WhatsApp Writing and Formal Writing Performance among University Students in Côte d'Ivoire: Sociolinguistic Implications for Language Teaching

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Abstract : This study investigates how WhatsApp writing practices impact formal writing performance among university students in Côte d'Ivoire. Using a sociolinguistic framework that combines Computer-Mediated Communication and variationist approaches, the article analyses recurrent digital features such as abbreviations, punctuation reduction, code-switching and phonetic spellings found in student writing. The study argues that WhatsApp writing does not simply weaken academic writing but creates competing register habits that necessitate pedagogical attention. Results suggest that students' main difficulty lies in register differentiation rather than linguistic deficiency. The article proposes pedagogical strategies that integrate digital literacy into formal writing instruction in higher education.
Keywords: WhatsApp writing, formal writing, sociolinguistics, language change, digital literacy, Côte d'Ivoire

Résumé : Cette étude analyse l'influence des pratiques d'écriture sur WhatsApp sur les performances en écriture formelle chez les étudiants universitaires en Côte d'Ivoire. En s'appuyant sur la sociolinguistique variationniste et la communication médiée par ordinateur, l'article examine des phénomènes tels que les abréviations, la réduction de la ponctuation, l'alternance codique et les graphies phonétiques observées dans les productions écrites étudiantes. Les résultats demontrent que l'écriture numérique ne constitue pas simplement une dégradation de la norme, mais un registre concurrent nécessitant un encadrement pédagogique. L'étude recommande une intégration explicite de la littératie numérique dans l'enseignement universitaire de l'écriture.
Mots-clés : écriture WhatsApp, écriture formelle, sociolinguistique, changement linguistique, littératie numérique, Côte d'Ivoire

Introduction

Over the past decade, digital communication technologies have significantly transformed writing practices across educational and social environments. Among these technologies, WhatsApp has become one of the most widely used communication platforms among university students because of its accessibility, immediacy and conversational flexibility. As a mobile messaging application, it encourages rapid written interaction with characteristics like abbreviated forms, phonetic spellings, reduced punctuation, emoji use and frequent code-switching. These emerging practices have attracted scholarly attention because they reflect ongoing processes of language change in digitally mediated environments (Crystal, 2011; Herring, 2013; Calude, 2023).

In many university contexts, students use WhatsApp not only for personal communication but also for academic coordination, peer discussion, and information sharing. This constant exposure to informal digital writing has raised questions about the relationship between online writing habits and formal academic writing performance. Recent studies suggest that digital writing is not merely a simplified form of language, but rather an adaptive register defined by speed, economy, identity expression and communicative efficiency (Temple & Fayigbe, 2025). However, when informal digital conventions appear in formal academic writing, tensions emerge between communicative innovation and institutional standards of correctness.

This issue is particularly important in multilingual settings such as Côte d'Ivoire, where written communication leans on multiple linguistic resources. University students commonly move between standard French, informal French, English borrowings, local languages, and urban varieties such as Nouchi[1]. In digital exchanges, these resources often coexist to produce hybrid written forms that reflect linguistic creativity and social identity. Such hybridisation corresponds to what variationist sociolinguistics describes as language adaptation across contexts and communicative situations (Labov, 1972; Honkanen, 2023).

In Côte d'Ivoire, WhatsApp communication frequently includes abbreviations (slt, bjr, stp, cmt), phonetic spellings (koi, sava), lexical borrowings, and Nouchi expressions. These forms are socially meaningful choices shaped by peer interaction and digital familiarity. Yet their increasing appearance in academic assignments raises pedagogical concerns, particularly when students struggle with punctuation, lexical precision and register differentiation.

Current research increasingly rejects the view that digital writing necessarily weakens language competence. Instead, scholars argue that digital communication creates new writing standards that coexist with traditional literacy practices (Tagg, 2015; Temple & Fayigbe, 2025). The main challenge therefore lies in understanding how students manage transitions between informal and formal registers.

This study throws light on the relationship between WhatsApp writing and formal writing performance among university students in Côte d'Ivoire. It aims to identify recurrent linguistic features in WhatsApp exchanges, determine whether these characteristics appear in academic writing and discuss their sociolinguistic implications for language teaching at university level.

1. Problem Statement

The expansion of digital communication has greatly altered the writing practices of university students worldwide. Among the most frequently used digital platforms, WhatsApp plays a central role in students' daily communication because it allows immediate, informal, and continuous written interaction. Through this platform, students regularly produce written messages characterized by abbreviations, phonetic spellings, reduced punctuation, emoji use, lexical innovation, and code-switching. These linguistic features reflect the emergence of new communicative norms associated with digital writing and language adaptation in technologically mediated environments (Crystal, 2011; Ilbury, 2025).

Although these practices are increasingly normalized in informal communication, their growing presence in educational contexts raises important concerns. In many universities, teachers report that students often reproduce informal digital writing patterns in formal academic assignments. Such transfers may affect orthographic accuracy, syntactic organization, punctuation, lexical selection, and overall adherence to academic writing conventions. Recent studies have shown that the boundaries between informal digital discourse and formal academic discourse are becoming increasingly fluid, and more specifically among young writers who use mobile communication intensively (Nwagbara, 2025; Alzahrani, 2025).

[1] Nouchi, also referred to as popular Ivorian French by Gossouhon (2016: 118), "is the form of French used by illiterate or less -educated people living in urban, semi-urban or rural areas. This form of French is characterized not only by its over-simplification at the level of the structures, but also, by a great number of interferences from Ivorian local languages"

In Côte d'Ivoire, this issue is particularly complex because student writing is shaped by a multilingual sociolinguistic environment. University students frequently move between standard French, Ivorian French, English borrowings, local languages, and urban speech forms such as Nouchi. In WhatsApp interactions, these linguistic resources often combine in highly hybridized written forms. While such hybridization demonstrates linguistic creativity and social identity construction, it may also be at the origin of difficulties when students are required to produce formal academic texts governed by institutional norms of written French.

Despite the increasing visibility of this phenomenon, empirical research in Côte d'Ivoire remains limited regarding the specific influence of WhatsApp writing on formal university writing. Most available studies focus broadly on digital communication or language use in social media, without systematically comparing WhatsApp discourse with students' academic written productions in higher education. As a consequence, little is known about the exact linguistic features transferred from digital writing to formal writing in the Ivorian university context.

This lack of localized evidence creates an important pedagogical gap. Without clear empirical data, language teaching at university level may continue to address writing difficulties without fully considering the role of digital literacy practices in students' writing behaviour. However, understanding these interactions is essential for designing effective pedagogical responses adapted to contemporary student communication habits.

This study therefore addresses the following problem: to what extent do WhatsApp writing practices influence formal writing performance among university students in Côte d'Ivoire, and what sociolinguistic implications does this have for language teaching?

2. Research Objectives

2.1. General Objective

To examine the influence of WhatsApp writing practices on formal writing performance among university students in Côte d'Ivoire.

2.2. Specific Objectives

1. To identify the main linguistic features used in students' WhatsApp messages.
2. To determine which of these features appear in formal academic writing.
3. To analyse the pedagogical implications of these writing transfers for language teaching.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study leans on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Variationist Sociolinguistics. These frameworks provide an appropriate analytical basis for examining how digital writing practices on WhatsApp influence formal academic writing among university students in Côte d'Ivoire.

3.1. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-Mediated Communication refers to forms of human interaction conducted through digital technologies such as mobile messaging applications, email, social media platforms, and online discussion spaces. Within this perspective, language is

understood as adapting to the technical conditions of digital media, where speed, brevity, interactivity, and immediacy strongly influence linguistic choices. Scholars such as Herring (2013) and Crystal (2011) argue that digital writing does not simply reproduce spoken or written language but rather creates hybrid communicative forms characterized by structural flexibility and innovative expression.

In WhatsApp communication, these characteristics are particularly visible. Users often resort to abbreviations, reduced punctuation, phonetic spellings, graphic substitutions and emojis in order to communicate rapidly and efficiently. Expressions such as slt (salut[2]), stp (s'il te plaît[3]), bjr (bonjour[4]), or cv (ça va[5]) illustrate the economy principle that governs mobile interaction. According to Crystal (2011), such forms are not signs of linguistic disorder but manifestations of adaptation to a medium that privileges immediacy and reduced typing effort.

The approach of Herring (2013) to CMC further emphasizes that digital writing develops its own discourse conventions depending on the communication platform, social context as well as user community. WhatsApp messages are determined by conversational spontaneity, interpersonal familiarity, and low formal constraint, which encourages linguistic experimentation and informal register use. In this work, CMC helps explain why students' WhatsApp messages display recurring linguistic properties that differ from conventional academic writing norms.

The relevance of CMC to this research lies in its capacity to interpret WhatsApp writing as a legitimate communicative register rather than as a deviation from standard language. This perspective allows the study to identify digital writing patterns objectively before examining whether these same patterns appear in formal academic writing.

3.2. Variationist Sociolinguistics

The second theoretical framework adopted in this study is Variationist Sociolinguistics, principally associated with the work of William Labov (1972). This framework considers language variation as systematic and socially meaningful. According to Labov (1972), speakers do not use language uniformly. They rather adjust linguistic forms according to context, audience, communicative purpose and social identity.

Applied to the present study, variationist sociolinguistics helps understand why university students may use different linguistic forms in WhatsApp communication and in formal academic writing. Students' digital messages often reflect informal interaction, peer solidarity, and identity expression, whereas academic writing necessitates adherence to institutional norms of correctness, precision, and formal register. The difficulty arises when features associated with one context are transferred to another context.

In Côte d'Ivoire, this variation is particularly significant because students operate within a multilingual environment where standard French coexists with Ivorian French, English borrowings, local languages, and urban varieties such as Nouchi. In WhatsApp exchanges, these resources frequently overlap, producing hybrid written forms such as code-switching, lexical borrowing, and informal expressions. Variationist sociolinguistics makes it possible to interpret these forms not as random errors but as socially conditioned linguistic choices.

[2] Hello, (Translation mine)
[3] Please, (Translation mine)
[4] Good morning, (Translation mine)
[5] It's okay, (Translation mine)

Recent sociolinguistic research on writing has also shown that orthographic variation deserves the same analytical attention traditionally given to speech variation (Honkanen, 2023). In digital communication, spelling choices often reflect social positioning, group identity, and communicative economy. subsequently, when students write abbreviated or phonetic forms, these choices may indicate adaptation to peer-group norms rather than simple orthographic incompetence.

3.3. Relevance of the Combined Framework

The combination of CMC and Variationist Sociolinguistics offers an interpretive model for this study. While CMC explains the technological and communicative factors that encourage linguistic innovation on WhatsApp, variationist sociolinguistics explains how students manage or fail to manage transitions between informal digital registers and formal academic writing. This combined framework therefore allows the study to analyse both the linguistic features specific to WhatsApp discourse and the social conditions under which these features appear in academic writing.

It also supports the pedagogical argument that language teaching should not simply condemn digital writing practices, but should help students develop awareness of register differentiation and context-sensitive writing competence.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive comparative research design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The objective is to examine the linguistic relationship between WhatsApp writing practices and formal academic writing among university students in Côte d'Ivoire. A comparative corpus is used to identify recurrent linguistic features in students' digital communication and investigate whether similar properties occur in formal written academic productions.

The descriptive dimension of the study makes it possible to identify and classify linguistic forms present in WhatsApp interactions, while the comparative dimension allows these forms to be examined in relation to formal academic writing. The quantitative aspect consists in measuring the frequency of selected linguistic features, whereas the qualitative aspect lays the accent on interpreting their sociolinguistic significance within the Ivorian university context.

4.2. Study Population and Participants

The study targets undergraduate students enrolled in higher education institutions in Côte d'Ivoire, with participants drawn from both public and private universities in order to capture a broader range of writing practices across different academic environments. The sample consists of thirty (30) students selected from Université Alassane Ouattara (public university) and Groupe EDHEC (private higher education institution), two institutions representing distinct educational settings and student profile.

Participants are selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria include:

- regular use of WhatsApp in daily communication;
- active participation in academic writing tasks;
- willingness to provide both digital and academic written data.

Including students from both institutions allows the study to account for for possible differences liked to institutional culture, disciplinary orientation and digital literacy practices. The sample includes students from different academic disciplines in order to capture diverse writing practices while analytical maintaining comparability.

4.3. Data Collection

Two categories of data are collected for this study.

4.3.1. WhatsApp Corpus

The first corpus consists of 250 WhatsApp message extracts gathered from participants' personal conversations, with prior informed consent. Only written messages produced by participants are retained for analysis. Messages containing private or highly sensitive content are excluded with the aim of respecting confidentiality.

The selected messages include naturally occurring digital exchanges characterized by spontaneous writing practices. The corpus focuses on ordinary student communication rather than institutional messages in order to capture authentic informal writing.

4.3.1. Academic Writing Corpus

The second corpus consists of 30 formal written assignments produced by the same participants in academic settings. These texts include essays, assignments, or written examinations submitted within university courses.

The academic corpus is used to identify whether linguistic features found in WhatsApp communication appear in formal writing contexts.

4.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The collected corpus is analysed qualitatively and quantitatively through comparative linguistic coding based on recurrent writing characteristics identified in previous studies on digital communication (Crystal, 2011; Herring, 2013). Particular attention is given to abbreviations, phonetic spellings, punctuation reduction, lexical borrowing, code-switching, and register shifts. Each feature is identified in both WhatsApp and academic texts in order to observe possible transfer patterns as shown in the table below.

Linguistic Feature	WhatsApp Corpus (%)	Academic Corpus (%)
Abbreviations	68	21
Reduced punctuation	74	18
Code-switching	49	11
Phonetic spelling	57	14
Emoji/graphic markers	35	0

This table demonstrates that linguistic features associated with informal digital writing occur much more frequently in the WhatsApp corpus than in the academic corpus. Reduced punctuation appears as the most recurrent feature in WhatsApp exchanges (74%), followed by abbreviations (68%) and phonetic spellings (57%). This confirms that students favour speed and economy in mobile communication. Although these features

appear less frequently in academic writing, their presence in the academic corpus indicates partial transfer of informal digital habits into formal writing contexts. Code-switching also remains visible in both corpora, revealing the multilingual sociolinguistic environment in which Ivorian students operate. Emoji and graphic markers, however, are absent from academic writing. This is demonstrative of the fact that students generally recognise certain boundaries between digital interaction and formal academic discourse.

4.5. Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by the theoretical perspectives of Computer-Mediated Communication and Variationist Sociolinguistics. Computer-Mediated Communication makes it possible to interpret WhatsApp writing as a digital register shaped by speed and interaction constraints, while Variationist Sociolinguistics explains the transfer of linguistic forms across communicative contexts.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical precautions are taken all through the study. Participants are informed of the research objectives before data collection. All WhatsApp data are anonymized, and personal identifiers are removed. Only excerpts strictly relevant to linguistic analysis are retained. This ensures confidentiality and protects participants' privacy.

5. Presentation and Analysis of Results

The analysis compares linguistic features identified in the WhatsApp corpus with those observed in the academic writing corpus. The objective is to determine whether recurrent digital writing forms used in informal communication appear in formal university writing.

A total of 250 WhatsApp message extracts and 30 academic written assignments were examined. Six linguistic categories were selected for analysis: abbreviations, phonetic spellings, vowel deletion, code-switching, punctuation reduction, and lexical borrowings.

5.1. Frequency of Linguistic Features in the WhatsApp Corpus and Academic Corpus

Linguistic Feature	Frequency in WhatsApp Corpus	Frequency in Academic Corpus
Abbreviations	**96**	**18**
Phonetic spellings	**64**	**11**
Vowel deletion	**53**	**9**
Code-switching	**48**	**12**
Punctuation reduction	**112**	**27**
Lexical borrowings (Nouchi / informal forms)	**39**	**0**

The table shows that abbreviations and punctuation reduction are the most frequent features in WhatsApp exchanges. These forms also appear in academic writing, although at lower frequencies.

5.2. Abbreviations in Students' Writing

Abbreviations constitute one of the most recurrent features in WhatsApp messages. Students frequently use forms such as:

- slt (salut)
- bjr (bonjour)
- stp (s'il te plaît)
- mrc (merci)

These abbreviated forms reflect the search for writing economy in mobile communication. In the academic corpus, some students reproduced similar reductions, especially in drafts or informal assignments. This suggests partial transfer of digital habits into formal writing and confirms once more that abbreviation is not limited to digital interaction but may influence academic written production when students do not fully adjust to formal norms.

5.3. Phonetic Spellings and Vowel Deletion

Phonetic spellings were also highly visible in WhatsApp messages. Examples include:

- "koi" instead of "quoi"
- "sava" instead of "ça va"

Similarly, vowel deletion appeared in forms such as:

- "pr" instead of "pour"
- "tjrs" instead of "toujours"

These forms were less frequent in academic writing but still present in several student assignments, more specifically in quickly produced texts.

Their presence suggests that students may internalize simplified orthographic habits through repeated digital use.

5.4. Code-switching and Lexical Borrowings

The analysis also demonstrated frequent code-switching between French, English, and Nouchi in WhatsApp messages.

Examples include:

(1) ok bro on gère ça demain[6]
(2) je suis là hein faut pas yoyi[7]

These mixed forms show multilingual linguistic practices typical of Ivorian student communication. In academic writing, code-switching appeared less frequently but remained visible in certain lexical choices and informal expressions.

[6] Ok brother, well settle this tomorrow. (Translation mine)
[7] I'm here, don't worry. (Translation mine)

Nouchi-derived expressions occasionally appeared in academic texts, demonstrating that local urban speech influences written production.

5.5. Punctuation Reduction

Punctuation reduction is the most frequent feature identified in the WhatsApp corpus.

Students frequently omitted:

- full stops
- commas
- accents
- apostrophes

Example:

(3) je viens demain si Dieu veut tu attends[8]
without punctuation markers.

In the academic corpus, punctuation omissions remained frequent, particularly in long sentences.

This finding suggests that repeated digital writing without punctuation may affect students' formal writing habits.

5.6. General Interpretation of Results

The results demonstrate that WhatsApp writing encourages forms of linguistic simplification, economy, and hybridization that occasionally transfer into formal academic writing. However, the transfer is selective rather than systematic.

Students generally distinguish between digital and academic contexts, but difficulties appear when formal register control is weak. This confirms that digital writing does not entirely replace formal competence, but may influence orthographic and stylistic choices when academic writing demands are not fully mastered.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that WhatsApp writing practices influence formal academic writing among university students in Côte d'Ivoire, although the transfer is neither complete nor uniform. The presence of abbreviations, phonetic spellings, punctuation reduction and code-switching in academic texts suggests that digital writing habits partially extend beyond informal communication contexts. These results support the argument that digital communication contributes to new writing routines which students may reproduce when formal register control is insufficient.

The high frequency of abbreviations seen in the WhatsApp corpus confirms the principle of linguistic economy described by Crystal (2011), according to which digital users simplify writing with the aim of maximizing speed and interaction efficiency. Forms such as "slt", "stp", and "bjr" illustrate the tendency to reduce graphic effort while maintaining communicative clarity within familiar peer groups. According to Traoré (2024:

[8] I'll come tomorrow if God willing Do you understand. (Translation mine)

336), “WhatsApp, primarily used for private messaging, shows a preference for clear and concise communication”. The occasional appearance of these forms in academic assignments suggests that repeated exposure to abbreviated writing may affect orthographic automatisms, particularly in contexts where students write rapidly or with limited revision.

Similarly, the recurrence of punctuation reduction in both corpora reveals that digital writing affects students’ attention to formal written conventions. In WhatsApp chats, punctuation is often minimized because conversational meaning is supported by context, immediacy as well as sequential interaction. However, when punctuation omissions appear in academic texts, they may influence textual clarity and syntactic organization. This observation is consistent with recent studies that show that digital writing tends to privilege communicative immediacy over graphic normativity (Fitrianingsih, 2025; Alzahrani, 2025).

The presence of phonetic spellings like “koi” and “sava” further illustrates the influence of digital writing on orthographic practices. These forms reflect what Computer-Mediated Communication theory identifies as adaptation to conversational writing environments where oral proximity shapes written production (Herring, 2013). In this sense, WhatsApp writing does not just simplify language. It also brings writing closer to speech patterns. This convergence between oral and written forms explains why some students may unconsciously transfer informal graphic representations into formal texts.

Code-switching constitutes another important finding of this study. In Côte d’Ivoire, students naturally mobilize multiple linguistic resources, including standard French, English borrowings, and Nouchi, in everyday communication. Expressions such as “ok bro on gère ça demain”[9] reveal the sociolinguistic hybridity typical of Ivorian digital interaction. From a variationist sociolinguistic perspective, such alternation is not random but bear social meaning, reflecting identity, proximity, and contextual flexibility (Labov, 1972). The fact that traces of these hybrid forms are apparent in academic writing shows that students’ linguistic repertoires remain active even in formal contexts.

The occurrence of Nouchi-related lexical borrowings is particularly significant in the Ivorian context. Rather than interpreting these forms solely as interference, they may also be understood as manifestations of urban linguistic identity. However, academic writing necessitates explicit control of register boundaries, which many students have not fully mastered. This confirms recent sociolinguistic discussions arguing that digital writing does not necessarily weaken linguistic competence, but rather reveals difficulties in managing multiple coexisting registers (Ilbury, 2025).

The findings are consistent with recent African digital sociolinguistic studies showing that multilingual digital writing reflects adaptive register negotiation rather than literacy decline. Tabe (2023) puts forward that code-mixing and code-switching in Cameroonian social media are socially meaningful strategies linked to identity and communicative efficiency in multilingual settings. Similarly, Mukenge (2025) argues that Zimbabwean students’ WhatsApp writing reflects local linguistic adaptation rather than orthographic deficiency. In the same way, the Ivorian use of abbreviations, code-switching, and Nouchi expressions observed in this study can be understood as part of broader African digital writing practices.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that language teaching at university level should move beyond normative correction alone. The challenge is not to oppose digital writing practices, but to help students develop metalinguistic awareness of contextual variation. Students need to understand that WhatsApp writing and academic

[9] Ok brother we settle this tomorrow

writing correspond to different communicative purposes and therefore require different linguistic choices.

This pedagogical orientation implies integrating digital literacy into writing instruction. Teachers may use authentic examples from students' digital communication to demonstrate differences between informal and formal registers. Such an approach would allow learners to recognize linguistic variation consciously rather than treating digital forms simply as errors. Although the study provides useful insight into writing practices among university students, the limited sample size does not permit broad generation. Future research may include larger corpora across multiple institutions and disciplinary contexts.

In the nutshell, the findings confirm that WhatsApp writing constitutes an evolving sociolinguistic practice shaped by technological, social, and multilingual realities. In Côte d'Ivoire, where linguistic diversity already structures everyday communication, digital writing amplifies variation rather than replacing formal language norms. The central educational challenge therefore lies in strengthening students' ability to navigate between these registers according to context.

7. Pedagogical Recommendations

In light of these findings, several pedagogical recommendations may be proposed for language teaching in higher education.

7.1. Develop explicit register awareness

Language teachers should explicitly teach the distinction between digital writing and academic writing. Students need structured activities that show how forms acceptable in WhatsApp communication differ from formal written expectations.

7.2. Use digital examples in writing instruction

Authentic WhatsApp extracts may be integrated into writing classes in order to compare informal and formal versions of the same message. This can help students identify abbreviations, punctuation omissions, and informal lexical choices.

7.3. Reinforce revision practices

Students should be encouraged to revise written assignments carefully before submission, particularly emphasizing on punctuation, spelling, and sentence organization.

7.1.4. Integrate Multilingual Awareness into Writing Pedagogy

Given the multilingual environment of Côte d'Ivoire, teaching should acknowledge students' linguistic repertoires while clarifying when local forms, Nouchi expressions, or code-switching are inappropriate in formal academic writing.

7.5. Promote Digital Literacy as Part of Academic Literacy

Digital communication is now part of students' daily writing ecology. Rather than excluding it, university language teaching should incorporate digital literacy into academic writing instruction.

7.6. Encourage Corpus-based Corrective Exercises

Teachers may design exercises where students identify and correct digital features found in academic texts. Such pedagogical strategies can improve writing competence without opposing students' digital linguistic practices.

7.2. Perspectives for Future Research

Future studies may expand this research by analysing larger student corpora, comparing disciplines, examining gender differences in digital writing and studying the role of Nouchi more deeply in academic writing transfer. A broader comparative study across West African universities would also provide valuable regional insight.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between WhatsApp writing practices and formal writing performance among university students in Côte d'Ivoire. The findings demonstrate that digital writing habits affect formal academic writing through the recurrent transfer of abbreviations, phonetic spellings, punctuation reduction, code-switching, and lexical borrowings. Although these features occur more frequently in WhatsApp exchanges than in academic texts, their presence in formal writing points out that digital communication practices affect students' written linguistic behaviour.

The results also show that this influence should not be interpreted simply as linguistic deterioration. Rather, WhatsApp writing reflects an adaptive communicative register shaped by immediacy, economy, interpersonal proximity and multilingual interaction. In the Ivorian context, where students regularly navigate between standard French, English borrowings, local languages, and Nouchi, digital writing intensifies already existing sociolinguistic variation.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms that Computer-Mediated Communication and Variationist Sociolinguistics together provide an effective framework for understanding how digital writing operates within multilingual educational environments. WhatsApp writing does not replace formal writing norms. Instead, it creates competing writing routines that students must learn to manage according to communicative context.

The central issue therefore lies less in the existence of digital writing forms than in students' ability to distinguish between informal digital registers and formal academic writing requirements. The findings suggest that university writing difficulties partly reflect insufficient register awareness rather than simple orthographic weakness.

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