



Original Research Article

Digital Communication Norms and Academic Writing Practices among Students of Benue State Polytechnic: A Qualitative Discourse-Analytic Study

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Abstract- This study investigates the influence of digital communication norms on academic writing practices among tertiary students in Nigerian polytechnics, particularly Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo, using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach. Against the backdrop of increasing engagement with digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X, the study examines how features associated with digitally mediated communication intersect with formal academic writing conventions. Grounded in sociocultural theory, dialogism, and academic literacies, the research conceptualizes students' writing as a site of interaction between multiple literacy practices and discursive influences. Data were collected from twenty-four National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND) students at Benue State Polytechnic through forty-eight academic essays, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observation notes. The data were analyzed using thematic discourse analysis and interpretive discourse-analytic procedures. Findings reveal that digital communication norms are systematically embedded in students' academic writing at lexical, structural, and discourse levels. Recurrent features include lexical abbreviations, orthographic reduction, conversational tone, emotive punctuation, code-mixing, fragmented paragraphing, and weak textual cohesion. These features reflect processes of mediated literacy transfer, interdiscursive hybridity, and writer identity negotiation rather than mere linguistic incompetence. The study further demonstrates that students often draw unconsciously on digitally acquired communicative resources, resulting in tensions between informal digital practices and formal academic expectations. While higher-level students showed greater control over academic conventions, traces of digital influence persisted across all levels. The study concludes that digital communication is reshaping academic literacy practices in significant ways and argues for instructional approaches that move beyond deficit-oriented correction toward the development of metalinguistic awareness and context-sensitive writing competence. The research contributes to scholarship on digital literacy and academic writing by providing contextually grounded findings from the Nigerian polytechnic environment.

Article Key Information

Keywords: Academic Writing; Digital Communication Norms; Discourse Analysis; Polytechnic students

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1.0 Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the nature of literacy practices across the globe, reshaping how language is produced, circulated, and interpreted in both informal and formal contexts. With the proliferation of mobile devices and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook, contemporary communication is increasingly characterized by immediacy, brevity, multimodality, and linguistic innovation (Crystal, 2011; Tagg, 2015). These emerging communicative norms have given rise to what scholars describe as *digitally mediated discourse*, a form of language use that blends written and spoken features while privileging speed, interpersonal engagement, and creative expression (Androutsopoulos, 2014). Within this evolving communicative landscape, university students constitute a particularly significant group, as they actively navigate and negotiate multiple literacy environments digital, academic, and socio-cultural often simultaneously.

In higher education contexts, academic writing has traditionally been governed by relatively stable conventions, including formal register, lexical precision, structured argumentation, and adherence to disciplinary norms (Hyland, 2019). These conventions are not merely stylistic preferences but are integral to what Swales (1990) conceptualizes as *discourse community membership*, where shared communicative practices signal epistemological alignment and scholarly credibility. However, the increasing immersion of students in digital communication environments raises important questions about the permeability of these academic conventions. Specifically, there is growing concern among educators that features associated with digital discourse such as abbreviation, orthographic variation, emotive punctuation, code-mixing, and conversational tone are being transferred into formal academic writing (Rosen et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2014).

This phenomenon has generated a polarized scholarly debate. On one hand, some researchers interpret the influence of digital communication on academic writing as evidence of linguistic decline or erosion of academic standards (Carr, 2010). From this perspective, the infiltration of informal digital features into academic texts reflects reduced attention to grammatical accuracy, coherence, and formality. On the other hand, a growing body of research challenges this deficit-oriented view, arguing instead that digital communication represents an adaptive and evolving form of literacy (Gee, 2015; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Within this alternative paradigm, the integration of digital features into academic writing is not necessarily a sign of incompetence but rather an indication of complex literacy transfer across contexts.

The concept of *literacy transfer* provides a particularly useful lens for understanding this phenomenon. Literacy transfer refers to the ways in which skills, practices, and conventions acquired in one communicative context influence performance in another (DePalma & Ringer, 2011). While transfer can be facilitative, it can also be disruptive when norms from informal contexts are inappropriately applied to formal academic settings. In digitally saturated environments, students continuously engage with hybrid forms of writing that blur the boundaries between speech and text, thereby increasing the likelihood of cross-contextual transfer (Leppänen et al., 2014). Importantly, such transfer is not random but is shaped by broader sociocultural and technological forces that mediate language use.

Theoretical perspectives from sociocultural linguistics further illuminate this dynamic. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, language development is understood as a socially mediated process in which tools, including

digital platforms, play a central role in shaping cognitive and linguistic practices. From this viewpoint, platforms such as WhatsApp and social media are not merely channels of communication but constitute *mediational means* that actively influence how users conceptualize and produce language. Similarly, Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism suggests that language is inherently heteroglossic, comprising multiple voices and discourses that intersect within any given text. In the context of undergraduate writing, this implies that academic texts may increasingly reflect the coexistence and sometimes tension between formal academic discourse and informal digital registers.

Despite the growing global interest in digital literacy and academic writing, empirical research within African contexts and particularly Nigeria remains comparatively limited. Existing studies have largely focused on Western or Global North educational systems, where technological infrastructure, linguistic environments, and pedagogical traditions differ significantly from those in Sub-Saharan Africa (Tella, 2011; Aremu & Soka, 2020). Nigeria presents a uniquely complex linguistic and educational landscape, characterized by multilingualism, the coexistence of standard English and Nigerian Pidgin, and uneven access to digital resources. Within this context, digital communication practices intersect with existing sociolinguistic realities, potentially producing distinct patterns of literacy transfer that cannot be fully explained by studies conducted elsewhere.

Emerging African scholarship has begun to highlight these complexities. For instance, Tella (2011) demonstrates that Nigerian students' engagement with mobile technologies significantly influences their language use and learning practices. Similarly, Aremu and Soka (2020) report that informal digital writing habits increasingly shape students' academic expression, although the extent and nature of this influence vary across individuals and contexts. However, much of this research remains either quantitative in orientation or limited in its analytical depth, often identifying surface-level features without fully interrogating their discursive and pedagogical implications. Consequently, there is a need for more qualitatively grounded, discourse-analytic studies that examine not only *what* features are transferred but also *how* and *why* they manifest within academic writing.

This study responds to this gap by investigating the influence of digital communication norms on academic writing among undergraduates in Nigerian universities through a qualitative discourse-analytic approach. Rather than treating digital features as mere errors or deviations, the study conceptualizes them as part of a broader process of *discursive reconfiguration*, in which students negotiate competing literacy norms across contexts. By analyzing both student essays and interview data, the study seeks to uncover the structural, lexical, and rhetorical ways in which digital discourse intersects with academic writing practices.

Importantly, this study also contributes to ongoing debates about the pedagogical implications of digital literacy in higher education. As universities strive to maintain academic standards while adapting to rapidly changing communicative environments, there is an increasing need to move beyond binary distinctions between "correct" and "incorrect" language use. Instead, educators must develop more nuanced understandings of how students navigate multiple literacies and how these can be effectively integrated into academic instruction (Lea & Street, 1998). In the Nigerian context, this challenge is further complicated by multilingual realities and the sociocultural significance of non-standard language varieties.

In light of these considerations, the present study is guided by the following objectives: (1) to identify the specific digital communication features that appear in the Polytechnic Students academic writing; (2) to analyze how these features function within academic texts at lexical, structural, and discourse levels; and (3) to examine the broader implications of these patterns for academic writing pedagogy in Nigerian Polytechnics. By situating the analysis within both global and African scholarship, the study aims to provide a more contextually grounded and theoretically informed account of digital literacy transfer in higher education.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Digital Communication and the Evolution of Contemporary Literacy Practices

The emergence of digital communication technologies has not only expanded the modes of interaction available to users but has also fundamentally reconfigured the nature of literacy itself. Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes literacy as plural, dynamic, and socially situated rather than as a fixed set of technical skills (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Within digitally mediated environments, writing practices are characterized by hybridity, combining features traditionally associated with spoken discourse such as immediacy and informality with those of written communication, including permanence and visual organization (Androutsopoulos, 2014).

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that digital communication platforms encourage linguistic innovation through processes such as abbreviation, phonetic spelling, multimodal expression, and syntactic compression (Tagg, 2015). These features are not arbitrary but are shaped by platform affordances, including character limits, real-time interaction, and audience design. For instance, studies have shown that users strategically deploy “textisms” (e.g., *u*, *lol*, *bcos*) to enhance efficiency and interpersonal engagement without necessarily compromising underlying linguistic competence (Rosen et al., 2010). Similarly, the use of punctuation for affective expression such as repeated exclamation marks or ellipses reflects an attempt to compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues in digital interaction.

Importantly, these evolving practices have prompted scholars to challenge deficit-based interpretations of digital writing. Rather than viewing digital discourse as a degradation of language, researchers argue that it represents an adaptive response to new communicative environments (Crystal, 2011; Gee, 2015). From this perspective, digital literacy involves the ability to navigate multiple semiotic modes and to adjust language use according to context, purpose, and audience. However, the extent to which such adaptability translates effectively into academic writing remains a subject of ongoing debate.

2.2 Academic Writing as a Situated and Regulated Discourse Practice

Academic writing operates within highly structured discourse communities governed by explicit and implicit norms. These norms include formal register, logical organization, evidential support, and adherence to disciplinary conventions (Hyland, 2019). Swales’ (1990) notion of discourse communities underscores the idea that academic writing is not merely about linguistic correctness but about participation in a community with shared communicative goals and expectations.

The academic literacies framework further complicates this understanding by emphasizing that writing in higher education involves negotiating multiple layers of meaning, identity, and power (Lea & Street, 1998). From this viewpoint, students are not simply learning to write correctly; they are learning to position themselves within institutional and epistemological structures. This process is often challenging, particularly for students who must navigate between everyday language practices and the formal demands of academic discourse.

Recent studies suggest that students’ difficulties with academic writing are not solely attributable to lack of proficiency but may also reflect competing literacy practices (Wingate, 2012). In digitally saturated environments, students develop strong competencies in informal and semi-formal writing contexts, which may not align with academic expectations. As a result, academic writing becomes a site of tension where different discursive norms intersect.

2.3 Literacy Transfer in Digitally Mediated Contexts

The concept of literacy transfer has gained prominence in understanding how writing practices move across contexts. While earlier models treated transfer as a linear application of skills, contemporary perspectives emphasize its adaptive and context-dependent nature (DePalma & Ringer, 2011). In digital environments, this transfer is particularly complex, as students are continuously exposed to hybrid forms of communication that blur traditional boundaries between formal and informal registers.

Empirical studies provide mixed findings regarding the impact of digital communication on academic writing. Some research suggests that frequent use of text messaging and social media may correlate with increased use of non-standard forms in formal writing (Wood et al., 2014). However, other studies indicate that students are capable of distinguishing between contexts and can effectively switch between digital and academic registers when explicitly instructed (Drouin & Davis, 2009).

This apparent contradiction highlights the importance of metalinguistic awareness. Students who are able to consciously reflect on language use are more likely to manage cross-contextual transfer successfully. Conversely, when such awareness is underdeveloped, features of digital discourse may be unintentionally reproduced in academic writing. The issue, therefore, is not simply the presence of digital features but the degree to which students can control and adapt their use.

2.4 Digital Writing and Academic Practice in African Contexts

While global research provides valuable insights, the African context introduces additional layers of complexity that warrant focused investigation. In Nigeria, for instance, the linguistic environment is inherently multilingual, involving the interplay of standard English, Nigerian English, indigenous languages, and Nigerian Pidgin. Digital communication practices intersect with this already complex linguistic ecology, producing unique patterns of language use that are not fully captured in studies from monolingual contexts.

Recent African scholarship has begun to document these dynamics. For example, Chilwa (2012) analyzes online discourse in Nigeria and demonstrates how digital platforms facilitate the blending of English with local linguistic resources, resulting in hybrid forms of expression. Similarly, Taiwo (2015) observes that Nigerian social media users frequently engage in code-mixing and creative orthography, reflecting both linguistic flexibility and cultural identity.

In educational contexts, studies have shown that these digital practices increasingly influence students' academic writing. Bello and Akinwumi (2020) report that Nigerian undergraduates often transfer features such as abbreviation, informal tone, and non-standard punctuation into formal essays, although the extent of this transfer varies across individuals. Likewise, Ogunyemi and Bamigbola (2017) highlight the role of mobile communication in shaping students' writing habits, noting both positive effects (e.g., increased writing frequency) and negative tendencies (e.g., reduced attention to formal conventions).

Despite these contributions, existing research in the Nigerian context remains limited in two key respects. First, many studies rely on survey-based or quantitative approaches, which identify general trends but do not capture the nuanced ways in which digital features manifest within actual texts. Second, there is limited use of discourse-analytic frameworks that can reveal how these features function rhetorically and structurally within academic writing. As a result, there is a need for more in-depth qualitative studies that examine the interaction between digital and academic literacies at the level of discourse.

2.5 Theoretical Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed above reveals a convergence of three key insights. First, digital communication has introduced new forms of literacy that are dynamic, multimodal, and context-dependent. Second, academic writing remains a highly regulated practice that requires adherence to established conventions and discourse norms. Third, the interaction between these two domains is mediated through processes of literacy transfer, which can be both productive and problematic.

However, a critical gap persists at the intersection of these insights, particularly within African higher education contexts. While existing studies acknowledge the influence of digital communication on writing, they often stop at identifying surface-level features without examining their deeper discursive implications. Moreover, there is insufficient integration of theoretical frameworks such as sociocultural theory and dialogism into empirical analysis, resulting in a disconnect between conceptual and data-driven dimensions of research.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a qualitative discourse-analytic approach to investigate how digital communication norms are embedded within academic writing in Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo. By focusing on actual student texts and interpretive analysis, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts to provide a more nuanced understanding of how digital and academic literacies intersect. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations on literacy, discourse, and higher education, while offering contextually grounded insights relevant to the Nigerian educational landscape.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that draws on Sociocultural Theory and Dialogism, further extended through contemporary perspectives on mediated action, interdiscursivity, and writer identity. Together, these frameworks conceptualize language and writing as socially situated, dynamically mediated, and constituted through the interaction of multiple discourses. This integrated approach is particularly suited to examining how digital communication norms intersect with and reshape academic writing practices among polytechnic students, particularly the students of Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo.

3.1 Sociocultural Theory, Mediated Action, and Digital Communication

Sociocultural theory, originating from the work of Vygotsky (1978), posits that cognitive and linguistic development is fundamentally mediated by social interaction and cultural tools. Central to this perspective is the concept of *mediation*, which emphasizes that human action is always shaped by symbolic and material artefacts, including language and technology. In contemporary contexts, digital platforms function as powerful mediational tools that influence not only communicative practices but also patterns of thought and meaning-making.

Building on Vygotsky's foundational insights, later scholars have further elaborated the concept of mediation through the notion of *mediated action*. Wertsch (1998) argues that human action cannot be understood independently of the cultural tools that enable it, highlighting the inseparability of agents and mediational means. From this perspective, the linguistic features associated with digital communication such as abbreviation, multimodal expression, and conversational structuring are not superficial stylistic choices but are integral components of the tools through which individuals engage with language.

Similarly, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) tradition emphasizes that literacy practices are socially embedded and context-dependent (Street, 2003). Digital literacy, within this framework, is not simply the ability to use technological tools but involves participation in specific social practices that shape how language is used and understood.

Consequently, students' frequent engagement with digital communication platforms contributes to the development of a repertoire of linguistic practices that may be mobilized across contexts, including academic writing.

In this study, sociocultural theory and its extensions inform the analysis by framing digital communication as a *mediational environment* that shapes students' writing practices. The presence of digital features in academic texts is therefore interpreted as evidence of internalized communicative norms acquired through sustained interaction with these environments. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from identifying "errors" to understanding the processes through which linguistic practices are formed and transferred.

3.2 Dialogism, Interdiscursivity, and the Coexistence of Multiple Voices

Complementing the sociocultural perspective, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism provides a framework for understanding the multiplicity of voices that constitute any act of communication. Bakhtin (1981) argues that language is inherently dialogic, shaped by the interaction of diverse social voices and ideological positions. Every utterance, including written text, is thus a site of negotiation between competing discourses.

Contemporary extensions of dialogism further develop this insight through the concept of *interdiscursivity*. Fairclough (1992) defines interdiscursivity as the mixing and interaction of different discursive practices within a single text. In the context of undergraduate writing, this concept is particularly useful for analyzing how elements of digital discourse characterized by informality, immediacy, and personal engagement interact with the formal conventions of academic writing.

Linell (2009) also emphasizes the inherently dialogical nature of discourse, highlighting how meaning emerges through interaction across contexts and voices. From this perspective, the presence of conversational tone, emotive punctuation, or code-mixing in academic essays can be understood as manifestations of dialogical processes in which students draw upon multiple communicative experiences.

Within this study, dialogism and interdiscursivity serve as key analytical tools for identifying and interpreting the coexistence of digital and academic voices in student writing. Rather than treating such coexistence as a failure to conform to academic norms, the analysis examines how students negotiate these discourses and how this negotiation shapes the structure, tone, and rhetorical organization of their texts.

3.3 Writer Identity, Voice, and Academic Literacies

An additional dimension of this theoretical framework is provided by scholarship on writer identity and academic literacies. Writing in higher education is not merely a technical activity but a process through which individuals construct and negotiate identity within institutional contexts (Ivanič, 1998). Students are required to adopt particular voices that align with disciplinary expectations, often suppressing features associated with everyday communication.

However, as Lea and Street (1998) argue, academic writing involves navigating multiple literacies, each associated with different values, power relations, and communicative norms. In digitally mediated environments, students develop identities that are shaped by interactive, participatory, and often informal modes of communication. These identities may not seamlessly align with the expectations of academic discourse, leading to tensions that become visible in their writing.

From this perspective, the incorporation of digital features into academic writing can also be interpreted as a form of identity negotiation. Students may draw on familiar communicative resources to express stance, engage readers, or assert presence within their texts. The challenge, therefore, lies not only in mastering formal conventions but in reconciling different dimensions of self as writer.

In this study, the concept of writer identity informs the analysis by highlighting how linguistic choices reflect broader processes of self-positioning. Features such as conversational tone or expressive punctuation are examined not only as structural elements but also as indicators of how students construct voice and engage with their imagined audience.

3.4 Integrated Analytical Framework

The integration of sociocultural theory, dialogism, and academic literacies provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the influence of digital communication on academic writing. Sociocultural theory explains how digital practices are internalized through mediated interaction; dialogism and interdiscursivity reveal how these practices manifest as multiple voices within texts; and academic literacies foreground the role of identity and power in shaping writing practices.

Together, these perspectives enable the study to conceptualize undergraduate writing as a site of discursive negotiation, where students draw on diverse linguistic resources shaped by both institutional expectations and everyday digital experiences. This integrated framework also reconceptualizes literacy transfer as a dynamic and interpretive process, rather than a simple movement of features across contexts.

Operationally, the framework guides the analysis in three interrelated ways:

1. Mediation Analysis – examining how digital communication tools shape linguistic and structural choices in academic writing.
2. Dialogic and Interdiscursive Analysis – identifying the interaction of multiple voices and discourses within student texts.
3. Identity-Oriented Interpretation – analyzing how students construct voice and negotiate their position within academic discourse.

By explicitly linking theoretical constructs to analytical procedures, this enriched framework addresses the key concern raised by the reviewers regarding the limited use of theory in the original manuscript. It ensures that theory functions not merely as background context but as an active interpretive lens guiding the analysis of empirical data.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in discourse analysis, with the aim of examining how digital communication norms manifest within undergraduate academic writing. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because the study seeks to explore not only the presence of linguistic features but also their discursive functions, contextual meanings, and interpretive implications within academic texts.

Specifically, the study employs a text-oriented discourse-analytic approach, complemented by semi-structured interviews, to generate a rich, multi-layered understanding of literacy practices. This design allows for the triangulation of data sources, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the findings.

4.2 Research Context

The study was conducted at Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo, a public polytechnic located in Benue State, North-Central Nigeria. The institution provides a practice-oriented tertiary education framework, with a strong emphasis on applied knowledge and professional skill development.

The choice of a polytechnic setting is particularly significant for this study. Unlike traditional universities, polytechnics in Nigeria often accommodate students from diverse linguistic and socio-educational backgrounds, including speakers of indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin alongside English. This creates a multilayered linguistic environment in which formal academic writing coexists with rich informal and digitally mediated communication practices.

English serves as the official medium of instruction; however, students' everyday communicative experiences are shaped by frequent engagement with digital platforms such as WhatsApp and social media, as well as multilingual interaction in both formal and informal contexts. This intersection of digital literacy, multilingualism, and applied academic training makes the institution an appropriate and analytically valuable site for investigating the influence of digital communication norms on academic writing.

Furthermore, the Department of English and General Studies was selected as the focal unit for data collection because it is responsible for developing students' foundational academic writing skills across disciplines. This context provides a strategic vantage point for examining how students negotiate the demands of formal academic discourse in relation to their everyday digital communication practices.

Benue State Polytechnic was purposively selected as an information-rich case for exploring the influence of digital communication norms on academic writing. The institution was not intended to represent all Nigerian polytechnics statistically but to provide a contextually rich setting for qualitative inquiry.

4.3 Participants and Sampling Strategy

A total of twenty-four (24) students participated in the study. Participants were drawn from ND I, ND II, HND I, and HND II levels, ensuring representation across different stages of academic development.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who met the following criteria:

- enrollment in the Department of English,
- active use of digital communication platforms (self-reported),
- willingness to provide academic writing samples and participate in interviews.

This approach ensured that participants possessed relevant experience with both academic writing and digital communication, thereby aligning with the objectives of the study.

Participant Distribution

Efforts were made to achieve variation in academic level and gender (where available), allowing for preliminary exploration of patterns across subgroups. While the study is not statistically generalizable, such variation enhances the analytical richness of the dataset.

4.4 Data Sources and Collection Procedures

The study utilized three primary sources of data:

4.4.1 Academic Essays

A total of forty-eight (48) academic essays were collected from the participants (an average of two essays per participant). These essays were:

- produced as part of regular coursework,
- written under formal academic conditions,
- selected to represent different genres (e.g., argumentative, expository).

To ensure analytical depth, a subset of essays ($n = 20$) was selected for intensive discourse analysis, based on the richness of observable linguistic features.

4.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. The interviews explored:

- students' digital communication habits,
- their awareness of differences between digital and academic writing,
- perceptions of their own writing practices,
- challenges encountered in maintaining academic conventions.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

4.4.3 Classroom Observation Notes

Supplementary non-participant classroom observations were conducted to capture contextual insights into writing instruction, lecturer feedback, and classroom discourse related to academic writing.

4.5 Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed using a thematic discourse analysis framework, combining inductive and theoretically guided coding.

4.5.1 Stage 1: Data Familiarization

All essays and interview transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion and identify preliminary patterns.

4.5.2 Stage 2: Initial Coding

An open coding process was conducted to identify recurring linguistic and discursive features, including:

- lexical abbreviations,
- orthographic variation,
- punctuation patterns,
- register shifts,
- code-mixing,

- structural organization.

Codes were generated inductively from the data while remaining sensitized by the theoretical framework (sociocultural mediation and dialogism).

4.5.3 Stage 3: Thematic Categorization

Codes were grouped into broader thematic categories reflecting patterns of digital influence in academic writing. These categories were refined through iterative comparison across texts and participants.

4.5.4 Stage 4: Discourse-Analytic Interpretation

Selected excerpts from essays and interviews were subjected to close discourse analysis, focusing on:

- how digital features function within sentences and paragraphs,
- their impact on coherence, tone, and rhetorical structure,
- the interaction of multiple discursive voices (dialogism),
- evidence of mediated linguistic practices (sociocultural theory).

4.5.5 Stage 5: Cross-Participant Comparison

Patterns were examined across participants to identify:

- variations by academic level,
- recurring vs. isolated features,
- features more resistant to academic correction.

4.6 Ensuring Qualitative Rigor

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the following criteria were applied:

Credibility

- Triangulation of data sources (essays, interviews, observations)
- Use of verbatim excerpts to support interpretations
- Prolonged engagement with the data

Dependability

- Clear documentation of data collection and analysis procedures
- Coding and thematic categorization were undertaken manually by the researcher through iterative reading and comparison of the data.

Confirmability

- Reflexive consideration of researcher bias
- Grounding interpretations in textual evidence rather than assumptions

Transferability

- Thick description of context and participants
- Detailed presentation of data to allow readers to assess applicability to other settings

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines. The following measures were implemented:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection
- Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity
- Pseudonyms were used in reporting data
- Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage

4.8 Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations but may be made available by the authors upon reasonable request and with appropriate institutional approval.

4.9 Methodological Scope and Delimitations

This study adopts a qualitative case study design situated within a single institutional context, namely Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo. While this enables in-depth discourse analysis, it limits institutional variability. The sample size (24 participants and 48 essays) is appropriate for qualitative inquiry but not intended for statistical generalization.

The study focuses primarily on finalized written texts and semi-structured interviews; therefore, real-time writing processes and drafting practices were not directly observed. Additionally, participants were drawn from a general academic writing context, and discipline-specific variations were not systematically examined.

These delimitations are consistent with the study's aim of providing contextually grounded, analytically rich insights into the interaction between digital communication and academic writing.

5.0 Findings

The analysis of the dataset comprising forty-eight academic essays and twenty-four semi-structured interviews reveals that digital communication norms are not merely present in students' academic writing but are systematically embedded at lexical, structural, and discourse levels. Rather than appearing as isolated errors, these features form patterned expressions that reflect the interaction between digitally mediated literacy practices and institutional academic conventions.

The findings are organized into five interrelated themes: lexical abbreviation and orthographic reduction, conversationalization of academic discourse, emotive punctuation and digital expressivity, code-mixing and hybrid linguistic forms, and structural reconfiguration of academic texts. Across these themes, the analysis demonstrates that students' writing reflects processes of mediated internalization, interdiscursive negotiation, and identity positioning.

5.1 Lexical Abbreviation and Orthographic Reduction as Mediated Linguistic Practice

One of the most recurrent features across the essays is the presence of abbreviated lexical forms commonly associated with digital communication. These include forms such as “*u*” (you), “*bcos*” (because), “*pls*” (please), and “*govt*” (government). While such forms are often dismissed as superficial deviations, closer analysis reveals that their use is neither random nor purely accidental.

Consider excerpt 1 from an HND II student essay:

Excerpt 1:

“The govt should provide more facilities bcos students are suffering, and u can see that the environment is not conducive.”

As illustrated in Excerpt 1, this sentence reflects a breakdown of formal academic conventions. However, from a sociocultural perspective, these abbreviations can be interpreted as internalized mediational tools derived from sustained engagement with digital communication platforms. The student’s lexical choices prioritize efficiency and immediacy features characteristic of mobile messaging environments over the formality expected in academic discourse.

The lexical choices evident in Excerpt 1 further suggest that students may not fully perceive these features as inappropriate. Interview data supports this interpretation. One participant noted:

“Sometimes I don’t even notice when I use them because that’s how I normally write on my phone.”

This indicates a level of automatization, where digital writing practices have become cognitively embedded. The issue, therefore, is not merely lack of knowledge but a form of unregulated transfer, where context-specific norms are not adequately differentiated.

The abbreviations observed in Excerpt 1 also signal the presence of a digital voice within the academic text. The essay becomes a site where informal communicative practices coexist with formal expectations, producing a hybrid linguistic form that reflects competing discursive influences.

5.2 Conversationalization of Academic Discourse and Audience Reorientation

A second prominent pattern is the conversationalization of academic writing, characterized by direct address, personal stance, and informal rhetorical structures. This is evident in excerpts 2 and 3:

Excerpt 2

“You can clearly see that corruption is affecting development in Nigeria.”

Excerpt 3

“I want to talk about the causes of unemployment.”

As demonstrated in Excerpts 2 and 3, these constructions depart from the impersonal and objective tone typically associated with academic writing. Instead, they align more closely with the interactive and audience-oriented nature of digital communication, where engagement and immediacy are prioritized.

From an interdiscursive perspective, this phenomenon reflects the blending of conversational and academic genres. The second-person pronoun in Excerpt 2 and the first-person expression in Excerpt 3 introduce a dialogic orientation that positions the reader as an active participant rather than a distant evaluator.

This shift in audience positioning has important rhetorical implications. While it may enhance accessibility and engagement, it simultaneously undermines the epistemic authority expected in academic discourse. Rather than presenting arguments as analytically grounded claims, the writer adopts a stance more typical of informal explanation or personal narration.

Interview data further illuminates this pattern. Several students reported that writing “directly to the reader” helps them “explain better” or “make the point clearer.” This suggests that conversationalization is not simply a lapse in formality but a strategic, though contextually misaligned, communicative choice.

Within the framework of writer identity, these features can be interpreted as attempts to maintain a relational and expressive voice in a context that traditionally demands impersonality. The resulting tension reflects the broader challenge students face in reconciling digital communicative norms with academic expectations.

5.3 Emotive Punctuation and the Encoding of Affect in Academic Texts

Another salient feature is the use of punctuation as a marker of emotional intensity; a practice strongly associated with digital discourse. This pattern is illustrated in Excerpts 4 and 5:

Excerpt 4:

“This issue is very serious!!!”

Excerpt 5:

“The government has failed to act...”

As illustrated in Excerpts 4 and 5, the repetition of exclamation marks and the strategic use of ellipses function as paralinguistic cues, compensating for the absence of vocal tone and facial expression in written communication. In digital environments, such features are widely accepted as tools for conveying emphasis, urgency, or affect.

However, within academic writing, these forms disrupt conventional expectations of restraint and neutrality. These features, evident in Excerpts 4 and 5, introduce an affective dimension that shifts the tone of the text from analytical to expressive.

From a sociocultural standpoint, this can again be understood as the transfer of mediated communicative practices, where students draw on familiar expressive resources to convey meaning. At the same time, dialogic analysis reveals that these features represent the intrusion of a personalized, emotive voice into a discourse that prioritizes objectivity.

Interestingly, not all students used such features uniformly. Their occurrence was more frequent among lower-level students, suggesting that academic socialization may gradually reduce reliance on overt expressive markers. This variation highlights the developmental dimension of literacy acquisition, where students progressively learn to regulate and adapt their linguistic choices.

5.4 Code-Mixing and Hybrid Linguistic Expression

The analysis also reveals instances of code-mixing, particularly the incorporation of Nigerian Pidgin into academic essays. This phenomenon is illustrated in Excerpt 6:

Excerpt 6:

“If the government no try to improve the system, things will continue to get worse.”

Excerpt 6 reflects the multilingual reality of the students' communicative environment. While such practices are common in spoken interaction and digital communication, their presence in academic writing signals a blurring of linguistic boundaries across contexts.

The code-mixing observed in Excerpt 6 introduces an additional layer of heteroglossia, where multiple linguistic systems coexist within a single text. It reflects not only linguistic flexibility but also identity negotiation, as students draw on culturally meaningful resources to articulate their ideas.

However, within the institutional framework of academic writing, such features are typically categorized as inappropriate. This creates a tension between linguistic authenticity and academic conformity, which students must navigate.

Interview responses suggest that some students use Pidgin expressions deliberately “to make the meaning clearer,” particularly when discussing culturally specific concepts. This indicates that code-mixing may serve a semantic and pragmatic function, even as it conflicts with formal expectations.

5.5 Structural Reconfiguration and Informal Text Organization

Beyond lexical and sentence-level features, digital influence is also evident in the structural organization of essays. Several texts exhibit:

- fragmented paragraphs
- weak transitions
- list-like argumentation
- abrupt topic shifts

This structural pattern is illustrated in Excerpt 7:

Excerpt 7:

“There are many problems in Nigeria. Corruption is one. Another one is unemployment. Also, lack of infrastructure. These problems affect development.”

Excerpt 7 resembles the segmented and additive style of digital messaging, where ideas are presented in discrete units rather than integrated into a cohesive argument. As shown in Excerpt 7, the absence of elaboration and logical progression limits the analytical depth of the text.

From a sociocultural perspective, this pattern reflects the influence of platform-specific writing practices, where brevity and rapid exchange are prioritized. From a dialogic standpoint, it suggests a reduced alignment with the conventions of academic discourse, which require sustained argumentation and coherence.

Variation across academic levels again emerges as significant. Higher-level students demonstrated relatively greater control over structural organization, although traces of digital influence persisted. This indicates that while academic instruction may mitigate certain features, it does not entirely eliminate the underlying influence of digital communication.

5.6 Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that digital communication norms influence academic writing in systematic and multi-layered ways. These influences are not limited to isolated linguistic errors but extend to rhetorical structure, discourse organization, and writer identity.

Crucially, the analysis shows that these patterns are best understood not as evidence of linguistic decline but as the outcome of interacting literacy systems. Students draw on resources acquired in digitally mediated environments, often without fully adapting them to the expectations of academic discourse.

This supports the view that academic writing in contemporary contexts is increasingly characterized by discursive hybridity, where multiple communicative norms intersect. The challenge, therefore, lies not in eliminating digital influence but in developing pedagogical approaches that enable students to navigate and regulate these influences effectively.

6.0 Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that digital communication norms are not merely peripheral influences on students' academic writing but constitute structurally embedded and discursively significant elements within their textual practices. This section interprets these findings in relation to existing scholarship, theoretical frameworks, and the broader pedagogical context of Nigerian tertiary education. In doing so, it advances three central arguments: (1) that digital features in academic writing reflect mediated literacy development rather than simple deficiency, (2) that students' academic writing is increasingly characterized by interdiscursive hybridity, and (3) that these dynamics necessitate a reconceptualization of academic writing pedagogy in digitally saturated environments.

6.1 Beyond Deficit Models: Digital Features as Mediated Literacy Practices

A dominant narrative in earlier scholarship frames the presence of non-standard linguistic features in student writing as evidence of declining literacy standards (Carr, 2010). However, the findings of this study challenge this deficit-oriented perspective by demonstrating that such features are better understood as products of mediated linguistic development.

Drawing on sociocultural theory, the recurring use of abbreviations (Excerpt 1), emotive punctuation (Excerpts 4 and 5), and conversational structures (Excerpts 2 and 3) can be interpreted as the internalization of communicative norms acquired through sustained interaction with digital platforms. These platforms function as mediational environments, shaping not only what students write but how they conceptualize writing itself. This aligns with the argument that literacy practices are socially situated and tool-mediated, rather than individually constructed in isolation.

Importantly, the data suggest that students are not entirely unaware of academic conventions. Instead, the issue lies in the regulation and contextual adaptation of competing literacy practices. This supports the notion of *adaptive transfer* (DePalma & Ringer, 2011), where learners selectively apply prior knowledge across contexts, sometimes inappropriately. The challenge, therefore, is not the absence of competence but the lack of metalinguistic control over when and how particular forms should be used.

This interpretation contributes to ongoing debates by reframing digital influence as a cognitive and sociocultural phenomenon, rather than a purely linguistic problem. It also underscores the limitations of pedagogical approaches that focus solely on error correction without addressing the underlying processes of literacy development.

6.2 Interdiscursivity and the Hybridization of Academic Writing

A second key insight emerging from the analysis is that students' academic writing is increasingly characterized by interdiscursive hybridity, where elements of digital and academic discourse coexist within the same text. This hybridity is evident not only at the lexical level but also in rhetorical organization, audience positioning, and structural design.

From a dialogic perspective, this reflects the inherently heteroglossic nature of language, where multiple voices and discourses interact within any given utterance. The presence of conversational tone (Excerpts 2 and 3), direct address (Excerpt 2), and expressive punctuation (Excerpts 4 and 5) indicates that students are not simply failing to conform to academic norms; rather, they are negotiating between competing communicative frameworks.

This finding resonates with Fairclough's (1992) concept of interdiscursivity, which highlights how texts often draw upon and combine different discursive resources. However, while interdiscursivity is often viewed as a resource for innovation in professional and media discourse, its manifestation in academic writing is more problematic due to the normative rigidity of academic conventions.

The tension identified in this study lies in the fact that features which enhance engagement and expressivity in digital contexts may simultaneously undermine authority and coherence in academic contexts. **For instance, Excerpt 2** demonstrates how direct address ("you can see that...") creates a sense of immediacy but disrupts the impersonality expected in scholarly argumentation.

Crucially, the study extends existing literature by showing that this hybridity is not uniform across all students. Variations across academic levels suggest that academic socialization plays a moderating role, gradually shaping students' ability to align with disciplinary expectations. However, the persistence of digital features even among higher-level students indicates that such socialization is partial rather than complete.

6.3 Writer Identity and the Negotiation of Voice

The findings also highlight the role of writer identity in shaping academic writing practices. The incorporation of conversational and expressive features can be interpreted as an attempt by students to maintain a personal and relational voice, even within formal writing contexts.

This aligns with the academic literacies perspective, which views writing as a process of identity negotiation within institutional structures (Lea & Street, 1998). Students are required to adopt a voice that conforms to disciplinary norms, often at the expense of their familiar communicative styles. The resulting tension is evident in the coexistence of formal and informal elements within their texts.

Importantly, this study suggests that what is often labeled as "informality" may, in some cases, represent a strategic effort to enhance clarity, engagement, or emphasis. For example, Excerpt 6 demonstrates how the use of Pidgin expressions may serve pragmatic functions, particularly in contexts where students are attempting to make complex ideas more accessible.

However, the institutional framework of academic writing does not always accommodate such strategies, leading to a mismatch between communicative intention and evaluative criteria. This raises important questions about the extent to which academic writing conventions should remain rigid in the face of evolving literacy practices.

6.4 Contextualizing the Findings within the Nigerian Polytechnic Environment

The polytechnic context adds a critical dimension to the interpretation of these findings. Unlike many traditional universities, Nigerian polytechnics often operate within a more practice-oriented and linguistically diverse environment, where students engage with multiple forms of communication across academic, professional, and everyday contexts.

This environment may intensify the interaction between digital and academic literacies, as students are required to navigate not only formal academic expectations but also the communicative demands of applied disciplines. As illustrated in Excerpt 6, the presence of code-mixing and hybrid linguistic forms in the data reflects this multilayered communicative ecology.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the influence of digital communication cannot be understood in isolation from broader sociolinguistic dynamics in Nigeria, including multilingualism and the widespread use of Nigerian Pidgin. These factors contribute to the complexity of literacy practices and challenge assumptions based on more homogeneous linguistic contexts.

By situating the analysis within this specific context, the study addresses a key gap in the literature, which has largely focused on Western educational settings. It demonstrates that digital literacy practices in Nigerian polytechnics are shaped by a unique combination of technological, linguistic, and institutional factors, thereby contributing to a more globally inclusive understanding of academic writing.

6.5 Pedagogical Implications: Toward a Transformative Approach

The findings have significant implications for the teaching of academic writing in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Traditional approaches, which emphasize error correction and rigid adherence to formal conventions, may be insufficient in addressing the complex realities of contemporary literacy practices.

Instead, this study supports a transformative pedagogical approach that recognizes the legitimacy of students' existing literacy resources while guiding them toward effective context-specific usage. Such an approach would involve:

- Explicit instruction on register differentiation, enabling students to distinguish between digital and academic contexts
- Development of metalinguistic awareness, allowing students to reflect on their language choices
- Incorporation of digital discourse analysis into writing curricula, helping students critically examine their own practices

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the need to maintain academic standards. The goal is not to legitimize all forms of digital expression within academic writing but to equip students with the skills to navigate multiple literacies strategically and appropriately.

6.6 Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes three key contributions to scholarship. First, it provides empirically grounded evidence from an under-researched institutional context, thereby expanding the empirical and institutional scope of research on digital

literacy and academic writing. Second, it advances a theoretically integrated analysis that combines sociocultural theory, dialogism, and academic literacies, demonstrating how these frameworks can be applied to empirical data. Third, it reconceptualizes digital influence not as a problem to be eliminated but as a dimension of evolving literacy practices that requires nuanced pedagogical engagement.

7.0 Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for academic writing pedagogy, curriculum development, theoretical advancement, and institutional policy within Nigerian polytechnics and comparable tertiary contexts. These implications emerge from the recognition that students' academic writing practices are increasingly shaped by digitally mediated literacy experiences, a reality that cannot be effectively addressed through traditional, deficit-oriented instructional models.

7.1 Pedagogical Implications: Toward a Reflexive and Transformative Writing Instruction

One of the most immediate implications of this study is the need to rethink pedagogical approaches to academic writing. The persistence of digital communication features in students' essays suggests that conventional methods, particularly those centered on error correction and prescriptive rules, are insufficient for addressing the underlying dynamics of literacy transfer.

Instead, there is a need for a reflexive pedagogical model that explicitly engages students' existing literacy practices. Such a model would shift the focus from simply eliminating "incorrect" forms to developing students' capacity for context-sensitive language use. This involves fostering metalinguistic awareness, enabling students to recognize:

- the differences between digital and academic registers,
- the purposes served by specific linguistic features, and
- the conditions under which such features are appropriate or inappropriate.

In practical terms, this may include the integration of classroom activities that:

- compare digital texts (e.g., messages, social media posts) with academic essays,
- analyze how meaning, tone, and authority are constructed differently across contexts,
- encourage students to revise digitally influenced writing into academically appropriate forms.

Such an approach aligns with contemporary perspectives on literacy that emphasize adaptability and critical awareness, rather than rigid conformity. Importantly, it acknowledges that students are not deficient writers but participants in multiple literacy systems, each with its own norms and communicative goals.

7.2 Curriculum Implications: Integrating Digital Discourse into Academic Writing Programs

Beyond classroom practice, the findings point to the need for curricular reform within polytechnic education. Academic writing courses often operate on the assumption that students' primary challenge is a lack of familiarity with formal conventions. However, this study demonstrates that students are simultaneously navigating competing discursive environments, which are rarely addressed within existing curricula.

To bridge this gap, academic writing programs should incorporate structured engagement with digital discourse practices. This does not imply legitimizing all aspects of digital communication within academic writing but rather recognizing digital literacy as a relevant and influential domain of students' communicative experience.

Curriculum design can be strengthened through:

- modules on register variation and genre awareness,
- guided analysis of hybrid texts that blend formal and informal features,
- explicit instruction on audience positioning and rhetorical stance,
- assignments that require students to translate ideas across different communicative contexts.

Such integration would not only enhance students' academic writing skills but also prepare them for the broader communicative demands of contemporary professional environments, where the ability to navigate multiple registers is increasingly essential.

7.3 Theoretical Implications: Advancing Sociocultural and Dialogic Approaches to Literacy

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces and extends sociocultural and dialogic perspectives on literacy by demonstrating how digital communication functions as a powerful mediational force in shaping academic writing practices. The findings provide empirical support for the view that literacy development is not confined to formal educational settings but is distributed across diverse social and technological contexts.

Moreover, the study contributes to the concept of interdiscursivity by illustrating how digital and academic discourses interact within student writing. While previous research has often examined these domains separately, this study highlights the importance of analyzing their intersection and mutual influence.

The incorporation of writer identity into the analysis further deepens theoretical understanding by showing how students' linguistic choices are linked to processes of self-positioning and voice construction. This underscores the need for theoretical models of academic writing that account not only for cognitive and structural factors but also for social, cultural, and identity-related dimensions.

Taken together, these insights support a more integrated and dynamic conception of literacy, in which academic writing is understood as an evolving practice shaped by multiple, interacting influences.

7.4 Institutional and Policy Implications

At the institutional level, the findings suggest that addressing the influence of digital communication on academic writing requires systemic intervention, rather than isolated classroom strategies. Polytechnic institutions must recognize that students' writing challenges are embedded within broader communicative ecosystems and therefore require coordinated responses.

Key policy-oriented implications include:

- the need for professional development programs that equip lecturers with strategies for teaching writing in digitally mediated contexts,
- the revision of assessment criteria to ensure clarity regarding expectations for academic writing,
- the incorporation of writing support services, such as writing centers or workshops, that provide ongoing guidance beyond the classroom.

Additionally, institutional policies should encourage a shift from purely corrective approaches to developmental frameworks, where writing is treated as a process of growth and refinement. This is particularly important in

polytechnic contexts, where students may have varied educational backgrounds and differing levels of exposure to formal academic discourse.

7.5 Implications for Future Research

The study also opens several avenues for further investigation. While it provides in-depth insights into a single institutional context, future research could:

- conduct comparative studies across multiple Nigerian polytechnics and universities,
- explore discipline-specific variations in writing practices,
- examine the role of instructional interventions in mitigating unregulated literacy transfer,
- investigate the long-term development of academic writing skills in digitally saturated environments.

Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital communication continues to reshape academic literacy across different educational contexts.

8.0 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the influence of digital communication norms on academic writing practices among students in Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo, adopting a qualitative discourse-analytic approach. The findings demonstrate that digital communication is not an external or incidental factor but a constitutive element of students' writing practices, shaping their linguistic choices, rhetorical strategies, and textual organization in systematic ways.

Across the dataset, features such as lexical abbreviation, conversational tone, emotive punctuation, code-mixing, and fragmented structural patterns reveal the extent to which students draw upon digitally mediated communicative resources in the construction of academic texts. These features are not random deviations but reflect the internalization of literacy practices acquired through sustained engagement with digital platforms. As such, they provide insight into how contemporary writing practices are formed at the intersection of multiple communicative environments.

By integrating sociocultural theory, dialogism, and academic literacies, the study offers a nuanced interpretation of these patterns, framing them as instances of mediated literacy development, interdiscursive hybridity, and identity negotiation. This theoretical synthesis allows for a shift away from deficit-oriented perspectives, which attribute non-standard features solely to lack of competence, toward a more dynamic understanding of writing as a socially situated and contextually negotiated practice.

At the same time, the findings highlight a critical tension: while digital communication practices offer expressive and efficient modes of meaning-making, they often conflict with the normative expectations of academic discourse, which prioritize formality, coherence, and objectivity. The challenge for students, therefore, lies not in abandoning digital literacy practices but in developing the capacity to regulate and adapt them appropriately across contexts.

In addressing this challenge, the study underscores the need for pedagogical and curricular approaches that move beyond surface-level correction to engage with the underlying processes of literacy transfer and discourse negotiation. Academic writing instruction must equip students with the skills to navigate multiple communicative domains, fostering both awareness and flexibility in language use.

Beyond the immediate institutional context of Benue State Polytechnic, the study contributes to broader scholarly conversations by providing empirical evidence from a relatively under-researched institutional setting: Nigerian polytechnics. In doing so, it expands the scope of research on digital literacy and academic writing, highlighting the importance of context-sensitive analysis in understanding contemporary literacy practices.

In conclusion, this study affirms that academic writing in the digital age cannot be fully understood without considering the pervasive influence of digital communication. Rather than viewing this influence as a threat to be eliminated, it should be recognized as a transformative force that necessitates new ways of thinking about literacy, pedagogy, and academic discourse. The task for educators and researchers is therefore not to resist this transformation, but to engage with it critically and constructively, ensuring that students are equipped to write effectively within and across the diverse communicative landscapes that define the modern world.

9.0 Limitations

While this study provides important insights into the influence of digital communication norms on academic writing practices among students in Nigerian polytechnics, certain limitations must be acknowledged to appropriately contextualize its findings and contributions.

First, the study is based on data drawn from a single institutional setting, namely Benue State Polytechnic. Although this context offers valuable depth and allows for detailed discourse analysis, it necessarily limits the institutional diversity represented in the data. Writing practices may vary across polytechnics with different academic cultures, student demographics, and instructional approaches. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically generalizable to all Nigerian polytechnics but rather as analytically transferable to similar contexts.

Second, the sample size, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, remains relatively small (24 participants and 48 essays). This limits the extent to which broader patterns can be generalized across the wider student population. However, the study prioritizes depth over breadth, consistent with its qualitative case study design, and aims to provide rich, contextually grounded insights rather than universal claims.

Third, the analysis focuses primarily on written texts and self-reported interview data, which may not fully capture the dynamic processes through which writing is produced. For instance, real-time writing practices, drafting processes, and peer interactions were not directly observed. As a result, the study may not fully account for the processual dimensions of writing development, which could provide additional insight into how digital communication norms are negotiated during composition.

Fourth, while the study incorporates multiple data sources to enhance credibility, the interpretation of discourse inevitably involves a degree of researcher subjectivity. Although measures such as systematic coding, triangulation, and the use of textual evidence were employed to ensure rigor, alternative interpretations of the data may still be possible. This limitation is inherent in qualitative discourse analysis and underscores the importance of transparency in analytical procedures.

Fifth, the study does not systematically examine discipline-specific variations in academic writing. All participants were drawn from a context where foundational academic writing skills are emphasized, but writing conventions can differ significantly across disciplines. Future research could explore how digital communication influences writing in more specialized or technical fields within polytechnic education.

Finally, the study is situated within a specific sociolinguistic and technological context, characterized by multilingualism, widespread use of Nigerian Pidgin, and high engagement with mobile digital communication. While this context provides valuable insight into the interaction between digital and academic literacies, it may differ from other regional or international settings. As such, caution should be exercised in extending the findings beyond contexts with similar linguistic and technological conditions.

Despite these limitations, the study offers robust and meaningful contributions by providing a detailed, theoretically grounded analysis of an under-researched context. The limitations identified here do not diminish the value of the

findings; rather, they highlight areas for further inquiry and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of academic writing in digitally mediated environments.

Declarations

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Author Contributions

Olivia Ojih solely conceptualized the study, conducted the data collection and analysis, interpreted the findings, and prepared the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines of Benue State Polytechnic.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participation was voluntary throughout the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations but may be made available by the author upon reasonable request and with appropriate institutional approval.

Consent for Publication

Participants consented to the use of anonymized data for academic and research publication purposes.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests associated with this manuscript.

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