

Original Paper

When Social Media Reshapes Academic English: Digital Register Drift and Hybrid Communication among Vietnamese EFL Students

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Abstract

In the era of digital communication, social media has increasingly transformed how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students communicate, interact, and construct linguistic identities. While previous studies have primarily focused on the effects of social media on language learning outcomes, relatively limited attention has been devoted to its influence on stylistic norms, academic discourse practices, and register control. This study investigates how social media-mediated communication contributes to digital register drift and hybrid communication among Vietnamese EFL students.

Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative data collected from 90 undergraduate students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Trade Union University. The dataset includes questionnaire responses, semi-structured interviews, and discourse samples extracted from students' online interactions across multiple social media platforms. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparative tests, while qualitative data were examined through thematic, discourse, and multimodal analysis.

The findings reveal that social media functions as a digital discourse ecology that reshapes communicative norms and accelerates stylistic hybridization. Students increasingly combine academic English with informal digital expressions, emojis, abbreviations, conversationalized syntax, and code-switching practices. The study further identifies a process of digital register drift in which increased communicative fluency and interactional confidence coexist with weakened grammatical precision, reduced stylistic consistency, and declining academic register control.

The study contributes theoretically by introducing the concepts of digital stylistic hybridization and academic register drift to explain the transformation of English communication in digitally mediated environments. Pedagogically, the findings highlight the need for EFL education to integrate digital stylistic competence, register awareness, and multimodal communication training into contemporary language instruction.

Keywords

digital register drift; hybrid communication; social media discourse; academic English; multimodal communication; digital sociolinguistics; EFL students; stylistic hybridization

1. Introduction

1.1 Digital Communication and the Crisis of Academic Language Boundaries

The rapid growth of social media and multimodal communication has fundamentally transformed contemporary language practices among EFL students. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are no longer merely entertainment spaces; they have become influential digital environments where learners interact, construct identities, and practice English in real time.

Within these environments, communication increasingly occurs through hybrid discourse that blurs the boundaries between formal and informal English, spoken and written language, and academic and everyday communication. EFL students frequently engage in multimodal interaction through emojis, memes, hashtags, short-form videos, and code-switching, leading to more fluid and conversationalized communication styles.

As a result, traditional academic English norms are becoming increasingly unstable. Digital discourse often incorporates emoji-mediated interaction, abbreviated syntax, internet slang, fragmented sentence structures, and translanguaging practices. Expressions once limited to informal online communication are gradually entering academic contexts such as classroom discussions, presentations, and written assignments.

This shift has contributed to the emergence of “register drift,” in which students move from formal academic English toward more informal and digitally influenced communication styles. While social media may enhance fluency, spontaneity, and communicative confidence, it may simultaneously weaken stylistic control, grammatical precision, and awareness of academic discourse conventions. Despite increasing research on social media and English learning, relatively few studies have explored how digital communication reshapes stylistic norms and hybridizes academic English among Vietnamese EFL students.

1.2 Problem Statement

Existing research on social media and English language learning has primarily focused on language skills development, learner motivation, vocabulary acquisition, or technological integration in education. However, the central issue is no longer whether social media affects English learning, but rather how it

reshapes communicative norms and transforms academic language practices in digitally mediated environments.

In contemporary digital communication, EFL students increasingly engage in hybrid discourse that combines formal academic language with informal online expressions, emojis, abbreviations, memes, and code-switching practices. As a result, the boundaries between academic and conversational English are becoming increasingly blurred, giving rise to new forms of stylistic instability and “register drift.” Students may demonstrate greater fluency and communicative spontaneity online while simultaneously struggling to maintain grammatical precision, stylistic appropriateness, and academic discourse control in formal educational contexts.

Despite the growing significance of these transformations, relatively limited research has systematically examined how social media reshapes stylistic norms, normalizes hybrid discourse, and influences students’ ability to navigate between digital and academic registers. In the Vietnamese EFL context, empirical studies addressing the relationship between multimodal digital communication and academic language control remain particularly scarce. This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive investigation into the stylistic consequences of social media-mediated communication in higher education.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate how social media-mediated communication reshapes academic English and contributes to the emergence of hybrid discourse among Vietnamese EFL students. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- 1) Examine forms of stylistic hybridization in students’ English communication across digital and academic contexts.
- 2) Analyze manifestations of register drift from formal academic English toward digitally influenced discourse practices.
- 3) Explore the relationships among social media intensity, multimodal interaction, stylistic awareness, and academic language control.
- 4) Propose a digital stylistic competence framework to support more balanced and context-appropriate EFL communication in the digital era.

1.4 Research Questions

To address these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What forms of stylistic hybridization emerge in students’ English communication?
- 2) How does social media contribute to the blurring of boundaries between academic and informal English?
- 3) What linguistic features characterize the mixing of digital and academic discourse?
- 4) What pedagogical implications arise from the transformation of communication styles in EFL education?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Communication Style and Register Theory*

Communication style and register theory provide an important theoretical foundation for understanding how language users adapt their linguistic behavior across different communicative contexts. Early sociolinguistic research by Dell Hymes emphasized the concept of communicative competence, arguing that effective language use requires not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to employ language appropriately according to social and cultural contexts. Similarly, M. A. K. Halliday highlighted the functional relationship between language and context through systemic functional linguistics, particularly the concept of register, which refers to language variation according to field, tenor, and mode of communication.

Building upon these perspectives, researchers such as Deborah Tannen and Douglas Biber further demonstrated that communication styles are dynamic, socially negotiated, and context-dependent. Their work suggests that speakers constantly engage in style-shifting, adjusting linguistic forms and discourse strategies according to audience expectations, interactional goals, and communicative environments. In academic contexts, discourse appropriateness, stylistic control, and register awareness are considered essential components of effective English communication.

However, the emergence of digitally mediated interaction has increasingly challenged traditional distinctions between formal and informal registers. Contemporary EFL learners frequently navigate multiple communicative spaces simultaneously, leading to greater stylistic fluidity and increasing difficulty in maintaining stable academic discourse norms. Recent studies indicate that social media interaction often encourages conversationalized language practices, abbreviated syntax, and informal discourse structures that may gradually influence students' academic communication styles (Ahmad & Jarin, 2024; Kolo, 2025).

2.2 *Digital Discourse and Multimodality*

The development of social media has significantly transformed communication from predominantly text-based interaction into multimodal discourse combining language, visuals, sounds, emojis, memes, hashtags, and digital symbols. Scholars such as Gunther Kress and Carey Jewitt argue that meaning-making in digital environments increasingly relies on the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than linguistic text alone. Within this framework, communication on social media platforms is shaped not only by linguistic choices but also by visual presentation, platform affordances, emotional symbols, and interactional immediacy.

Research in digital discourse studies further demonstrates that online communication has produced new forms of digital vernacular characterized by informality, brevity, emotional expressiveness, and rapid interaction. Jannis Androustopoulos highlights how online communities create hybrid linguistic practices that blend spoken and written discourse, while Caroline Tagg emphasizes the role of social media in reshaping everyday communication norms and interpersonal interaction.

Within EFL contexts, multimodal communication practices increasingly involve emoji-mediated interaction, internet slang, abbreviations, and code-switching. These forms of platform discourse contribute to more spontaneous and interactive communication but simultaneously challenge conventional academic writing and speaking standards. Studies by Sriwichai (2022), Putri and Putra (2024), and Tri (2024) suggest that prolonged exposure to digital discourse may encourage learners to adopt hybrid communication styles that blur distinctions between academic English and social media language.

2.3 Stylistic Hybridization and Register Drift

One of the most significant emerging phenomena in digital communication is stylistic hybridization, referring to the blending of formal academic discourse with informal digital communication practices. In social media environments, EFL learners increasingly combine academic vocabulary with internet slang, emojis, shortened expressions, conversational syntax, and translanguaging practices. This process contributes to what recent scholars describe as hybrid discourse, a communicative form situated between institutional academic language and digitally mediated conversational interaction.

Closely related to this phenomenon is the concept of register drift, which describes the gradual movement from formal academic English toward more informal and platform-influenced communication styles. Rather than maintaining clear stylistic boundaries, students often transfer discourse habits developed through social media into classroom interaction, presentations, and academic writing. This tendency may result in reduced grammatical precision, weakened academic tone, fragmented discourse structures, and increasing academic de-standardization.

At the same time, digital communication environments promote linguistic fluidity, enabling users to move flexibly between linguistic styles, communicative identities, and discourse conventions. While such flexibility may strengthen communicative spontaneity and social interaction, it may also weaken awareness of academic register control. Ahmad and Jarin (2024) as well as Kolo (2025) argue that social media increasingly reshapes students' perceptions of appropriateness, contributing to the normalization of hybrid communication practices in higher education contexts.

Despite growing interest in digital discourse, relatively few studies have systematically examined stylistic hybridization and register drift among Vietnamese EFL students. Consequently, these concepts represent the core theoretical contribution of the present study.

2.4 Digital Sociolinguistics

Digital sociolinguistics provides an important interdisciplinary perspective for understanding how language, identity, and social interaction are reconstructed within digitally mediated communication environments. Rather than viewing language as a fixed system, digital sociolinguistic approaches emphasize linguistic performance, identity negotiation, and community-based meaning-making in online interaction.

Within social media contexts, language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a means of identity construction and self-presentation. EFL students actively construct online personas through

stylistic choices such as code-switching, emoji use, internet slang, humor, and multimodal interaction. These communicative practices contribute to the formation of digital communicative identities shaped by both local cultural norms and global digital culture.

Furthermore, social media platforms facilitate the emergence of online speech communities in which users share linguistic conventions, interactional styles, and platform-specific communicative norms. Through repeated participation in these communities, students gradually internalize new discourse patterns and hybrid communication styles that may differ substantially from traditional academic English conventions.

Studies by Nguyen (2021), Nguyen (2018), and Tri (2024) demonstrate that Vietnamese students frequently engage in translanguaging and intercultural linguistic practices within digital communication environments. Such practices reflect increasing sociolinguistic hybridity in the digital era and highlight the importance of examining the relationship between online interaction and academic communication norms among Vietnamese EFL learners.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Drawing upon communication style theory, multimodal discourse studies, digital sociolinguistics, and research on stylistic hybridization, this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework explaining how social media reshapes academic English communication among Vietnamese EFL students.

The framework suggests that increased social media engagement exposes students to intensive multimodal interaction characterized by emojis, abbreviations, visual communication, conversational discourse, and code-switching practices. Continuous participation in these digital environments contributes to stylistic hybridization, in which learners increasingly combine academic and informal communication styles. Over time, this process may lead to register drift, reflected in weakened academic discourse control, blurred stylistic boundaries, and the normalization of hybrid communication practices. Ultimately, these transformations generate a range of academic communication challenges related to grammatical precision, discourse appropriateness, stylistic consistency, and academic language awareness. However, the impact of digital discourse is moderated by several important factors, including digital literacy, stylistic awareness, and academic orientation. Students possessing stronger awareness of academic discourse conventions may demonstrate greater ability to navigate between digital and academic communication contexts effectively.

Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes social media not merely as a technological learning tool, but as a discourse ecology that actively restructures communicative norms, stylistic expectations, and language practices in contemporary EFL education.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate how social media reshapes academic English communication

among Vietnamese EFL students. The mixed-methods approach enabled the study to combine statistical measurement of communication patterns with in-depth exploration of digital discourse practices, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of stylistic transformation in social media-mediated communication.

3.2 Participants

The study utilized existing research data collected from 90 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Trade Union University. In addition to the survey data, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions and communication experiences in digital environments. The qualitative dataset also included 78 English discourse samples extracted from students' online interactions across different social media platforms.

3.3 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire focusing on students' frequency of social media use, platform preferences, stylistic communication habits, and self-perceived communication styles in English.

Qualitative data consisted of interview narratives, discourse excerpts, and online interaction samples gathered from social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. These data were used to examine how students negotiate communication styles across digital and academic contexts.

3.4 Discourse Analysis Framework

To examine stylistic hybridization and register drift, the study adopted a discourse-oriented analytical framework integrating sociolinguistic and multimodal discourse perspectives. The analysis focused on key linguistic and stylistic features, including lexical simplification, emoji substitution, abbreviated syntax, code-switching, discourse compression, informalization, and conversationalization.

This framework represents the study's primary theoretical and methodological contribution, as it moves beyond conventional language-skill analysis to investigate how digitally mediated discourse reshapes academic communication norms among EFL learners.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparative statistical tests, including ANOVA and independent samples t-tests, to identify relationships between social media use and communication style patterns.

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and multimodal analysis to explore manifestations of hybrid communication, stylistic fluidity, and the transformation of academic English in digitally mediated environments.

4. Findings

4.1 Social Media as a Hybrid Linguistic Space

The findings indicate that social media functions as a hybrid linguistic space where Vietnamese EFL students are continuously exposed to diverse forms of English communication across formal, informal,

visual, and multimodal contexts. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube provide students with frequent access to authentic English discourse, enabling them to interact with global linguistic practices beyond traditional classroom settings.

The data further reveal that communication in these digital environments is characterized by high levels of informality, communicative spontaneity, and platform-specific discourse patterns. Students frequently engage in rapid, emotionally expressive, and interaction-oriented communication through comments, reactions, memes, short-form videos, and conversational exchanges. As a result, English use on social media increasingly reflects a fluid combination of spoken-like interaction, visual communication, and digitally mediated discourse conventions.

Moreover, each platform appears to shape distinct communication styles. TikTok-mediated communication appears to privilege compressed, emotionally expressive, and interaction-oriented discourse forms, thereby reinforcing communicative immediacy over formal linguistic elaboration, while Facebook communication demonstrates greater conversational flexibility and interpersonal engagement. YouTube and Instagram, meanwhile, encourage multimodal forms of linguistic performance combining text, visuals, and symbolic interaction. These findings suggest that social media environments actively reshape students' communicative habits and stylistic preferences.

Table 1. Social Media Platforms and Dominant Communication Features among Vietnamese EFL Students

| Platform | Dominant Communication Style | Common Linguistic Features | Academic Risk Level |
|-----------|----------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| Facebook | Conversational-interactive | code-switching, emojis, informal comments | Moderate |
| TikTok | Highly compressed and expressive | abbreviations, slang, short-form discourse | High |
| Instagram | Visual-symbolic interaction | captions, hashtags, symbolic language | Moderate |
| YouTube | Observational and responsive | comment-based interaction, conversational tone | Low-Moderate |

As shown in Table 1, different social media platforms promote distinct discourse patterns and communicative behaviors. TikTok and Instagram particularly encourage compressed, expressive, and multimodal communication styles, while Facebook interaction demonstrates stronger conversational hybridity.

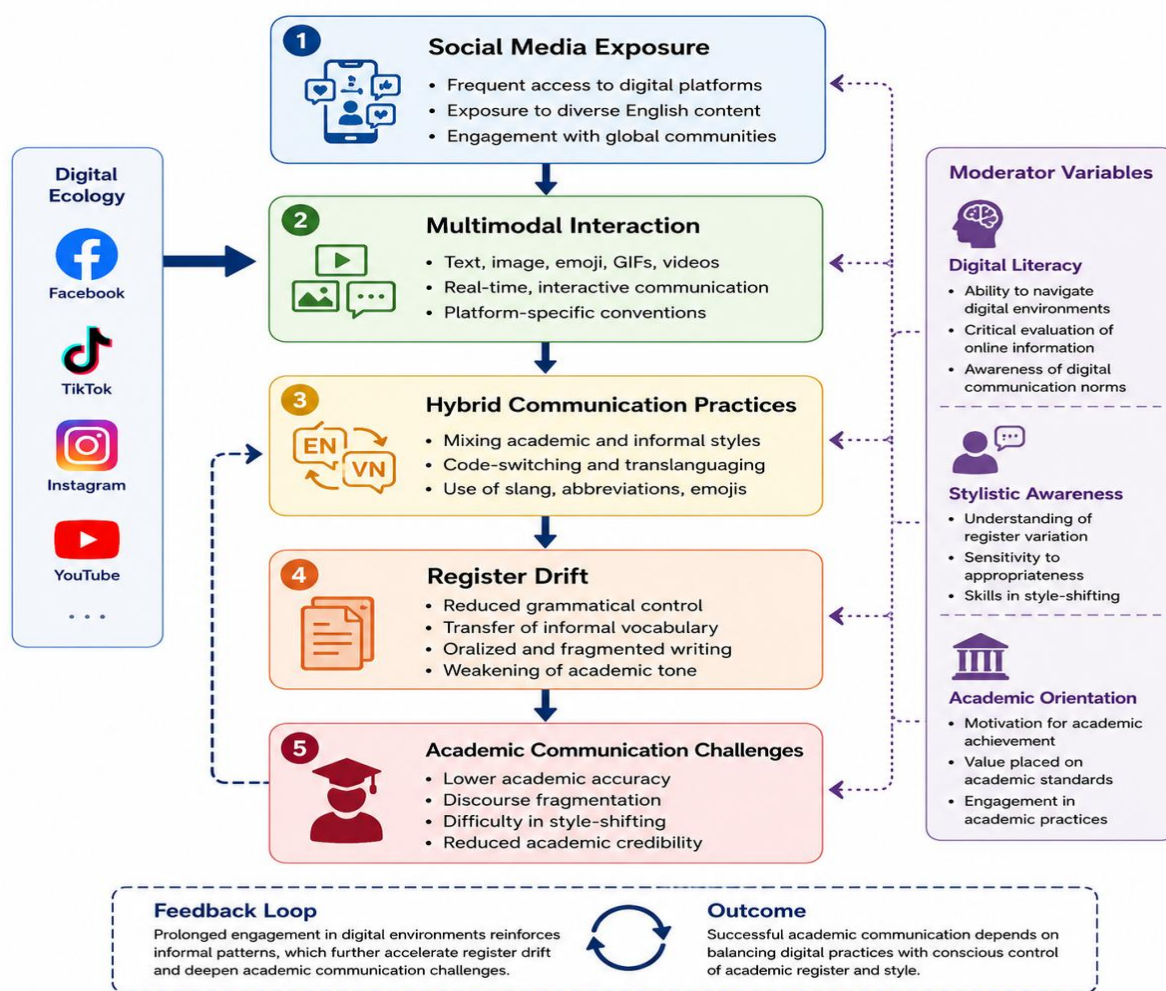


Figure 1. Distribution of English-Mediated Social Media Use

The findings indicate that platform affordances significantly shape communication patterns by encouraging immediacy, emotional responsiveness, brevity, and multimodal interaction.

4.2 Emergence of Stylistic Hybridization

One of the most significant findings of the study is the emergence of stylistic hybridization in students' English communication. The analysis demonstrates that many students no longer maintain clear boundaries between academic English and informal digital discourse. Instead, they increasingly combine formal vocabulary with internet slang, conversational expressions, emojis, abbreviations, and platform-specific linguistic features.

The discourse samples reveal frequent mixing of academic expressions with informal online language, particularly in peer discussions, online group work, and classroom-related digital interaction. Emojis and reaction symbols were commonly integrated into semi-academic communication to express tone, agreement, humor, or interpersonal solidarity. Similarly, abbreviated expressions such as "idk," "btw," "lol," and "gonna" frequently appeared even in contexts involving academic discussion. For example,

one participant commented during an online group discussion: “I totally agree 😄 but this topic kinda hard tbh.”

This excerpt illustrates the coexistence of academic positioning (“I totally agree”) and informal digital discourse markers (“😄,” “kinda,” “tbh”), reflecting the hybridization of formal and conversational communication styles.

Table 2. Manifestations of Stylistic Hybridization in Students’ English Communication

| Linguistic Feature | Example from Data | Communication Function | Academic Impact |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Emoji integration | “I totally agree 😄” | emotional emphasis | reduced formality |
| Abbreviated syntax | “idk”, “gonna”, “btw” | speed and spontaneity | weakened academic precision |
| Code-switching | “This assignment hoi khó” | identity negotiation | mixed register |
| Conversationalized writing | fragmented sentences | interactional immediacy | discourse instability |

Another notable feature is the emergence of an oralized writing style in which written communication increasingly resembles spoken interaction. Students often employed shortened sentence structures, conversational rhythm, fragmented syntax, and spontaneous discourse patterns typically associated with speech rather than formal academic writing. These findings indicate that digital communication practices are gradually normalizing hybrid discourse forms that combine academic and informal stylistic elements within the same communicative space.

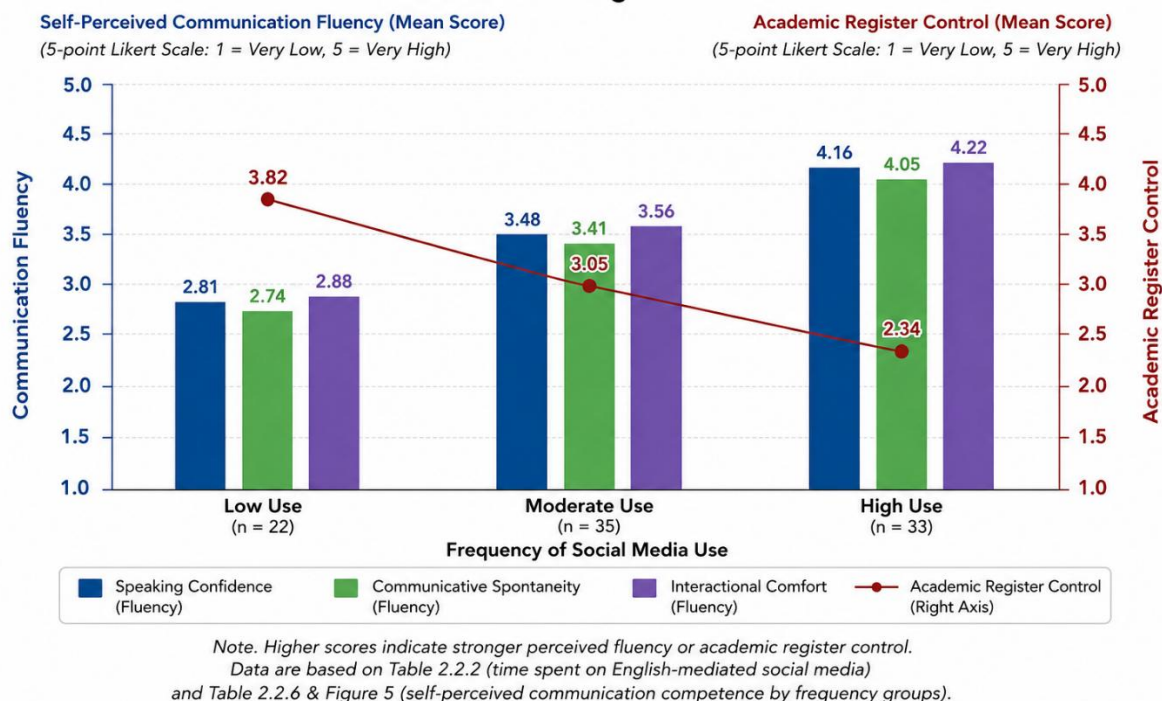


Figure 2. Frequency of Social Media Use and Perceived Communication Fluency

Figure 2 illustrates the paradoxical relationship between social media exposure and English communication practices among Vietnamese EFL students. The findings indicate that increased social media engagement is associated with higher levels of communicative fluency, interactional confidence, and spontaneous English use. Students with more frequent exposure to digital communication environments generally reported greater comfort in online interaction and stronger self-perceived communicative competence.

However, the figure also demonstrates a simultaneous decline in academic register control as social media use increases. Students in the high-use group exhibited weaker grammatical precision, reduced stylistic consistency, and lower adherence to formal academic discourse conventions. In particular, prolonged engagement with multimodal and conversational digital discourse appears to contribute to greater informalization and fragmentation of academic English communication.

This finding highlights the paradoxical nature of digitally mediated English communication in contemporary EFL contexts. While social media may facilitate communicative flexibility and authentic interaction, it may also accelerate processes of register drift and academic de-standardization among university students.

4.3 Register Drift and Academic De-standardization

The findings further demonstrate a clear tendency toward register drift, referring to the gradual shift from formal academic English toward more informal, digitally influenced communication styles. This phenomenon represents one of the study's most important theoretical contributions.

Table 3. Indicators of Academic Register Drift

| Indicator | Observed Pattern | Implication |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Reduced grammatical control | omission of formal structures | weakened academic accuracy |
| Informal vocabulary transfer | slang in academic interaction | erosion of register boundaries |
| Discourse fragmentation | shortened responses | reduced coherence |
| Oralized writing | speech-like syntax | conversationalization of academic discourse |

Table 3 demonstrates that register drift extends beyond isolated linguistic errors and reflects a broader transformation in students' perceptions of discourse appropriateness. The findings suggest that academic English is increasingly influenced by interactional norms associated with platform-mediated communication.

A recurrent pattern observed across discourse samples was reduced grammatical control, particularly in online academic interaction. Students frequently omitted grammatical markers, simplified sentence structures, and prioritized communicative speed over linguistic accuracy. In many cases, formal syntactic organization was replaced by fragmented discourse sequences resembling instant messaging conventions. The transfer of informal vocabulary into academic contexts also emerged as a significant trend. Expressions commonly associated with social media communication, including slang, internet abbreviations, and emotionally expressive phrases, increasingly appeared in classroom discussions and semi-formal academic exchanges. Consequently, the academic tone of communication became weaker, more conversational, and less institutionally structured.

Additionally, the findings reveal increasing fragmentation of discourse structure, particularly in students' online written communication. Rather than developing coherent argumentative sequences, many participants relied on compressed expressions, shortened responses, symbolic interaction, and discontinuous conversational turns. These tendencies suggest that prolonged exposure to platform-mediated communication may contribute to processes of academic de-standardization and weakened stylistic regulation in English communication.

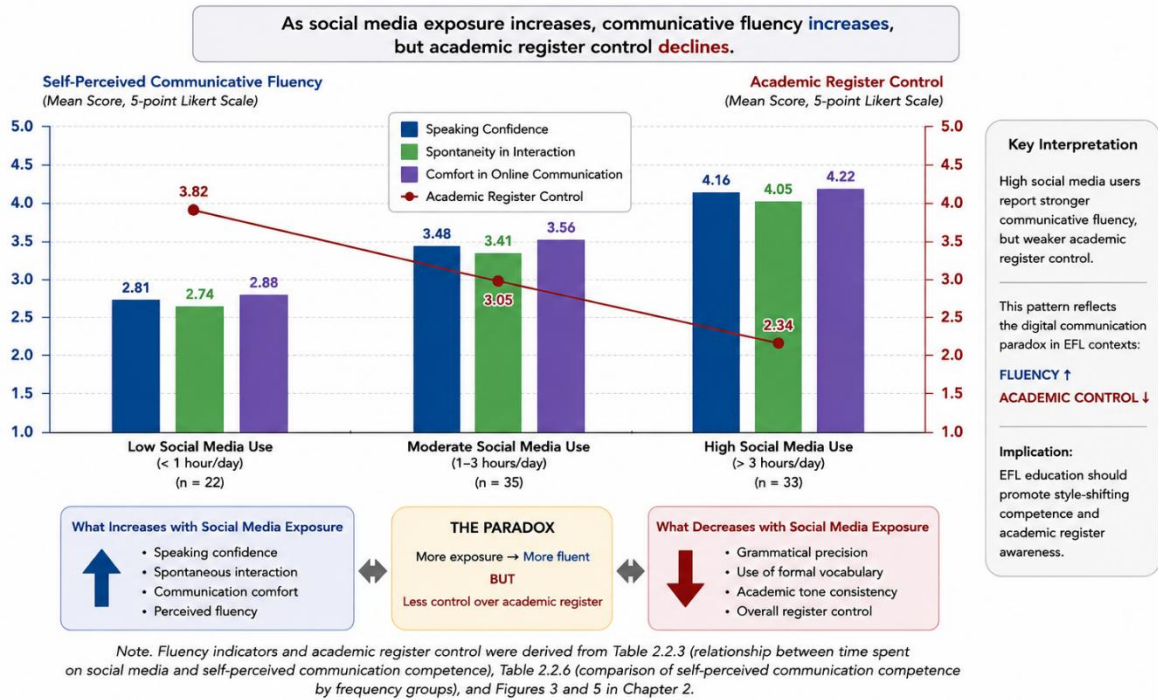


Figure 3. Relationship between Social Media Exposure and Academic Register Control

Register drift in this study should not be interpreted merely as linguistic simplification, but as evidence of a broader sociolinguistic restructuring of academic communication norms under conditions of digital mediation.

4.4 Code-switching and Digital Identity Construction

The study also identifies code-switching as a central feature of students’ digital communication practices. Vietnamese-English mixing appeared frequently across online interactions, reflecting both linguistic flexibility and identity negotiation within digitally mediated environments.

Table 4. Functions of Code-switching in Digital Communication

| Function | Example | Communicative Purpose |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| emotional expression | “deadline căng quá” | emotional emphasis |
| humor | mixed slang expressions | peer bonding |
| identity signaling | English slang insertion | digital identity |
| efficiency | short bilingual phrases | communicative speed |

Students commonly alternated between English and Vietnamese to express emotions, humor, social intimacy, and cultural references more effectively. In many cases, English expressions functioned not merely as linguistic tools but also as markers of modernity, global connectivity, and digital identity

performance. The selective use of English vocabulary, internet slang, and platform-specific expressions contributed to stylistic self-presentation and the construction of distinctive online personas.

Furthermore, code-switching frequently served interpersonal and symbolic purposes rather than purely communicative ones. Students used hybrid linguistic forms to signal group membership, shared digital culture, and generational identity. This finding supports digital sociolinguistic perspectives emphasizing that online communication is deeply connected to identity construction and social positioning in digital spaces.

Code-switching functioned not only as a communicative strategy but also as a symbolic performance of digital identity, cosmopolitan orientation, and peer-group affiliation.

4.5 Tension between Authenticity and Academic Accuracy

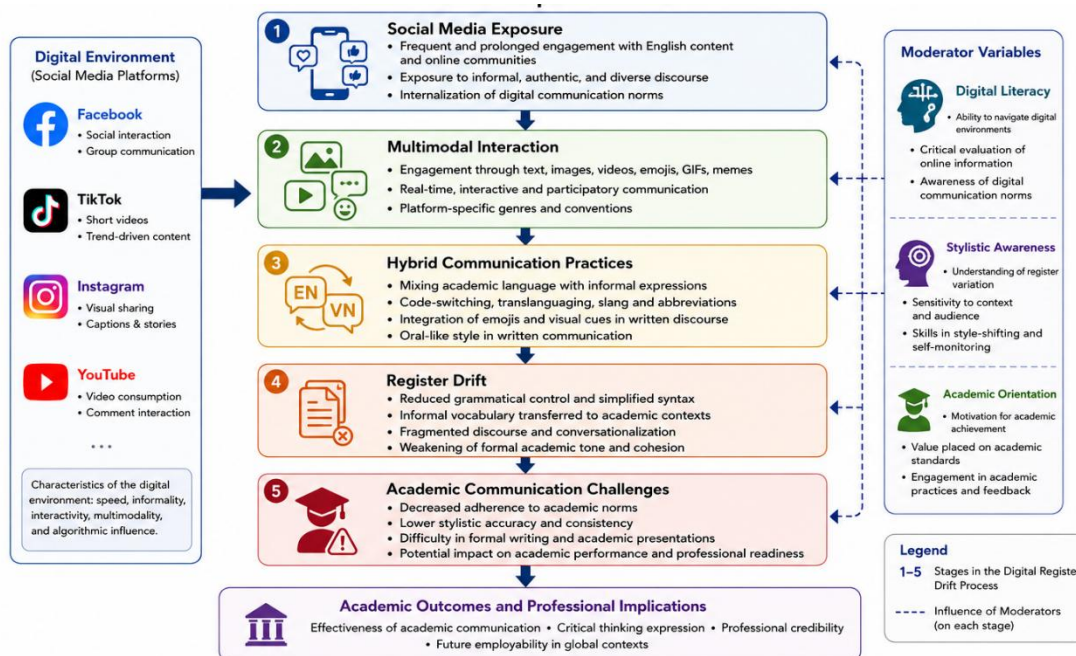
One of the most important findings of the study is the growing tension between communicative authenticity and academic accuracy in students' English use. On the one hand, social media exposure appears to enhance communicative fluency, spontaneity, confidence, and interactional flexibility. Students reported feeling more comfortable expressing ideas, participating in English interaction, and engaging in real-time communication through digital platforms.

On the other hand, increased exposure to informal digital discourse also appears to weaken academic stylistic control. While students became more fluent and communicatively expressive, their language use simultaneously demonstrated greater informality, reduced grammatical precision, and weaker awareness of academic discourse conventions.

This paradox highlights the dual impact of social media on EFL communication. Digital platforms facilitate authentic language use and communicative participation, yet they may simultaneously accelerate the erosion of formal academic norms through the normalization of hybrid discourse and conversationalized communication styles. The findings therefore suggest that social media-mediated English communication operates within a complex dynamic between linguistic creativity, communicative authenticity, and academic standardization.

Table 5. Positive and Negative Linguistic Effects of Social Media Exposure

| Positive Effects | Negative Effects |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| increased fluency | reduced grammatical control |
| communicative confidence | weakened academic tone |
| spontaneous interaction | discourse fragmentation |
| intercultural exposure | stylistic instability |



Note. The model illustrates how social media exposure may lead to digital register drift through a series of interacting processes, while moderator variables can either mitigate or intensify this trajectory.

Figure 4. Digital Register Drift Process among Vietnamese EFL Students

The findings therefore reveal a communicative paradox in which increased linguistic participation and interactional authenticity coexist with declining adherence to institutional academic norms.

5. Discussion

5.1 Social Media as a Digital Discourse Ecology

The findings suggest that social media should no longer be understood merely as a technological tool supporting English language learning. Rather, it functions as a digital discourse ecology that actively reshapes communicative norms, interactional practices, and stylistic expectations among Vietnamese EFL students. Within this ecosystem, language is continuously negotiated through multimodal interaction, algorithm-driven visibility, platform culture, and participatory communication practices.

Unlike traditional classroom environments characterized by relatively stable academic conventions, social media platforms promote immediacy, emotional expressiveness, brevity, and interaction-oriented communication. Consequently, students are increasingly socialized into digitally mediated discourse practices where communicative effectiveness often takes precedence over formal linguistic accuracy. This transformation reflects a broader shift from institutionally regulated academic discourse toward flexible, participatory, and platform-specific communication norms.

The study therefore argues that social media does not simply influence language use externally; rather, it reconstructs the communicative environment within which language practices, stylistic preferences, and discourse expectations are formed and normalized.

5.2 Hybrid Communication as an Emerging EFL Reality

The findings further demonstrate that hybrid communication has become an emerging reality in contemporary EFL contexts. Hybrid discourse is no longer a peripheral or temporary phenomenon restricted to informal online interaction. Instead, it increasingly represents a normalized communicative behavior among university students navigating between digital and academic environments.

Students frequently combine academic vocabulary with emojis, abbreviations, conversational expressions, internet slang, and multimodal elements within the same interactional space. This stylistic blending reflects the growing fluidity of communication in digitally mediated environments, where traditional distinctions between written and spoken discourse, formal and informal registers, and academic and social interaction are becoming increasingly unstable.

Importantly, the normalization of hybrid discourse should not be interpreted solely as linguistic decline. In many cases, hybrid communication enables greater communicative spontaneity, emotional expressiveness, interpersonal engagement, and digital adaptability. Students appear to develop new forms of stylistic flexibility that allow them to participate more actively in online communication communities.

However, the findings also suggest that this flexibility may come at the cost of reduced awareness of academic discourse conventions. As hybrid communication becomes normalized, the ability to distinguish between contextually appropriate registers may gradually weaken, particularly in digitally mediated academic interaction.

5.3 The Crisis of Academic Register Control

One of the most significant implications of the study is the emergence of a crisis of academic register control among Vietnamese EFL students. The findings indicate an increasing collapse of stylistic boundaries between academic English and informal digital discourse. Linguistic features traditionally associated with social media communication, including abbreviated syntax, fragmented discourse, internet slang, emoji-mediated interaction, and conversationalized expressions, are progressively entering academic contexts.

This process contributes to the erosion of academic discourse discipline, particularly in relation to grammatical precision, stylistic consistency, coherence, and institutional norms of communication. Students frequently prioritize communicative speed, emotional immediacy, and interactional efficiency over formal linguistic accuracy and argumentative structure. As a result, academic English increasingly demonstrates characteristics of conversational digital discourse rather than conventional scholarly communication.

The findings also reveal the role of digital environments in accelerating processes of informalization. Continuous exposure to platform-mediated communication normalizes brevity, simplification, symbolic interaction, and multimodal expression, gradually reshaping students' perceptions of acceptable language use. Consequently, the distinction between "correct academic English" and "effective digital communication" becomes increasingly blurred.

This phenomenon should not be viewed simply as individual linguistic deficiency but rather as a structural consequence of changing discourse ecologies in the digital era. The crisis of register control therefore reflects broader sociolinguistic transformations affecting how language norms are negotiated, internalized, and reproduced within digitally connected communication environments.

5.4 Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes theoretically to emerging scholarship in digital sociolinguistics, EFL communication, and multimodal discourse studies in several important ways.

First, the study extends digital sociolinguistic perspectives within EFL contexts by demonstrating how social media-mediated communication reshapes stylistic norms, discourse practices, and academic language boundaries among Vietnamese university students. While previous studies have primarily focused on language skills or technological integration, this study emphasizes the sociolinguistic transformation of communication itself.

Second, the study introduces the concept of “digital stylistic hybridization” to explain the blending of academic discourse with platform-based digital communication practices. This concept highlights how multimodal interaction, internet vernacular, and conversationalized discourse increasingly coexist within students’ English communication styles.

Third, the study conceptualizes “academic register drift” as a gradual movement from formal academic English toward more informal, digitally influenced communication patterns. This concept provides a useful analytical framework for understanding how prolonged participation in digital communication environments may influence academic discourse control and stylistic regulation.

Finally, the study expands current understandings of multimodal communicative competence by arguing that effective English communication in the digital era requires not only grammatical accuracy and linguistic fluency, but also the ability to navigate multiple communicative registers, digital interactional norms, symbolic resources, and platform-specific discourse conventions. Consequently, communicative competence in contemporary EFL education must increasingly be understood as both linguistic and multimodal in nature.

6. Pedagogical Implications

6.1 Teaching Style-Shifting Competence

The findings suggest that EFL instruction should place greater emphasis on developing students’ style-shifting competence, namely the ability to adjust language use appropriately across different communicative contexts. In digitally mediated environments, students must learn not only how to communicate effectively, but also when to employ formal academic English, conversational interaction, or platform-specific digital discourse.

Accordingly, EFL pedagogy should explicitly train learners to recognize differences between academic, professional, and social media communication styles, while strengthening their awareness of register appropriateness, stylistic flexibility, and discourse adaptation.

6.2 Integrating Digital Discourse Awareness into EFL Curricula

The study highlights the need to integrate digital discourse awareness into contemporary EFL curricula. Since social media increasingly shapes students' communication practices, language education can no longer focus exclusively on traditional academic forms detached from digital realities.

EFL programs should therefore incorporate critical analysis of social media language, multimodal communication practices, online interaction norms, and platform-specific discourse conventions. Such integration may help students develop a more balanced understanding of both the opportunities and risks associated with digitally mediated communication.

6.3 Developing Reflective Stylistic Awareness

Another important implication involves fostering reflective stylistic awareness among EFL learners. Students should be encouraged to critically examine how their communication styles are influenced by social media exposure and how digital habits may affect academic discourse practices.

Through reflective activities such as discourse comparison, self-analysis, and stylistic evaluation, learners may develop stronger awareness of grammatical precision, discourse appropriateness, and academic communication standards. This reflective dimension is essential for helping students maintain stylistic control while navigating increasingly hybrid communication environments.

6.4 Training Multimodal Academic Communication

The findings also suggest the importance of training students in multimodal academic communication. Contemporary communication increasingly combines written language with visual, symbolic, and interactive elements, requiring learners to navigate multiple semiotic resources simultaneously.

Consequently, EFL instruction should move beyond purely text-based approaches and incorporate multimodal communication tasks involving presentations, digital storytelling, online discussions, visual interpretation, and platform-mediated interaction. Such training may help students develop more adaptive communicative competence while maintaining academic clarity, coherence, and professionalism in digital environments.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that social media-mediated communication is fundamentally transforming English communication practices among Vietnamese EFL students. Rather than functioning merely as supplementary learning tools, digital platforms increasingly operate as discourse ecologies that reshape communicative norms, stylistic preferences, and interactional behaviors in contemporary EFL contexts. The findings reveal that prolonged engagement with multimodal digital communication contributes to the emergence of hybrid discourse practices characterized by the blending of academic language, conversational expressions, emojis, abbreviations, code-switching, and platform-specific linguistic conventions.

The study further confirms that stylistic hybridization is no longer a peripheral phenomenon limited to informal online interaction. Instead, hybrid communication has become increasingly normalized and

institutionalized within students' everyday English use, gradually blurring the boundaries between academic and informal discourse. While social media exposure appears to enhance communicative fluency, interactional confidence, and spontaneous language use, it simultaneously contributes to processes of register drift, weakened academic register control, and the informalization of academic English communication.

Importantly, the findings suggest that the growing influence of digital discourse challenges traditional assumptions regarding academic language stability and communicative competence in higher education. Academic English is increasingly shaped by conversationalized, multimodal, and digitally mediated forms of interaction, requiring students to navigate multiple communicative registers simultaneously. Consequently, effective EFL communication in the digital era can no longer be understood solely in terms of grammatical accuracy or linguistic proficiency, but must also involve the ability to manage stylistic appropriateness, register flexibility, and multimodal interaction across diverse communicative contexts.

The study also contributes theoretically by extending digital sociolinguistic perspectives within EFL education and introducing the concepts of digital stylistic hybridization and academic register drift as analytical frameworks for understanding contemporary transformations in English communication. These concepts provide new insights into how digital environments influence discourse practices, identity construction, and academic communication norms among university students.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the urgent need for EFL education to move beyond purely traditional models of academic language instruction. Future EFL pedagogy should integrate digital stylistic competence, including style-shifting ability, register awareness, multimodal communication skills, and critical understanding of digital discourse practices. Such an approach may help students develop balanced communicative competence capable of responding effectively to both academic expectations and digitally mediated communication realities in the contemporary global context.

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