

ENGLISH VOCABULARY AND DIGITAL DISCOURSE: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of social media on contemporary English vocabulary usage among university students. The study was guided by three research questions: how social media influenced vocabulary acquisition, what lexical features characterised social media discourse, and how digital vocabulary related to formal academic language use. A mixed-method design was employed, combining a structured questionnaire (N = 40) with a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis of 15 digital artifacts drawn from TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook. Quantitative results indicated that 77.5% of participants reported vocabulary development through social media, and 37.5% reported using informal digital vocabulary in academic writing. SFL analysis revealed that social media discourse functioned across three metafunctions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—through compressed lexical forms, evaluative language, and multimodal cohesive devices. Findings suggested that social media served as a significant site of incidental vocabulary acquisition while simultaneously exerting informalization pressure on academic registers.

Keywords: social media, English vocabulary, Systemic Functional Linguistics, digital discourse, register variation, Pakistani university students

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally reshaped how language is encountered and used in everyday life. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) exposed users to continuous streams of authentic English, generating new lexical forms; slang, abbreviations, emojis, and hashtags—that circulate across digital communities at unprecedented speed. By 2024, Pakistan ranked among the top fifteen countries worldwide in social media usage, with over 71 million active users, the majority of whom were

university-aged adults (Statista, 2024). This context made Pakistani university students a particularly relevant population for examining how digital language exposure shaped English vocabulary development.

Vocabulary occupies a central position in language proficiency. Nation (2013) argued that lexical knowledge underpinned both comprehension and production, while Griffiths (2013) demonstrated that strong vocabulary was a more reliable predictor of communicative success than grammatical accuracy alone. Despite this

consensus, the role of informal digital input in vocabulary acquisition remained underexplored, particularly in ESL contexts where formal instruction dominated language learning environments.

Previous studies acknowledged social media's potential for incidental vocabulary learning (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Godwin-Jones, 2018) but were limited in their examination of specific lexical features and their functional operation in discourse. More recent research confirmed that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram had become significant sites of lexical exposure (Kohnke et al., 2023; Alqahtani, 2023), yet little empirical work applied a systematic functional framework to analyse how digitally acquired vocabulary operated across communicative contexts in Pakistani higher education.

This study addressed that gap by investigating three questions: (1) How did social media influence contemporary English vocabulary usage among university students? (2) What lexical features, including slang, abbreviations, emojis, and digital expressions, were commonly found in social media discourse? (3) What was the relationship between social media vocabulary and formal or academic language use? The analysis was framed within Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which provided a principled framework for examining how vocabulary functioned ideologically, interpersonally, and textually within digital communication.

Literature Review

Social Media and Vocabulary Acquisition

Research on social media and language learning consistently demonstrated that digital platforms provided rich incidental input for vocabulary development. Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) established that extramural engagement with English through online environments produced measurable gains in lexical breadth, and Godwin-Jones (2018) characterized informal online language learning as a complex adaptive system in which vocabulary emerged through repeated, contextualized exposure. More recently, Kohnke et al. (2023) found that TikTok's short-form video format facilitated retention of new lexical items

through multimodal reinforcement, combining auditory, visual, and textual input simultaneously. Similarly, Alqahtani (2023) demonstrated that EFL learners who engaged regularly with English-language Instagram content showed significantly greater gains in informal vocabulary than those relying solely on classroom instruction. These studies collectively confirmed social media as a meaningful supplementary site of vocabulary learning, particularly for informal registers of English.

Lexical Features of Digital Discourse

Digital communication was characterized by distinctive lexical innovations that departed substantially from standard written English. Crystal (2006) identified abbreviations, phonetic spelling, and emoticons as early markers of internet language, while Tagg (2012) documented how text messaging produced compressed syntactic structures and hybrid lexical forms. Tagliamonte (2016) extended this analysis to social media, demonstrating that platforms populated by younger users served as laboratories for lexical change, with slang items entering mainstream use within months of their emergence online. More recent corpus analyses confirmed that lexical items such as "doomscrolling," "grind," and "POV" had transitioned from niche digital registers into broadly recognized communicative shorthand (Wang & Li, 2024). Muñoz-Basols and Salazar (2023) further argued that digital multiliteracy, the capacity to interpret and produce meaning across linguistic and semiotic modes, had become an essential competence for contemporary language learners, repositioning digital lexical knowledge as a legitimate domain of language education.

Systemic Functional Linguistics and Digital Discourse

Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) SFL framework conceptualized language as a social semiotic system in which meaning was always contextually shaped. The framework's three metafunctions: ideational (representation of experience), interpersonal (enactment of social relations), and textual (organization of discourse), offered a principled vocabulary for analyzing how digital texts

simultaneously constructed meaning at multiple levels. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) extended SFL into multimodal analysis, demonstrating that visual and spatial resources operated alongside linguistic ones in meaning-making. Kress (2010) subsequently argued that digital environments had fundamentally altered the semiotic landscape, making multimodal analysis essential for understanding contemporary communication. These theoretical developments positioned SFL as an appropriate framework for examining how social media discourse functioned, given that digital texts routinely combined linguistic items, emojis, hashtags, and visual elements to construct layered meanings.

Social Media in Pakistani Educational Contexts

In Pakistan, English occupied a dual role as the language of formal education and professional advancement, yet classroom instruction historically emphasised grammatical accuracy over communicative practice. Statista (2024) reported that Pakistani social media users spent an average of three hours daily on digital platforms, with English-language content comprising a substantial portion of that exposure. Despite this, empirical research on how this digital input affected English vocabulary development among Pakistani university students remained limited. Bouhami (2016) noted that social media engagement correlated with improved academic performance among Arab university students, and Alqahtani (2023) identified similar trends in Gulf EFL contexts, but comparable studies in South Asian settings were sparse. This study therefore, contributed to a gap in the literature by examining how social media vocabulary acquisition operated within the specific institutional and linguistic context of Pakistani higher education.

Research Objectives

- To investigate the influence of social media on contemporary English vocabulary usage.
- To analyze the lexical features of social media discourse, including slang, abbreviations, emojis, and digital expressions.

- To examine the relationship between social media vocabulary and its impact on formal and academic language use.

Research Questions

- How does social media influence contemporary English vocabulary usage?
- What lexical features, including slang, abbreviations, emojis, and digital expressions, are commonly found in social media discourse?
- What is the relationship between social media vocabulary and formal or academic language use?

Research Gap

Although previous studies have established the role of social media in vocabulary acquisition and digital language learning, limited research has examined these phenomena within Pakistani higher education through a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) framework. Existing studies have largely focused on vocabulary gains or learner perceptions without exploring how digital lexical items function across ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings in authentic social media discourse. Furthermore, empirical evidence combining questionnaire-based data with SFL analysis remains scarce in South Asian contexts. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the influence of social media on English vocabulary usage among Pakistani university students while simultaneously analyzing the functional characteristics of digital discourse through the lens of SFL.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative strand consisted of a structured questionnaire measuring students' perceptions of social media's influence on their English vocabulary. The qualitative strand involved SFL-based discourse analysis of social media artifacts. Triangulation of both data sources allowed for a more comprehensive account of the research problem than either method could provide independently.

Participants and Setting

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	30	75.0
	Male	10	25.0
Academic Level	Undergraduate	29	72.5
	Postgraduate	10	25.0
	Other/No Response	1	2.5
Age Group	18-20 Years	8	20.0
	21-23 Years	27	67.5
	Above 23 Years	5	12.5

Participants were 40 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in the university. Participants were selected through convenience sampling and were required to be active users of at least one English-language social media platform. The sample comprised 75% female (n = 30) and 25% male (n = 10) students, with 72.5% (n = 29) at the undergraduate level and 25% (n = 10) at the postgraduate level. The dominant age group was 21-23 years (67.5%, n = 27).

Data Collection

The questionnaire comprised Likert-scale and multiple-choice items addressing social media usage patterns, perceived vocabulary development, and register behaviour in academic writing. For the qualitative component, 15 digital artifacts were selected purposively from TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, X (formerly Twitter), and

Facebook, targeting posts from both student communities and educational language accounts. Selection criteria prioritized posts containing notable vocabulary use, audience interaction, and representativeness across platform types.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics, with responses aggregated by percentage to identify dominant patterns. Qualitative data were analyzed through SFL discourse analysis, examining each artifact for linguistic features corresponding to the three metafunctions: ideational (transitivity structures, experiential vocabulary), interpersonal (mood, evaluative language, affect), and textual (cohesive devices, thematic organization, multimodal structures). Findings from both strands were triangulated in the discussion.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Findings

Table 2 Key Questionnaire Findings

Survey Item	Percentage (%)
Reported vocabulary development through social media	77.5
Increased confidence in English usage	67.5
Improved understanding of informal expressions	72.5
Use of social media slang and abbreviations in daily communication	77.5
Recognized emojis and hashtags as meaningful communicative resources	75.0

Survey Item	Percentage (%)
Used informal digital vocabulary in academic writing	37.5

Social media usage was intensive across the sample: 42.5% reported using platforms for four to six hours daily, and 27.5% for more than six hours. Vocabulary exposure was correspondingly high: 55% reported frequent exposure to English lexical items, and 35% reported occasional exposure. Against this backdrop, 77.5% of participants reported that social media had facilitated their English vocabulary learning, and 67.5% reported increased confidence in English usage. Understanding of informal expressions improved for 72.5% of participants, and 77.5% reported actively using social media slang and abbreviations in everyday communication. Multimodal semiotic resources such as emojis and hashtags were recognized as meaningful by 75% of respondents. However, only 37.5% reported using informal digital vocabulary in academic writing, indicating that students generally maintained a distinction between digital and academic registers.

SFL Analysis of Social Media Discourse

Ideational Metafunction

TikTok posts such as “POV: You’re studying for exams at 2 AM” and “A day in my life as a university student” constructed experiential meaning through compressed transitivity structures involving material and mental processes, first- and second-person participant positioning, and heavily implied circumstantial context. Lexical items such as “POV,” “grind,” “burnout,” and “doomscrolling” functioned as experiential categories that encoded complex behavioural and psychological states in single units, reflecting the high-density encoding characteristic of digital discourse. Educational

posts across platforms introduced vocabulary through equivalence structures: “exhausted = very tired,” “mitigate = reduce severity”; embedding lexical items within contextual examples and contrastive pairs rather than isolated definitions.

Interpersonal Metafunction

Audience comments on TikTok (“This is so relatable,” “I really needed this today”) functioned as interactional alignment strategies encoding affect and community belonging rather than propositional content. Educational content combined imperative mood structures with positive evaluative language (“Keep going. Success takes time.”; “Master IELTS vocabulary today.”), producing a hybrid interpersonal configuration in which pedagogical authority was softened through motivational framing, reducing social distance while preserving directive intent.

Textual Metafunction

Hashtags such as #IELTS, #Vocabulary, and #StudyTips operated as pre-textual thematic markers, classifying discourse into semantic domains and connecting individual posts to broader digital networks. Cohesion across the dataset was achieved through multiple semiotic modes simultaneously: linguistic (lexical items), visual (emojis, color-coded text), structural (captions, overlays), and interactive (comments, engagement metrics). This multimodal cohesion system represented a departure from the linear grammatical cohesion of traditional written texts, in which meaning was distributed across interacting semiotic resources.

Table 3 Distribution of Artifacts by Platform and SFL Metafunction

Platform	Ideational	Interpersonal	Textual	Total	% of Corpus
TikTok	3	2	1	6	40.0%
Instagram	1	1	1	3	20.0%
YouTube Shorts	1	1	0	2	13.3%

X (Twitter)	0	1	1	2	13.3%
Facebook	0	0	2	2	13.3%
Total	5	5	5	15	100%

Discussion

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings confirmed that social media functioned as a significant site of incidental vocabulary acquisition for the participants. The high levels of perceived vocabulary development (77.5%) were consistent with SFL analysis showing continuous exposure to functionally embedded lexical items across ideational, interpersonal, and textual contexts. This aligned with Kohnke et al.'s (2023) finding that multimodal digital input enhanced lexical retention, and with Alqahtani's (2023) evidence that platform-based exposure produced measurable vocabulary gains in EFL settings.

The limited register transfer observed (37.5%) suggested that students navigated between digital and academic registers with moderate competence, selectively drawing on digital vocabulary when contextually appropriate. This finding paralleled Muñoz-Basols and Salazar's (2023) argument that digital multiliteracy involved not simply exposure to new lexical forms but the development of metalinguistic awareness about their contextual constraints. In the Pakistani academic context, where formal instruction had historically emphasized accuracy over authentic communicative exposure, social media appeared to fill a meaningful gap by providing contextualized, multimodal input that classroom environments rarely replicated.

At the same time, the informalization pressure documented in the SFL analysis, particularly the compressed, context-dependent structures of TikTok discourse, represented a genuine pedagogical concern. Vocabulary acquired through high-density digital encoding may transfer imprecisely into academic writing contexts if learners lack explicit instruction on register boundaries. This limitation reinforced the need for pedagogical approaches that treated digital vocabulary exposure as a resource to be critically engaged rather than uncritically adopted.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of social media on English vocabulary development among university students. Three findings emerged consistently across quantitative and qualitative data. First, social media served as a pervasive and effective site of incidental vocabulary acquisition, with 77.5% of participants reporting lexical gains through digital engagement. Second, social media discourse was characterized by functionally specific lexical features, compressed experiential categories, evaluative and affective language, and multimodal cohesive devices; that operated systematically across the three SFL metafunctions. Third, register transfer from digital to academic contexts was observable but limited, suggesting that students maintained meaningful register awareness despite intensive social media use.

These findings carried implications for language pedagogy in Pakistani higher education. Educators were advised to integrate digital discourse awareness into curricula, using social media texts as pedagogical material for register analysis rather than treating digital language as a threat to academic standards. The study's limitations, a convenience sample of 40 students from a single institution, a qualitative corpus of 15 artifacts, and reliance on self-report data, restricted the generalizability of findings. Future research should employ larger, institutionally diverse samples, longitudinal tracking of vocabulary development, and computational corpus methods to examine digital lexical change at scale.

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