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NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF INTERNET SLANG ON STANDARD ENGLISH USAGE

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ABSTRACT

The wide use of internet slang by undergraduates in universities has become a source of concern regarding how it may affect the use of Standard English in the future. Internet slang structures and usage patterns have received scholarly attention by various means yet the neurolinguistic issue of the cognitive control of the competing linguistic registers has rarely been addressed. This paper used the Communication Accommodation Theory and Cognitive Load Theory to conceptualise undergraduates as active users of competing linguistic registers in an online and academic space. A quantitative survey design was used and the participants were 1,036 undergraduates between the ages of 18-35, with a questionnaire administered in a structured survey using Google Form distributed on undergraduates social media. The analysis of the data was done using the descriptive analysis in terms of frequencies and percentages. The results indicate that the reasons for using internet slang were efficiency, peer association and social interaction. Most of the participants noted that their use of Standard English is either not affected or haphazardly affected, which is an indication of great register awareness and control. According to the Communication Accommodation Theory, internet slang is a convergent strategy that forms peer relationship but implies generation gap. According to Cognitive Load Theory, the common use of slangs causes the formation of automated informal schemas, making it easy to switch to formal academic registers. The study concludes that Nigerian undergraduates' use of internet slang indicates adaptive sociocognitive competence, rather than linguistic decline. The study contributes to Nigerian sociolinguistic and neurolinguistic scholarship, explaining how digital language practices interact with the mental representation of Standard English.

Keywords: Digital communication, Standard English, Nigerian undergraduates, Communication Accommodation Theory, Cognitive Load Theory.

Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of language is dynamism, a feature that compels it to accommodate changes in form and function by adjusting to societal, cultural and technological modifications in order to meet new communicative needs. In recent times, a

major contributor to the language evolution has been technological advancement, particularly with the rise of the internet and numerous social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp. These platforms have revolutionised communication by transforming how people connect and share information, leading to the development of new linguistic forms widely known as internet slang or digital language (McCulloch, 2019; Panjaitan & Patria, 2024) characterised by marked differences in the vocabulary, usage and communication style.

Social media has created a digital atmosphere where young people, particularly university undergraduates, demonstrate their creative linguistic capacity by forming novel words, meanings, abbreviations and acronyms such as *OMG* (Oh My God), *ASAP* (As soon as possible), *FOMO* (fear of missing out), *BRB* (be right back) and newer expressions like *sus* (suspicious), and *IRL* (in real life). As reported in the literature, the use of such forms reflects a shift towards brief and informal communication (Mgbachi & Akabuike, 2024; Dembe, 2024) often marked by departure from traditional grammatical conventions through alterations in syntax, spelling, punctuations and vocabulary. Previous studies have identified linguistic features of digital language such as syllable simplification, abbreviation, phonetic spellings, changes in punctuation use, flexible word order, creative capitalisation, clipping, blending, unconventional spelling, consonant/vowel repetition, ellipsis and multimodal integration (AbuSa'aleek, 2015; Ali et al., 2022; Durdona, 2025; Imanova, 2023).

The divergence from conventional Standard English norms has generated scholarly debate regarding the impact of internet slang on Standard English usage. Opinions on this issue remain divergent. Some scholars argue that exposure to social media have negative effects on literacy skills (Akhir et al, 2025; Junaid, 2025; Matias, 2023; Rosen, et al., 2010) while others highlight its positive contributions to language development (Agunloye, 2025; Ricaforte, 2022). Still, other researchers suggest that young people demonstrate register awareness, enabling them to switch effectively between informal and formal linguistic codes (Thurairaj et al., 2015). This is a pertinent debate in multilingual settings like Nigeria, where English (the official language and main academic medium) interconnects with various indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin. This compels Nigerian undergraduates to navigate various linguistic registers of academic, social and digital spheres. This presumes frequent code switching depending on contexts. In Nigeria's linguistic diversity, internet slang could either be seen as a threat to Standard English or as another tool students use to communicate.

Despite growing studies on digital communication, there is limited research on the perceptions of Nigerian undergraduates on the connection between internet slang and Standard English usage. This study fills the gap by examining how Nigerian undergraduates think internet slang affects their Standard English. Understanding students' views on the influence of internet slang can provide an assessment if they think internet slang disrupts, adapts or rarely impact academic performance. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) are employed as theoretical frameworks for the study. CAT explains why students adjust their speech, while CLT explains how they process and automate internet slang. This study adds to the debate on the influence of digital language on academic performance, especially in a multilingual context.

Computer-Mediated Communication and Academic Language Use

The increasing amount of time internet users spend online has brought advancement to language, creating new ways of communication. The noticeable changes have resulted to a research shift, with the sole aim of describing the characteristics of internet language. Speed and briefness are the major features of internet vernacular which includes emojis, memes, abbreviations, slangs among others.

Extensive research has been conducted on the impacts of technology in academic settings, most especially in second language learning environments. Kakembo (2024) posits that the role played by technology in language learning, especially in relation to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The careful selection of appropriate technological tools, amid numerous available options, is advocated in order to make language learning engaging, accessible and effective.

Esan and Oyedepo (2025) investigated the effectiveness of AI-powered platforms in second language learning. Findings from data gathered from 45 participants who use several AI platforms such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, Babbel, among others reveal significant impacts of AI on linguistic skills. A majority of the participants had interacted with the platforms between 3 months and above 12 months, making them frequent users. Most participants reported improvements in reading, speaking, listening, grammar and vocabulary skills. The adaptive nature of these platforms enables them to meet learners' individual needs. When comparing AI-based learning platforms to traditional teaching methods, participants expressed a preference for the former but advocated for complementary or blended approaches rather than the complete abandonment of traditional methods.

The influence and the prospects of the use of slang in academic environments have been researched. Pongsapan's (2022) study investigated the various types of slang employed by students as well as the reasons for using them. From answers provided to the close-ended questionnaires, acronyms were the most frequent slang used by 39.75% participants. Other forms were clipping (27.71%), creative coinages (18.39%), compounding (9.19%) and imitation (5.74%). Several motivations for slang use were identified, including enriching language through neologisms (17.85%), fostering friendliness (16.70%), expressing distinctiveness and easing social interaction (15.47%), decreasing tenseness in conversation (13.09%), having fun (11.90%) and delighting in linguistic virtuosity (9.52%).

To examine the influence of social media on linguistic simplification, such as abbreviations and phonetic spellings, as well as its impact on syntax and grammar, Panjaitan and Patria (2024) identify linguistic economy, driven by speed and character limitations, as the primary motivation for simplification. The study equally suggests possible long-term shifts in linguistic norms due to the increasing presence of abbreviations in academic and professional settings. With its characteristic deviation from standard syntactic conventions, slang is found to contribute to an informal stylistic register that is efficient in conveying intention quickly.

Thurairaj *et al.* (2015) investigated the extent of the positive or negative impact of students' language usage on Social networking Sites (SNSs) among 236 students of Chinese ethnicity studying in private universities in Malaysia. 89.8% respondents reported logging into SNSs daily, while only 1.7% reported logging in less than twice a week. Facebook, Google+ and

Twitter were identified as the most preferred SNSs, whereas MySpace and LinkedIn were the least used. The major finding of the study revealed an insignificant relationship between SNS usage and English language proficiency, as students reported consciously avoiding the use of SNS language in academic writing.

Despite growing scholarly interest in digital communication, particularly internet slang, notable gaps exist in the literature. Several existing studies, such as Thurairaj *et al.* (2015), Xiuwen and Razali (2021), Pongsapan (2022), Panjaitan and Patria (2024), and Jose et al. (2025), have been conducted in western or Asian contexts. However, Nigeria which is a multilingual environment where there is coexistence of English with indigenous languages on the one hand and Nigerian Pidgin has also witnessed increasing engagement with internet slang.

Although Maledo and Edobor (2023) examined Nigerian internet-based slang from a morpho-sematic perspective, their study did not focus on the academic environment. A few studies have examined slang usage within Nigerian academic institutions from a sociolinguistic (Yahaya and Muhammad, 2019; Melefa and Ilo, 2020), semiotic (Adamo, 2013) and sociological (Robbin, 2020) perspectives. While these studies provide valuable insights into internet communication, they largely emphasise usage patterns rather than students' perceptions of impact. Although debate continues regarding the effects of digital language on Standard English (Agunloye, 2025; Akhir et al, 2025; Junaid, 2025; Matias, 2023; Ricaforte, 2022; Rosen et al., 2010), limited attention has been given to undergraduates' perceptions of internet slang's impact on Standard English, particularly within the Nigerian cultural context. By examining slang discourse from a neurolinguistic perspective, this study addresses this gap by providing cognitive insights into Nigerian undergraduates' perceived experiences regarding the impact of slang on Standard English usage. This positions the present study as a valuable contribution to Nigerian sociolinguistic and neurolinguistic research.

Theoretical framework

By adopting Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as its primary framework complemented by Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), the study employs a sociolinguistic methodology with neurolinguistically informed framework established on principles of brain-language processing, cognitive control and language monitoring. CAT explains how speakers adjust their language to fit situations. This is associated with ability of the brain to adapt and select the right words for specific context.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was pioneered by Giles (1973) and was further advanced by Giles, Coupland & Coupland (1991). The theory explains the social and psychological motivations underlying linguistic adjustments made by language users. It is hinged on the assumption that individuals do not only one way of communicating with others. Rather, they adapt their communication patterns, such as vocabulary, accent, and syntax, to achieve specific social goals, including gaining approval, improving efficiency, or asserting a distinct identity. The theory describes for the nature of several adjustments made in both verbal and nonverbal communicative contexts and how the adjustments serve as reflection of personal as well as social relationships. It does not only account for the adaptations made in communication but also explains the consequences and outcomes. CAT proposes cognitive motives and affective motives as the two major motives for adaptation in

communication. The cognitive motive relates to the management of comprehension, whereby a speaker seeks to be understood by others. The affective motive, on the other hand, concerns the management of social relationships through communication. This latter motive explains why certain topics are considered more appropriate in some relationships than in others (Soliz et al., 2022).

CAT highlights the main strategies people employ to make their communication either similar to or dissimilar from that of others. These strategies are divergence, convergence and maintenance. Convergence is a communicative strategy where individuals adjust their language, tone or behavior to align more closely with their conversation partners in order to reduce social distance, gain approval, or enhance interpersonal rapport (Giles et al., 2023). Converging speech modification may be conscious or unconscious, depending on the speaker's motivation, and it usually increases the perceived connection between speakers.

Convergence can occur in several ways: upward or downward convergence, depending on the prestige of the language variety being accommodated; full or partial accommodation; symmetrical or assymetrical accommodation, which makes either one or both speakers adjust their speech; and short-term or long-term accommodation. Divergence, conversely, occurs when speakers deliberately preserve or accentuate linguistic differences in order to create or sustain social distance, express contempt or signal disapproval. Divergence can be upward or downward, occur quickly or progressively, and be either minimal or highly pronounced (Giles et al., 2023). This strategy is particularly evident in interactions involving different social groups, such as intergenerational communication between younger and older individuals. Maintenance occurs when speakers uphold a specific communication style.

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)

Cognitive Load Theory, formulated by Sweller (1988), offers a model of how the brain coordinates and manages limited cognitive resources needed for the analysis of language-based tasks. He explains cognitive load as the amount of mental effort being used in the working memory at any time (Abdujabborova, 2025). Performance deteriorates when a task has a demand that exceeds the capacity of the working memory. Working memory, long-term memory, schema construction, schema automation are the aspects of human cognitive architecture proposed by Sweller et al. (1998). Working memory relates to a controllable consciousness in which all other cognitive functioning is processed. CLT is based on the premise that human working memory is limited in capacity. However, it processes the information of mental representations and new knowledge acquired through senses. Overloading the working memory may hinder proper output.

While working memory processes information, long-term memory stores information permanently. The knowledge stored in long-term memory is in form of schema. Schemas have automation where the construction of schemas occurs and is processed through working memory by sufficient practice. The information stored in the long-term memory can be automatically retrieved (Swller, 1994) because repeated exposure to a construct can activate its storage in long-term memory.

CLT identifies three different types of cognitive load which are assumed to be additive. They are intrinsic, extraneous and germane load. Cognitive overload occurs when the total

cognitive load, comprising the three types of load, exceeds one's working memory capacity. Intrinsic load relates to the complexity of the linguistic structure of the new information that one acquires. In other words, it is the natural inherent difficulty of the information being processed which is usually unalterable and fixed. Unfamiliar expressions require greater cognitive effort because of the need to first decode their meanings. On the other hand, extraneous load deals with the manner of the presentation of information rather than the content itself. Inefficient or complex communication increases this load, while simplified form reduces it. Germane load refers to the productive mental effort used in forming cognitive schemas that the automatic recognising and processing of information.

Methodology

A quantitative survey design was adopted to examine Nigerian undergraduates' perceptions of internet slang within the complementary frameworks of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT). The framework offers description of the social motivations for the use of internet slang as well as the perception of the cognitive implications of switching between the registers of internet slang and Standard English. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire of multiple choice and open questions created through Google Forms. The instrument was shared across undergraduates' social media platforms. Its Likert Scale questions ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Statistical analysis of the frequency of the responses of the respondents was carried out. Nigerian undergraduates aged 18 to 35 who are frequent internet users were the target of the study. A total of 1,036 valid responses obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages.

Data presentation and analysis

The quantitative data garnered from 1,036 Nigerian undergraduates are presented and analysed in this section. Some questions were not answered by some respondents, making the summation of the responses to some questions lesser than 1,036.

Table 1: Demography of the respondents

Age (N=1,036)				
Option	18–22	23-27	28-32	33-35
Frequency	889	104	16	27
Percentage	85.8	10	1.5	2.6
Gender (N=995)				
Option	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	
Frequency	640	349	6	
Percentage	64.3	35.1	0.6	
Level (N=1,031)				
Option	100L	200L	300L	400L
Frequency	709	187	45	90
Percentage	68.7	18.1	4.4	8.7

Geopolitical area (N=949)						
Option	South West	North West	North East	North Central	South South	South East
Frequency	619	55	29	46	73	127
Percentage	65.2	5.8	3.1	4.8	7.7	13.4

Table 1 presents the demographic information of participants across age, gender, academic level and geopolitical zone. That most respondents (85.8%) are aged 18-22 indicates that the sample is representative of typical undergraduates. Few respondents (14.1%) are between 23 and 35years. The concentration of the age is relevant to the study because younger undergraduates are usually active users of the internet. The study gained responses from more females than males. Females were 64.3%, males were 35.1% and 0.6% chose to conceal their gender. This does not reflect gender imbalance in the use of internet slang but response engagement.

Moreover, respondents are predominantly first-year (68.7%) and a little of second-year (18.1%) students. 4.4% are in third year, while 8.7% are in final year. The domination of 100-level students indicates the early exposure students have to academic conventions. Although all the geopolitical zones of the country are represented in the study, the South West has the highest representation with the record of 65.2% due to the accessibility of the researcher. However, the limitation in the regional proportion has no direct influence on the result of the study.

Table 2: Use of social media

Social media platforms regularly used												
Option	Twitter (X)	TikTok	Instagram	Facebook	WhatsApp	YouTube	Telegram	Opera mini	Discord	Snapchat	Substack	Gaming
Frequency	49	433	55	138	276	4	4	2	2	2	1	1
Percentage	4.7	41.8	5.3	13.3	26.1	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1

Table 2 summarises the preference of social media platforms by the respondents and their frequency of slang use. With a record of 47%, the most frequently used platform is TikTok. Next to it is WhatsApp which is used by 26.1%. Facebook is used by 13.3%. Other platforms have lesser representation.

Table 3: Slang use frequency

	Frequency of the use of slang (N=1,033)				
Option	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Frequency	284	237	387	109	16
Percentage	27.5	22.9	37.5	10.6	1.5

Table 3 reveals slang usage frequency. A significant 84.9% of the respondents report relative use of internet slang. About a fifth of the respondents (12.1%) say they hardly or never use internet slang. The findings indicate that internet slang is pivotal to undergraduates' online discussion.

Table 4: Functions of internet slang

Reasons for using Internet slang on social media				
Option / Statement	To express my personality or identity	To fit in with friends or online groups	Because it is trendy or popular	To communicate quickly and efficiently
Frequency	152	284	148	671
Percentage	12.1	22.6	11.8	53.5

Table 4 explores motivations for slang usage. The major one which is communication efficiency has 53.5%. This indicates that undergraduates are linguistically economical when they engage in digital communication. 22.6% respondents employ internet slang in order to fit in with friends. Expression of personality or identity is the motivation for 12.1% of the respondents, while 11.8% use it in order to follow trends. The findings suggest that internet slang is not only used for identity construction but also for efficiency.

Table 5: Attitudes to internet slang

Statement	**Strongly Agree (N/%)**	**Agree (N/%)**	**Neutral (N/%)**	**Disagree (N/%)**	**Strongly disagree**	**Total**
Internet slang helps me feel connected to social groups	321 (33.7)	311 (32.7)	188 (19.7)	93 (9.8)	39 (4.1)	952
Using slang online shows my cultural identity	77 (8.9)	127 (14.8)	227 (26.5)	299 (34.9)	127 (14.8)	857
I feel that slang creates a gap between younger and older people	190 (21.8)	206 (23.7)	206 (23.7)	181 (20.8)	88 (10.1)	871
Internet slang is an important part of Nigerian youth culture	255 (28.5)	247 (27.6)	170 (18.9)	133 (14.8)	91 (10.1)	896

Table 5 presents attitudinal responses of the respondents using a Likert Scale. A total of 632 respondents making 66.4% assert that internet slang help them to connect with others. This suggests that internet slang performs instrumental function of social integration and peer association. As regards expression of cultural identity, there are divergent views. Although a substantial 26.5% of the respondents are neutral, only 23.7 expressed their agreement, while a significant 49.7% expressed disagreement. This indicates that internet slang is hardly regarded as a cultural marker. There is wide distribution of responses as to whether internet slang creates a gap between younger and older people. About half of the respondents agree, while 23.7% are neutral in their decision and 30.9% either disagree or agree. Internet slang is regarded as an essential linguistic feature of Nigerian youth by 56.1% respondents, although 43.8% are either neutral or in disagreement. However, the decision of the majority strengthens the assertion.

Table 6: Perceptions of the impact of internet slang on Standard English

	Use of Slang Outside Social Media (N=1,028)				
Option	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Frequency	131	145	365	286	101
Percentage	12.7	14.1	35.5	27.8	9.8
Effect on Standard English (N=1,024)					

Option	Yes, it negatively affects my standard English	No, it does not affect my standard English	Sometimes it affects my standard English	I'm not sure
Frequency	214	425	331	54
Percentage	20.9	41.5	32.3	5.3
Perceptions of Teachers/older generation (N=1,023)				
Option	They accept it as normal and creative	They disapprove of it and see it as improper	They are indifferent	I don't know
Frequency	188	564	102	169
Percentage	18.4	55.1	10	16.5
Feelings about the changes internet slang bring to Standard English (N=999)				
Option	Positive	Negative	Neutral	
Frequency	298	302	399	
Percentage	29.8	30.2	40	

Table 6 directly addresses the core concern of the research which is the impact of internet slang on Standard English usage. A combined 62.3% affirm they use slang outside social media; 27.8% rarely use it and 9.8% never use it. However, that a majority of the respondents either sometimes or rarely use it outside social media suggests their ability to control their linguistic choices. As regards the effect of internet slang on Standard English usage, 20.9% affirm its direct relationship with their performance in Standard English. Although a majority (41.5%) of the respondents rejects its negative impact on Standard English usage, a significant 32.3% affirms its occasional interference. This implies that the respondents know that there is a situational interference and not a total deterioration in the linguistic form. Most respondents (55.1%) also admit to a perceived disapproval of internet slang by older generations, and only 18.4% see its acceptability. The observation implies that the internet slang, which is incorporated into the youth culture, is not accepted by the older generations, showing a good representation of generational barrier. The responses are spread out evenly in terms of perceived nature of changes that internet slang has had on Standard English.

Discussion and conclusion

The data are explained on the basis of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT). The results show that internet slang is a socially strategic construct that is cognitively regulated. There is an establishment of situational control of registers instead of the language decline situations previously established in the literature (Adeyemi et al., 2025; Akhir et al, 2025).

In CAT perspective, internet slang is used as a social convergence and identity strategy. It is commonly used among undergraduates in Nigeria and facilitates effective interaction and interrelationship. This is an indication of social convergence and identification with the peer group. Young people use slang as a way of minimising social distance. Online platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp and Facebook, characterised by speed and informality, demand convergence toward abbreviations and creativity. This convergence is caused by both cognitive processes and affective factors. In terms of cognition, the internet slang is used for

effective communication. Affectively, internet slang gives speakers a chance to gain social acceptance and sense of belonging.

Whereas convergence is the dominant feature of peer interaction, divergence manifests in the behavioral views by older generations. Thus, communication gap exists between younger and older people. This trend depicts both intergenerational and intentional divergence in the Communication Accommodation Theory. Students know the normative requirements of Standard English, but intentionally use slang. This kind of peer conformity with institutional nonconformity in informal situations is a kind of a dual accommodation strategy which shows sociolinguistic consciousness and not degeneration.

In addition, accommodation strategy in CAT also includes maintenance, where speakers maintain their communication style. As the data has shown, a good number of students differentiate between informal and formal communicative situations. Internet slang is mainly used online, with limited use out of social media. This shows that, students voluntarily maintain Standard English in official situations. Moreover, may are of the view that the usage of internet slang language has no impact on their use of Standard English. This means that there is a sense of a distinct boundary between formal and informal context and its maintenance.

Moreover, Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) describes the cognitive implications of regular slang use. The finding that the respondents use slang at least occasionally, with efficiency being the most prominent among their motivators, corresponds to CLT principle of schema automation within the long-term memory of the respondents. Frequent use of abbreviations and simplified constructions leads to automated informal schemas. According to this automation, internet slang is not disruptive since most of the respondents specifically mentioned that efficiency was their reason for using internet slang. This trend decreases the intrinsic and extraneous cognitive load in digital communication because it makes messages faster and easier to process. This minimises unnecessary mental strain involved in online communication. Internet slang removes unnecessary load and facilitates communication by decreasing typing needs on different social networking sites. Germane cognitive load shows in frequent exposure to the commonly used internet slang. This allows students to decode their meanings and process them automatically when they are online.

Yet, the shift from informal digital registers to the Standard English in academic activities can impose an extraneous cognitive strain. Others stated that Standard English is occasionally influenced by internet slang, meaning there could be a certain cognitive interference as a result of register switching. Regular use of abbreviations can establish competing mental patterns, which can lead to increased interference with retrieval and additional demands on working memory whenever there is a need to suppress competing mental patterns. The students need to inhibit the habitual slang patterns and use formal grammatical patterns in the process of transition. This inhibition procedure increases the necessities of working memory and cognitive functions.

However, the data do not indicate rampant cognitive overload. The fact that internet slang does not affect the use of Standard English implies efficient dual-schema management. Instead of becoming confused, the students have become more cognitively flexible such that

they adjust their linguistic options. This expresses executive control processes which manage competing representations in bilingual and multilingual speakers.

In summary, instead of viewing the internet slang as a threat to Standard English, internet slang among the Nigerian undergraduates should be considered as one of the dynamic elements of communicative competence that is socially predetermined, cognitively mediated and contextually implemented.

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