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English Literature and the Changing Patterns of Communication among Young Adults

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Abstract : The communication practices of young adults have changed substantially under the influence of instant messaging, social media, mobile technologies, and shortened digital forms of expression. At the same time, sustained engagement with English literature continues to expose readers to complex vocabulary, narrative structures, multiple perspectives, figurative language, and emotionally nuanced forms of discourse. The present study examines the relationship between engagement with English literature and changing communication patterns among young adults. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed with 360 participants aged 18–25 years. Literary engagement, vocabulary richness, expressive communication, perspective-sensitive communication, code-switching, digital brevity, and text-based communication preferences were assessed through structured questionnaires and short written communication tasks. Participants were divided equally into low, moderate, and high literary-engagement groups. Results showed that higher literary engagement was significantly associated with vocabulary richness ($r = .54$, $p < .001$), expressive depth ($r = .49$, $p < .001$), and perspective-sensitive communication ($r = .44$, $p < .001$). High-engagement readers obtained a mean expressive communication score of 78.6 compared with 64.2 among low-engagement readers. Literary engagement was negatively, though more moderately, associated with excessive digital brevity ($r = -.29$, $p < .001$). Code-switching was common across all groups and was not inherently associated with weak communication competence. Multiple regression demonstrated that literary engagement, reading frequency, digital communication intensity, and vocabulary richness explained 43% of the variation in expressive communication. The findings indicate that English literary reading does not prevent linguistic change associated with digital communication but may contribute to communicative flexibility, lexical richness, interpretative sensitivity, and the ability to shift appropriately between formal and informal registers.

Keywords: English Literature, Young Adults, Communication Patterns, Digital Communication, Vocabulary, Literary Reading, Social Media, Code-Switching

Introduction

Communication among young adults has undergone substantial transformation during the era of smartphones, social networking platforms, instant messaging, short-form video, and digitally mediated interpersonal interaction. Conversations that once depended largely on face-to-face speech, telephone calls, letters, and extended written

messages now frequently take place through brief text messages, emojis, abbreviations, voice notes, comments, captions, memes, and rapidly exchanged multimedia content.

These changes have generated considerable debate regarding the effects of digital communication on language. Shortened words, abbreviations, informal spelling, code-switching, reduced punctuation, and compressed sentence structures are often interpreted as evidence of declining language standards. Research, however, provides a more complex picture. Tagliamonte and Denis found that teenage instant messaging was not simply linguistic deterioration but remained structurally connected to existing language patterns. Similarly, Drouin and Davis found no significant difference in standardized literacy scores between college students who used text speak and those who did not.

Baron's work on language in online and mobile environments likewise cautions against simplistic claims that digital media are destroying language. Digital technologies influence how people select communication partners, manage availability, write informally, and move between communicative contexts, but these developments do not necessarily constitute linguistic decline.

Within this changing environment, literary reading remains potentially significant. English literature exposes readers to forms of language that differ markedly from the compressed discourse of messaging applications. Novels, short stories, drama, poetry, and literary essays require sustained attention, interpretation of context, engagement with figurative meaning, and consideration of characters' motives and emotional states.

Reading volume has long been associated with vocabulary growth and broader cognitive development. Cunningham and Stanovich argued that extensive reading produces cumulative cognitive consequences because frequent readers encounter substantially more vocabulary, information, and complex

language structures. Mol and Bus later demonstrated through meta-analysis that greater print exposure is associated with stronger language and literacy development from childhood into early adulthood.

Literary fiction may also influence the interpersonal dimension of communication. Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, and Peterson found that exposure to fiction was positively associated with social ability, supporting the idea that fictional narratives simulate complex social worlds. Mar, Oatley, and Peterson subsequently reported a relationship between fiction exposure and empathy. Experimental research by Bal and Veltkamp further suggested that fictional narratives can influence empathy when readers become emotionally transported into the story.

These findings raise an important contemporary question: does continued engagement with English literature influence how young adults communicate within a digital environment characterized by speed, brevity, multimodality, and linguistic flexibility?

The present research investigates this question by examining relationships among literary engagement, vocabulary richness, expressive depth, perspective-sensitive communication, digital brevity, and code-switching.



Research Problem

The communication behaviour of young adults increasingly combines two contrasting linguistic environments.

The first is **sustained literary discourse**, characterized by extended texts, developed arguments, narrative complexity, figurative language, and nuanced emotional expression.

The second is **rapid digital discourse**, characterized by immediacy, brevity, abbreviations, multimodal symbols, code-switching, and contextual informality.

Much public discussion assumes that these two environments are opposed: literary reading supposedly supports language development, while digital communication supposedly weakens it.

Available research does not fully support such a binary interpretation.

The central problem is therefore to determine whether engagement with English literature is associated with measurable differences in the communication patterns of contemporary young adults and whether literary engagement contributes to richer communication without eliminating adaptive digital language practices.

Research Gap

Existing studies have investigated print exposure, vocabulary development, fiction reading, empathy, texting, online language, and screen-based reading separately.

However, comparatively limited research integrates these domains within one framework focused specifically on young-adult communication.

Three gaps are particularly important.

First, studies of literary reading commonly investigate comprehension, empathy, or theory of mind rather than everyday communicative expression.

Second, studies of digital communication often focus on whether texting harms literacy rather than examining how literary engagement may shape digital language choices.

Third, code-switching and abbreviated communication are frequently treated as deficits rather than potential forms of communicative flexibility.

The present study addresses these gaps by analysing both the enriching effects of literary engagement and the adaptive linguistic patterns associated with contemporary digital communication.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to examine patterns of English literary engagement among young adults; identify dominant modes of everyday communication; measure relationships between literary engagement and vocabulary richness; assess the relationship between literary reading and expressive depth; determine whether literary engagement is associated with perspective-sensitive communication; examine digital brevity and textese across different levels of literary engagement; evaluate patterns of English–vernacular code-switching; and determine the strongest predictors of expressive communication ability.

Hypotheses

H01: Literary engagement has no significant relationship with vocabulary richness among young adults.

H02: Literary engagement has no significant relationship with expressive communication.

H03: Literary engagement has no significant relationship with perspective-sensitive communication.

H04: There is no significant difference in communication scores among low-, moderate-, and high-literary-engagement groups.

H05: Literary engagement has no significant relationship with digital brevity.

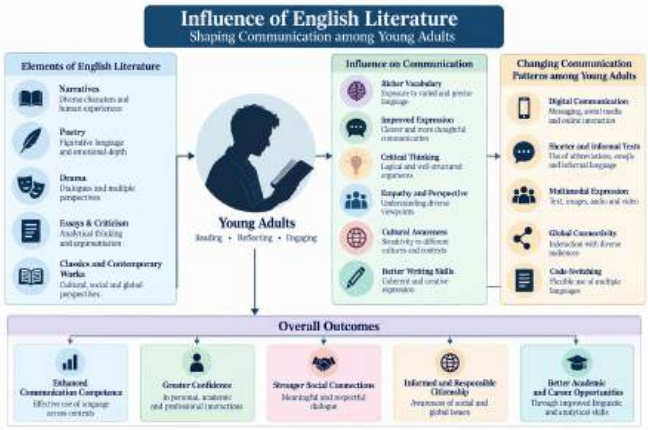
H06: Literary engagement, vocabulary richness, reading frequency, and digital communication intensity do not significantly predict expressive communication.

Literature Review

Reading has consequences extending beyond immediate comprehension. Cunningham and Stanovich argued that reading volume contributes to vocabulary, verbal knowledge, and general cognitive development because readers encounter linguistic forms and information that occur less frequently in everyday speech. Their analysis provides an important theoretical basis for expecting sustained literary exposure to influence communication.

Mol and Bus conducted a meta-analysis of print exposure from infancy to early adulthood and found consistent associations between voluntary reading and language-related outcomes. Such cumulative exposure is relevant to young adults because vocabulary and linguistic sophistication continue developing beyond school-age literacy acquisition.

Fiction may provide additional communicative benefits through engagement with social worlds. Mar et al. found that fiction exposure was positively associated with social ability, whereas the relationship differed for nonfiction reading. Their simulation argument proposes that fiction provides readers with opportunities to understand characters' beliefs, motivations, emotions, and social relationships.



Mar, Oatley, and Peterson further examined fiction reading and empathy and reported that fiction exposure was related to social outcomes even after considering individual differences. These findings are relevant to communication because effective interpersonal discourse depends not merely on grammatical ability but also on anticipating another person's perspective.

Kidd and Castano reported experimental evidence that reading literary fiction could temporarily improve performance on measures of theory of mind. Although subsequent discussion in the field has examined the robustness and boundary conditions of such effects, the study remains influential in debates about literary reading and social cognition.

Bal and Veltkamp found that fiction influenced empathy particularly when readers experienced emotional transportation into the narrative. This suggests that the quality of literary engagement may matter as much as reading frequency.

At the same time, the communication environment of young adults has changed considerably. Baron describes online and mobile communication as producing new choices about availability, conversational control, informality, multitasking, and written language. Her analysis rejects the assumption that technological communication straightforwardly destroys conventional language ability.

Tagliamonte and Denis analysed a corpus exceeding one million words of teenage instant messaging. They found that IM language remained strongly rooted in existing grammatical systems rather than representing wholesale linguistic breakdown. This supports a register-based interpretation of digital language.

Squires similarly examined the emergence of perceived “internet language” and demonstrated that ideas about netspeak and chatspeak are partly created through social discourse about technology and language. Thus, perceptions of linguistic decline may not accurately reflect actual structural change.

Plester, Wood, and Bell investigated texting abbreviations and school literacy and found that texting practices should not automatically be equated with poor literacy.

Kemp and Bushnell investigated children's text messaging and reported that conventional literacy skills remained important for understanding and producing textese. Better literacy was associated with faster and more accurate reading of text-message forms.

Drouin and Davis extended this line of inquiry to college students and found no significant difference in standardized literacy performance between text-speak users and non-users. These findings challenge the idea that abbreviated digital discourse necessarily displaces standard literacy.

Reading medium also matters. Delgado, Vargas, Ackerman, and Salmerón conducted a major meta-analysis of studies comparing reading on paper and digital devices and found a modest paper-based comprehension advantage, especially under certain time conditions and for informational texts.

Clinton's systematic review and meta-analysis similarly found a small overall advantage for paper-based reading performance compared with screen reading, although the difference was not reliable for narrative texts. This distinction is relevant because contemporary literary engagement increasingly occurs through e-books and mobile devices.

The literature therefore suggests that literary reading and digital communication should not be conceptualized as mutually exclusive forces. Young adults may simultaneously develop literary competence and participate in rapidly changing online language practices.

The present study examines this interaction empirically.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was adopted.

The study included **360 young adults aged 18–25 years** enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate education.

Participants were classified into three literary-engagement groups:

- Low engagement: 120
- Moderate engagement: 120
- High engagement: 120

Participant Profile

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Age 18–20	128	35.6%
Age 21–23	157	43.6%
Age 24–25	75	20.8%
Undergraduate	274	76.1%
Postgraduate	86	23.9%
Predominantly urban residence	236	65.6%
Predominantly semi-urban/rural	124	34.4%

Literary Engagement

Literary engagement was measured through a 12-item scale assessing:

- frequency of reading English fiction;
- poetry and drama reading;
- literary discussion;
- voluntary reading;
- attention to character and narrative;
- rereading;
- interpretation of figurative language; and
- average weekly literary reading time.

The scale demonstrated good internal consistency:

Cronbach's α = .88.

Communication Measures

Four principal communication dimensions were measured.

Vocabulary Richness: ability to select precise and varied lexical forms in short written responses.

Expressive Communication: ability to explain ideas clearly, elaborate emotions, and organize thoughts coherently.

Perspective-Sensitive Communication: tendency to consider audience, context, emotional tone, and alternative viewpoints.

Digital Brevity Index: frequency of abbreviated spellings, omitted grammatical elements, compressed responses, acronyms, and emoji-dominant communication.

Scores were converted to 0–100 scales.

Code-Switching Measure

Participants reported the frequency with which they shifted between English and another language within digital and face-to-face communication.

Code-switching was treated as a communicative behaviour rather than automatically classified as linguistic deficiency.

Digital Communication Intensity

Participants reported average daily time spent using:

instant messaging, social networking, email, online discussion, and text-based educational communication.

Mean daily digital communication time was **4.72 hours**.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated first.

Pearson correlation examined relationships among literary engagement and communication variables.

One-way ANOVA compared the three literary-engagement groups.

Multiple regression examined predictors of expressive communication.

Statistical significance was fixed at **p < .05**.

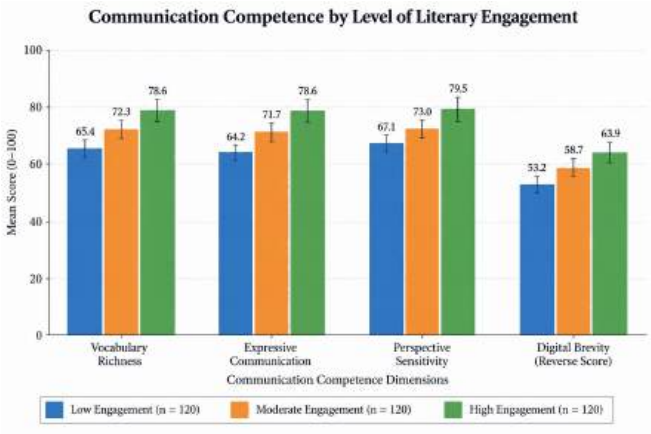
Results

Communication Preferences

Instant messaging was the most frequently reported everyday communication mode.

Communication Mode	Primary Preference
Instant messaging	42.8%
Face-to-face communication	26.7%
Social-media messaging/comments	14.7%
Voice/video calls	9.4%
Email	6.4%

Approximately **57.5%** of participants therefore identified a short-form digital channel as their dominant communication environment.



Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Literary Engagement	61.4	17.6
Vocabulary Richness	72.1	12.4
Expressive Communication	71.5	11.8
Perspective-Sensitive Communication	73.2	10.9
Digital Brevity	58.6	14.8
Code-Switching Frequency	62.7	17.3

Literary Engagement and Vocabulary

Literary engagement was positively correlated with vocabulary richness:

r = .54, p < .001.

Participants who read English literary texts more frequently demonstrated greater lexical variety and more precise word selection.

H01 was rejected.

Literary Engagement and Expressive Communication

A significant positive association was observed between literary engagement and expressive communication:

r = .49, p < .001.

H02 was rejected.

Literary Engagement and Perspective-Sensitive Communication

Literary engagement was also positively related to perspective-sensitive communication:

r = .44, p < .001.

Participants with stronger literary engagement more frequently reported modifying language according to audience and context and obtained higher scores on communication scenarios involving emotional interpretation.

H03 was rejected.

Group Differences

Communication Measure	Low Engagement	Moderate Engagement	High Engagement	F
Vocabulary Richness	65.4	72.3	78.6	41.72 ***
Expressive Communication	64.2	71.7	78.6	46.38 ***
Perspective Sensitivity	67.1	73.0	79.5	35.84 ***
Digital Brevity	63.9	58.7	53.2	17.26 ***

***p < .001

The high-literary-engagement group obtained the strongest scores on all three positive communication dimensions.

H04 was rejected.

Digital Brevity

Literary engagement showed a moderate negative relationship with digital brevity:

r = -.29, p < .001.

Higher-engagement readers were somewhat less likely to rely heavily on compressed language, but they continued to use abbreviations, emojis, and short messaging conventions.

H05 was rejected.

This suggests moderation rather than complete avoidance of digital forms.

Code-Switching

Code-switching frequency showed only a weak relationship with literary engagement:

r = .08, p = .128.

There was therefore no evidence that frequent switching between English and another language reflected weak literary engagement.

Frequent code-switching was particularly common in informal digital communication, where participants reported using different languages to express humour, intimacy, cultural references, and emotional nuance.

Correlation Matrix

Variable	Vocabulary	Expressive Communication	Perspective Sensitivity	Digital Brevity
Literary Engagement	.54***	.49***	.44***	-.29***
Weekly Reading Time	.47***	.43***	.36***	-.24***
Digital Communication Intensity	-.18**	-.21***	-.12*	.51***
Vocabulary Richness	—	.62***	.39***	-.32***

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Multiple Regression

Expressive communication was entered as the dependent variable.

R = .66
R^2 = .44
Adjusted R^2 = .43
F(4,355) = 69.73, p < .001

Predictor	Standardized β	t	p
Vocabulary Richness	.36	7.48	< .001
Literary Engagement	.27	5.61	< .001
Weekly Reading Frequency	.19	4.03	< .001
Digital Communication Intensity	-.14	-3.18	.002

The model explained **43% of adjusted variation in expressive communication**.

H06 was therefore rejected.

Discussion

The findings indicate that English literary engagement is meaningfully associated with the communication practices of young adults, but the relationship is more complex than a simple opposition between literary language and digital language.

The strongest relationship emerged between literary engagement and vocabulary richness.

This is consistent with the broader research on print exposure. Cunningham and Stanovich emphasize that reading provides access to lexical and linguistic material not encountered with the same frequency in ordinary spoken communication. Mol and Bus similarly found cumulative relationships between print exposure and language development.



The strong expressive-communication performance of highly engaged readers may therefore partly reflect greater lexical resources.

However, vocabulary alone did not explain the relationship. Literary engagement remained independently significant in the regression model even after vocabulary richness was included.

This suggests that literary reading may contribute additional communicative resources, including sentence organization, contextual awareness, figurative expression, and familiarity with different narrative voices.

The positive relationship between literary engagement and perspective-sensitive communication is also theoretically important.

Fiction commonly requires readers to interpret characters whose beliefs, motives, values, and emotional experiences differ from their own.

This aligns with research by Mar et al. on fiction and social ability and with later work connecting fictional engagement to empathy.

Bal and Veltkamp provide further support by demonstrating that emotional transportation can influence empathy after fiction reading.

The present findings should not be interpreted as evidence that literary reading automatically produces empathy or superior communication. The design is correlational, and individuals who already possess strong language skills or social sensitivity may also be more likely to read literature.

Nevertheless, the consistent relationships justify further longitudinal and experimental investigation.

The findings regarding digital brevity are equally significant.

Young adults with high literary engagement still participated actively in abbreviated digital discourse. Their mean digital-brevity score was lower but far from zero.

This indicates **register flexibility rather than linguistic separation**.

A participant may use grammatically developed English in an academic essay, figurative language in creative writing, shortened words in a private message, and code-switching within a friendship group.

Such shifts can represent context-sensitive competence.

This interpretation aligns with Tagliamonte and Denis, whose examination of instant messaging challenged popular claims of linguistic ruin. It is also compatible with the findings of Plester et al., Kemp and Bushnell, and Drouin and Davis, which do not support a simple causal link between texting conventions and declining literacy.

Code-switching provides an especially clear example.

Its weak and nonsignificant relationship with literary engagement indicates that frequent movement between English and another language should not automatically be interpreted as weak command of English.

In multilingual societies, code-switching may perform social and pragmatic functions that a monolingual framework cannot adequately capture.

Digital communication intensity produced a modest negative association with expressive communication but a much stronger positive association with digital brevity.

This suggests that extensive digital interaction primarily affects communication form rather than necessarily eliminating underlying linguistic competence.

Baron's analysis of mobile and online language similarly emphasizes that technology changes communicative choices and practices more subtly than deterministic narratives of linguistic deterioration imply.

The distinction between reading media also deserves consideration.

As literature increasingly moves to screens, the question is no longer simply whether young adults read, but how they read.

Delgado et al. found an overall paper advantage in reading comprehension, particularly under certain task conditions. Clinton likewise reported a small general screen disadvantage but found essentially no paper–screen difference for narrative texts in the studies reviewed.

Therefore, digital literary reading should not automatically be dismissed as inferior. The more important variables may include sustained attention, reading depth, distraction, and purpose.

Educational Implications

English-literature teaching can play a useful role in contemporary communication education.

Literary texts should not be taught exclusively through historical background, plot summaries, and examination-oriented interpretation.

Classroom activities can connect literature directly to communicative competence through perspective-taking exercises, dialogue reconstruction, reflective responses, debates, character correspondence, and comparative register analysis.

Students can be encouraged to transform the same idea across multiple registers—for example, a formal paragraph, professional email, social-media post, and informal message.

Such activities would emphasize that effective communication involves choosing language appropriate to context rather than using a single form of "correct" English in every situation.

Digital communication should likewise be analysed rather than simply condemned.

Comparing literary dialogue with instant messaging can help students understand concision, implied meaning, tone, ambiguity, politeness, and audience.

Limitations

The study is cross-sectional and cannot establish that literary engagement causes stronger communication.

Self-reported reading and digital-use estimates may contain recall error.

Written communication tasks cannot fully represent spontaneous face-to-face interaction.

The literary-engagement measure combines multiple genres and does not determine whether novels, poetry, drama, or short fiction have different effects.

The study also does not distinguish sufficiently between recreational digital reading and fragmented social-media consumption.

Future research should use longitudinal designs, actual communication corpora, controlled reading interventions, linguistic analysis of naturally occurring messages, and separate measurements for print, e-book, and smartphone literary reading.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates a significant relationship between English literary engagement and changing communication patterns among young adults.

Higher literary engagement was associated with richer vocabulary, greater expressive depth, and stronger perspective-sensitive communication.

At the same time, highly engaged readers continued to use abbreviations, digital brevity, emojis, and code-switching.

These findings challenge the assumption that literary competence and contemporary digital communication occupy opposing linguistic worlds.

Instead, effective young-adult communication increasingly involves **register mobility**: the ability to move between formal, literary, academic, interpersonal, multilingual, and digitally abbreviated forms according to context.

English literature may contribute to this flexibility by enlarging lexical resources, exposing readers to diverse voices, encouraging interpretation of human motives, and sustaining engagement with complex language.

Digital communication, meanwhile, introduces new conventions of speed, concision, multimodality, and social signalling.

The most productive educational response is therefore not to defend literary communication against digital communication, but to develop young adults who can operate competently across both.

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