaker organization. Nevertheless, considerable variation

existed among participants despite similar levels of social media use, indicating that language attitudes are also shaped by metacognitive awareness, academic writing experience, reading habits, and exposure to formal language rather than by digital exposure alone.

Overall, Theme 2 identifies ambivalent language attitudes as the central mechanism connecting digital communication and academic writing. Rather than portraying social media as inherently harmful, the findings demonstrate that students actively negotiate multiple linguistic identities. Consequently, the influence of social media on writing depends on how effectively students regulate the coexistence of informal digital discourse and formal academic language through conscious metacognitive control.

Theme 3: The Manifestation of Digital Habits in Academic Writing

The analysis of interview transcripts, academic writing samples, and classroom observations revealed that students' ambivalent language attitudes were reflected in identifiable patterns within their academic writing. Rather than appearing as isolated linguistic errors, these patterns extended from word choice to discourse organization, suggesting that the influence of digital communication reaches beyond vocabulary and affects broader writing processes. Importantly, the findings indicate that these manifestations should not be interpreted as direct consequences of social media exposure alone. Instead, they emerge through the interaction between students' digital communication habits, language attitudes, metacognitive awareness, previous writing instruction, and academic literacy experiences.

Analysis of the writing samples demonstrated recurring linguistic characteristics that differed from the conventions expected in formal academic writing. These findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Influence of Digital Language Habits on Academic Writing Quality

<i>Aspect of Writing</i>	<i>Expected Academic Standard</i>	<i>Observed Patterns in Student Writing</i>	<i>Frequency (N=42 papers)</i>
Vocabulary Choice	Precise, formal, and context-appropriate diction	Use of informal/colloquial words (e.g., "ngomongin" instead of "membahas"); overuse of common, vague words	High (78%)
Sentence Structure	Complete, varied, and well-constructed sentences	Tendency toward short, simple, or fragmented sentences; limited use of complex structures	Moderate (62%)
Paragraph Development	Coherent paragraphs with clear topic sentences and supporting details	Underdeveloped ideas; paragraphs that list points rather than develop arguments	High (71%)
Cohesion and Coherence	Logical flow with appropriate transitions	Abrupt shifts between ideas; weak or missing transitions; ideas presented in a disjointed manner	Moderate (60%)
Adherence to Spelling and Grammar Rules	Consistent application of EYD (Enhanced Indonesian Spelling System)	Occasional spelling errors; inconsistent punctuation; influence of spoken/informal grammar	High (74%)

As presented in Table 4, informal vocabulary, simplified sentence structures, limited paragraph development, weak cohesion, and occasional spelling inconsistencies appeared across many student papers. However, the document analysis revealed that these features were interconnected rather than independent. Students who relied heavily on conversational vocabulary also tended to construct shorter sentences, provide limited elaboration of arguments, and employ fewer cohesive devices. This pattern suggests that digital language habits influence not only lexical selection but also the organization of academic discourse.

One participant explained this relationship during the interview:

"On social media, you have to be quick and short to keep people's attention. I think that habit has made it hard for me to write long, detailed paragraphs. My mind just wants to get to the point quickly without much explanation." (P8)

Another participant reflected on a similar experience:

"I notice that in my papers, my sentences are often short and choppy. It's like I'm writing the way I tweet—just quick thoughts one after another, but without connecting them well."

These narratives correspond closely with the document analysis. Students' texts frequently introduced ideas without sufficient explanation, shifted rapidly between topics, and relied on repetitive sentence structures. Rather than constructing logically connected arguments, several papers resembled sequences of independent statements, reflecting discourse patterns commonly found in digital communication. Such

characteristics indicate that students were transferring communicative strategies optimized for speed and brevity into contexts that instead required elaboration, logical reasoning, and textual cohesion.

The document analysis further identified several discourse-level characteristics that were not immediately apparent through interviews alone. First, many papers exhibited limited argument development. Topic sentences were often present but were followed by brief explanations that lacked supporting evidence, examples, or analytical discussion. Second, paragraph organization tended to be uneven, with abrupt transitions between ideas and insufficient use of cohesive markers linking arguments across paragraphs. Third, several students repeatedly relied on similar sentence constructions, resulting in monotonous writing that reduced rhetorical effectiveness. These findings demonstrate that the influence of informal digital communication extends beyond language accuracy to higher-order writing competencies involving organization, coherence, and critical argumentation.

Nevertheless, considerable variation was observed among participants. Students with similar levels of social media exposure frequently produced markedly different writing quality. This variation indicates that intensive digital engagement alone does not determine academic writing performance. Instead, the findings suggest that individual differences in language awareness and writing regulation substantially influence how digital language habits are transferred into academic contexts.

This variation became particularly evident when the researchers compared interview responses with participants' writing samples. Students who explicitly distinguished between informal digital communication and formal academic writing generally produced texts demonstrating stronger paragraph organization, more precise vocabulary, and more coherent argument development. Conversely, participants who reported difficulty separating these linguistic contexts tended to produce papers containing conversational expressions, fragmented reasoning, and inconsistent academic register.

The relationship between language awareness and writing quality is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Student Strategies for Managing Digital Language Influence in Academic Writing

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Participant Quote</i>	<i>Perceived Effectiveness</i>
Conscious Code-Switching	Deliberately shifting mindset when transitioning from digital to academic writing	"I have a mental switch. When I open my laptop to write a paper, I tell myself, 'Okay, now you're in academic mode.' It helps me adjust my language." (P2)	High
Revision and Editing	Intentionally reviewing drafts to identify and correct informal elements	"I always read my paper aloud after finishing. If something sounds like something I'd say on Instagram, I change it." (P9)	High
Exposure to Academic Texts	Actively reading academic articles and books to internalize formal language patterns	"I try to read more journal articles. It helps me remember what academic language should look like." (P4)	Moderate
Peer Review	Asking friends to check for language formality and clarity	"I ask my friend to read my paper and point out if any parts sound too casual." (P11)	Moderate
No Conscious Strategy	Writing without deliberate attention to language register	"I just write whatever comes to mind. Usually, I assume it's fine." (P6)	Low

Table 5 demonstrates that participants employed different strategies to regulate the influence of digital language during academic writing. The most effective strategies were not technological but metacognitive in nature. Students consciously monitored their language choices, evaluated the appropriateness of their expressions, and deliberately adjusted their writing according to academic expectations. These strategies enabled them to negotiate competing language systems rather than allowing one register to dominate the other.

One participant described this conscious regulation:

"I have a mental switch. When I open my laptop to write a paper, I tell myself, 'Okay, now you're in academic mode.' It helps me adjust my language." (P2)

Another participant emphasized the importance of revision:

"I always read my paper aloud after finishing. If something sounds like something I'd say on Instagram, I change it." (P9)

Similarly, another participant highlighted the role of academic reading:

"I try to read more journal articles. It helps me remember what academic language should look like." (P4)

These findings suggest that successful writers actively regulate the transition between digital and academic language. Rather than attempting to eliminate informal language completely, they consciously adapted their linguistic choices according to communicative purpose and audience. Such behavior reflects metacognitive regulation, in which writers continuously monitor, evaluate, and revise their own language throughout the writing process.

By contrast, students who reported having no deliberate writing strategy generally produced papers containing more informal vocabulary, weaker cohesion, and less developed arguments. One participant admitted:

"I just write whatever comes to mind. Usually, I assume it's fine." (P6)

Document analysis supported these findings by showing that students with limited metacognitive regulation frequently produced texts containing conversational transitions, repetitive sentence patterns, and weak coherence, despite acceptable grammatical accuracy. In contrast, participants who regularly read academic articles, received lecturer feedback, and engaged in peer review maintained more consistent academic registers. These academic literacy experiences strengthened awareness of disciplinary writing conventions and helped students regulate informal linguistic habits developed through digital communication.

The triangulation of interview, observation, and document data indicates that the influence of social media on academic writing is neither direct nor uniform. Students with stronger metacognitive awareness, systematic revision practices, and greater exposure to academic texts were better able to separate digital and academic language registers. Overall, Theme 3 demonstrates that writing quality emerges from the interaction among digital communication, ambivalent language attitudes, metacognitive regulation, academic literacy, and instructional support. Rather than positioning social media as the sole cause of writing difficulties, the findings show that its influence is mediated by language attitudes and moderated by students' self-regulation and educational experiences.

Integrative Interpretation of the Findings

The three themes collectively illustrate that the relationship between social media exposure and students' academic writing is neither linear nor deterministic. Instead, the findings reveal an interconnected process in which continuous participation in digital communication shapes students' language attitudes, and these attitudes subsequently influence how they negotiate linguistic choices during academic writing. The analysis therefore supports the proposition that *ambivalent language attitudes* function as the central mechanism linking everyday digital communication and academic writing practices.

Across all data sources, social media emerged as a pervasive linguistic environment that continually reinforced informal communication characterized by brevity, immediacy, creativity, and expressive interaction. However, the findings demonstrate that repeated exposure to these linguistic patterns did not automatically diminish students' academic writing ability. Rather, sustained participation in digital communication gradually normalized particular language habits that students later had to reconcile with the formal conventions required in academic contexts. Consequently, the primary influence of social media lies not in directly producing writing errors but in shaping the linguistic experiences through which students develop beliefs, preferences, and behavioral tendencies toward language use.

The emergence of ambivalent language attitudes represents the study's most significant finding. Students consistently expressed two competing yet equally legitimate orientations toward language. On one hand, they recognized the institutional value of standard Indonesian as an essential requirement for academic credibility. On the other hand, they viewed informal digital language as more efficient, expressive, socially meaningful, and representative of their everyday identities. Rather than interpreting these orientations as contradictory, the present findings suggest that students continuously negotiate both language systems according to communicative purpose. This perspective provides a more nuanced explanation than portraying students as simply preferring informal language over academic language.

The findings further indicate that the manifestation of digital language habits in academic writing varied considerably among participants despite similarly intensive levels of social media use. This variation demonstrates that social media exposure alone cannot explain differences in writing quality. Students who exhibited stronger metacognitive awareness, greater familiarity with academic discourse, systematic revision practices, and regular engagement with academic reading were consistently more successful in maintaining appropriate academic language. Conversely, students with limited awareness of language registers experienced greater difficulty regulating the transfer of informal linguistic habits into academic writing. These patterns suggest that academic writing develops through the interaction of multiple educational and psychological factors rather than through digital exposure alone.

Taken together, the findings support the conceptual framework proposed in this study: Social Media Exposure → Ambivalent Language Attitudes → Academic Writing Practices. Rather than functioning as a direct causal pathway, this relationship is shaped by students' capacity to regulate language use through metacognitive monitoring, previous writing experiences, academic literacy practices, and instructional support. This integrative interpretation therefore positions ambivalent language attitudes as the key explanatory construct connecting digital communication with academic writing while simultaneously acknowledging the important roles of self-regulation and educational context.

Overall, the results suggest that the challenge faced by university students is not choosing between digital language and academic language, but learning to navigate both appropriately. Students who successfully distinguished between these linguistic registers were better able to adapt their writing to academic expectations without abandoning the communicative flexibility developed through digital interaction. These findings therefore provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion, which examines how the present results extend previous research, contribute to theories of language attitudes and academic writing, and inform pedagogical practices designed to strengthen register awareness and self-regulated writing in higher education.

Discussion

This study examined the interplay between social media exposure, language attitudes, and academic writing skills among university students. The findings indicate that the relationship among these variables is dynamic rather than linear. Instead of directly influencing writing quality, social media shapes students' linguistic experiences, which subsequently contribute to the development of *ambivalent language attitudes* that affect academic writing practices. This finding extends previous research by identifying language attitudes as the psychological mechanism connecting digital communication and writing performance. Moreover, the results demonstrate that writing quality is simultaneously influenced by metacognitive awareness, academic literacy experiences, writing instruction, and revision practices, suggesting that social media should be understood as one contextual factor within a broader educational ecosystem rather than the sole determinant of academic writing quality.

Theme 1: The Pervasiveness of Social Media and the Formation of Digital Linguistic Habits

The findings confirm that social media has become an integral part of students' daily communication, supporting previous observations that digital platforms have transformed how individuals interact, construct identities, and negotiate language (Yu, 2024; Timotheou et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2024; Gárgoles & Ambás, 2023). Rather than functioning merely as communication tools, platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X create distinct discourse communities that encourage different linguistic practices. WhatsApp facilitates rapid interpersonal exchanges, Instagram emphasizes expressive identity construction, TikTok promotes concise and trend-driven communication, and X encourages brief opinion-oriented discourse.

These platform-specific characteristics explain why students habitually employ abbreviations, code-mixing, slang, emojis, and simplified sentence structures, corroborating the findings of Di Marco et al. (2024) and Panjaitan & Patria (2024). However, the present study argues that these linguistic forms should not automatically be viewed as evidence of declining language competence. Within digital contexts, they represent communicatively efficient and socially meaningful language choices (Muawanah et al., 2024). Difficulties emerge only when these discourse patterns are unconsciously transferred into academic writing, where different rhetorical conventions are expected.

The variation observed among participants further demonstrates that intensive social media exposure alone cannot explain differences in writing quality. Students who successfully distinguished between digital and academic registers were better able to regulate their language use, indicating that educational outcomes depend on conscious linguistic regulation rather than digital exposure itself.

Theme 2: The Emergence of Ambivalent Language Attitudes

The principal contribution of this study lies in identifying *ambivalent language attitudes* as the key mechanism linking digital communication and academic writing. Previous studies generally describe language attitudes as either positive or negative (Kulsum et al., 2024; Hamade et al., 2024; Putra & Tustiawati, 2024). In contrast, the present findings reveal that students simultaneously value standard Indonesian for academic purposes while feeling emotionally attached to informal digital language. These orientations are not contradictory but reflect students' efforts to function effectively across different communicative contexts.

This interpretation expands previous work by Fang et al. (2025), who highlighted tensions between academic language expectations and digital communication. The present study demonstrates that this tension operates across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Students intellectually understand academic language conventions yet emotionally identify with informal digital communication, creating

continuous negotiation between competing language registers. Likewise, Chen & Liu (2025) emphasize the challenges of maintaining linguistic standards in digitally mediated environments, while the present findings show that successful academic writing depends on students' ability to regulate multiple linguistic identities rather than simply following grammatical rules.

Theme 3: The Manifestation of Digital Habits in Academic Writing

The findings further demonstrate that ambivalent language attitudes are reflected in students' academic writing through conversational vocabulary, simplified sentence structures, limited paragraph development, and weak cohesion. These findings support concerns raised by Černý (2025) and Lee et al. (2024) regarding declining academic writing quality. However, this study extends previous research by showing that these textual characteristics arise from the interaction between habitual digital communication and students' language attitudes rather than from insufficient linguistic competence alone.

Importantly, students with similar levels of social media use produced substantially different writing quality. Those who demonstrated stronger metacognitive awareness employed deliberate code-switching, systematic revision, academic reading, and peer feedback to regulate language use more effectively. This finding suggests that social media does not inevitably weaken academic writing. Instead, its influence is mediated by students' self-regulated writing strategies and academic literacy experiences, enabling some students to transform digital communication from a potential challenge into a manageable linguistic resource.

The present findings both support and extend previous studies concerning digital communication and academic writing. Sari et al. (2024), Sulyati & Kuswara (2025), and Chairunisa & Hasibuan (2024) reported that digital literacy enhances students' reading and writing skills by promoting critical thinking and academic engagement. Rather than contradicting these findings, this study distinguishes between structured educational uses of digital technologies and habitual social media communication. While educational digital resources expose students to formal language and purposeful learning, social media primarily encourages rapid, conversational interaction (Naslund et al., 2020). Consequently, the educational impact of digital technology depends on its communicative context rather than the technology itself.

Similarly, the positive effects of digital learning resources reported by Eragamreddy et al. (2024), Alneyadi et al. (2023), and Ramadhan et al. (2024) should be interpreted alongside the present findings. Digital technologies can strengthen academic writing when integrated into instructional settings, yet the same technologies may reinforce informal discourse habits when used predominantly for everyday social interaction. This interpretation also supports Klimova & Pikhart (2019), who argued that media influences writing at linguistic, cognitive, and discourse levels. The present study extends this argument by identifying *ambivalent language attitudes* as the psychological mechanism explaining how these influences are transferred into academic writing. Furthermore, consistent with Hamsiah et al. (2026), the findings suggest that students actively regulate rather than passively absorb digital communication practices, highlighting the importance of metacognitive awareness in academic writing.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes theoretically by proposing a process-oriented framework linking social media exposure, ambivalent language attitudes, and academic writing. Unlike previous research that examined these variables separately (Yu, 2024; Pan et al., 2024; Hamade et al., 2024), the present findings position language attitudes as the central mediating construct connecting digital communication and writing performance. Rather than conceptualizing attitudes as simply positive or negative, the findings demonstrate that students simultaneously maintain cognitive appreciation of standard Indonesian and emotional attachment to informal digital language.

The findings also suggest that social media should be understood as multiple discourse communities rather than a single technological environment. Different platforms cultivate distinct communicative norms that require students to negotiate multiple language registers. Consequently, academic writing is best viewed as a metacognitively regulated process in which successful writers consciously monitor, evaluate, and adapt their language according to disciplinary expectations. This framework advances understanding of language development by integrating digital communication, language attitudes, academic literacy, and self-regulated writing into a single explanatory model.

Expanded Pedagogical Implications

The findings have important implications for higher education writing instruction. First, writing courses should extend beyond grammar and mechanics to explicitly develop students' awareness of language registers. Students need opportunities to compare digital and academic discourse, recognize context-appropriate language choices, and understand that effective communication depends on audience and purpose rather than rigid linguistic correctness.

Second, writing instruction should systematically foster metacognitive regulation through reflective writing, guided revision, peer feedback, and self-assessment. These activities encourage students to monitor their linguistic decisions and consciously manage the transition between informal and academic registers, supporting recommendations by Kim et al. (2023) and Kim et al. (2021).

Third, educators should integrate authentic digital literacy activities into writing instruction instead of rejecting students' digital language practices. Classroom tasks such as transforming social media posts into academic paragraphs, analyzing discourse across different platforms, and practicing deliberate code-switching can help students appreciate the strengths and limitations of different language varieties. Finally, sustained exposure to academic texts, iterative feedback, and lecturer professional development are essential for strengthening students' academic literacy while enabling instructors to respond effectively to contemporary digital communication practices.

Limitations

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted at a single university in Indonesia, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other institutional or cultural settings. In addition, some information regarding social media practices relied on participants' self-reports, creating the possibility of recall bias or socially desirable responses despite triangulation through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures relationships at one point in time and therefore cannot fully explain how language attitudes and writing practices evolve throughout students' academic development.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media exposure significantly influences university students' academic writing through the mediating role of language attitudes. Frequent engagement with informal digital language, including abbreviations, slang, code-mixing, and non-standard structures, creates ambivalent attitudes in which students recognize the importance of standard Indonesian for academic purposes but feel more comfortable using informal varieties. This ambivalence is reflected in academic writing through informal vocabulary, underdeveloped sentences, weak paragraph cohesion, and limited idea elaboration. However, the influence is not deterministic, as students with stronger metacognitive awareness and strategies such as deliberate code-switching, revision, and engagement with academic models are better able to maintain writing quality. These findings highlight language attitude as an important link between digital exposure and writing behavior and suggest that writing instruction should address not only grammar and organization but also students' linguistic awareness, identity, and ability to shift appropriately between digital and academic registers. Future studies should use longitudinal, comparative, and intervention-based designs to examine causal relationships, generalizability, and effective pedagogical strategies for strengthening students' academic writing competence in increasingly digital environments.

Declarations

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|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Author contribution | : | <p>Rini Damayanti was responsible for conceptualizing and designing the research project. She conducted the primary data collection, carried out the interviews and observations, analyzed the data, and led the writing of the manuscript. She also coordinated the overall research process and integrated the findings into the final draft.</p> <p>Roely Ardiansyah contributed to the development of the research framework and methodology. He assisted in data analysis and interpretation, reviewed and refined the theoretical discussion, and provided critical revisions to improve the clarity and coherence of the manuscript. Both authors discussed the results, contributed to the final version of the manuscript, and approved the submitted version.</p> |
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| Ethics Approval | : | This study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional authority at the university where the research was conducted (No. 12/ET-UWKS/9/2025). All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement and were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly |

maintained, and all data were used solely for academic research purposes.

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