The Role of Punctuation in Conveying Meaning: A Study of Miscommunication in Digital Writing

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Abstract: The increase of digital communication has heightened the importance of punctuation in conveying meaning. Punctuations play a pivotal role in enhancing communicative meaning, yet their use, or lack thereof, in digital writing remains understudied. Despite the growing body of research on punctuation as a meaning-defining device in written communication, there has been a notable lack of research on the impact of punctuation on communication in digital writing. Drawing on theories such as Kress's multimodal theory, speech act theory, and communication accommodation theory, this research explores how punctuation affects message interpretation, with a particular focus on its absence, presence, and misuse. Employing a qualitative approach and content analysis method, thirty written digital posts were randomly selected and studied, with ten posts from each of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. Findings reveal that punctuation negligence and abuse are common across the digital interaction space, resulting in an overburdening cognitive load on readers, incoherence, and miscommunication. Common punctuation errors discovered range from omission and misplacement to excessive and inconsistent use of standard marks. The study also highlights the adaptive nature of punctuation in digital writing, where users modify their punctuation styles to align with discourse communities, sometimes at the expense of clarity. Given the findings, the study recommended awareness of punctuation, mindful writing practices, and other strategies for improving digital communication, emphasising the need for clear punctuation to aid understanding of digital discourse.
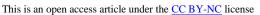
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INTRODUCTION

Communication is a livewire connecting all forms of human socialisation through history. It is an indispensable element of human society, refining and improving with societal evolution and advancement. Today's rapidly evolving digital age has ushered in an unprecedented era of human interconnectedness, reshaping human communication (Khayriniso, 2023). At the heart of this transformation lies the prevalence of digital communication, facilitated by the proliferation of digital platforms like social media, instant messaging apps, and emails (Abdul & Niruba, 2021). Digital communication has shifted communication from traditional face-to-face interactions to text-based exchanges and instant voice/video messaging that transcends geographical boundaries (Perez-Llantada, 2024). Although video and voice messaging are integral aspects of digital communication, text-based messaging appears to be the cornerstone of daily interactions on digital platforms, both in professional and personal contexts (Ologunebi & Taiwo, 2025). From instant messaging applications to social media posts and email exchanges, text has become the primary conduit for expressing thoughts, ideas, and emotions in contemporary society.

While digital communication offers convenience and immediacy, its reliance majorly on written words to convey meaning, tone, and intent underscores a unique necessity for punctuation to provide structure and clarity, shape message tone, emphasise specific points, and communicate effectively (Yani et al., 2025). Punctuation, which refers to the system of symbols used in writing to separate sentences and clarify meaning, plays a crucial role in written communication. It not only mirrors the natural rhythm and intonation of speech but also structures the text in a way that enhances readability. According to Nwike (2021), punctuation serves as a fundamental tool in written discourse, guiding readers through sentences by indicating pauses, emphasis, and syntactical relationships. It helps eliminate ambiguity, ensuring that both the overall discourse and its individual components are clearly organised. Proper use of punctuation enhances clarity, allowing readers to accurately interpret the writer's intended message and bridge the gap left by the absence of vocal tone, facial expressions, and body language in digital writing (Yani et al., 2025). A misplaced comma, omitted period, or incorrect use of a question mark can significantly alter the meaning of a sentence, sometimes leading to confusion or even conflict. In professional

and academic settings, errors in punctuation can compromise credibility, while in personal interactions, they may lead to misunderstandings or unintended emotional undertones (Kleppa, Phillipines, and Basso, 2024). As digital communication continues to shape social and professional interactions, the implications of poor punctuation usage become increasingly significant.

The informal and often hurried nature of online interactions has led to frequent neglect, misuse, and/or inconsistent application of punctuation, resulting in ambiguity, unintended meanings, and miscommunication (Hutauruk, 2016). Informal writing practices, such as omitting punctuation for brevity or overusing certain marks like ellipses and exclamation points, have become normalised in text-based interactions. These practices can lead to significant misunderstandings, ranging from minor confusion to more serious breakdowns in communication, particularly in scenarios where tone or intent is misinterpreted (Mawudoku, 2020). For instance, the placement of punctuation can drastically alter the meaning of a sentence, as seen in the classic example: "A woman, without her man, is nothing" versus "A woman: without her, man is nothing." In addition, Gihar et al. (2025) and Sari (2024) noted that the prevalence of character limits and autocorrect features has contributed to a decline in adherence to conventional punctuation norms. In digital spaces, where messages are often read quickly and without the opportunity for immediate clarification, the consequences of punctuation errors can be amplified.

This has led to a growing concern regarding the extent to which punctuation errors contribute to miscommunication in digital discourse. The problem is particularly evident in instances where the lack of punctuation alters the intended tone or creates multiple possible interpretations, leading to misinterpretation and, in some cases, conflict. Given the pervasive nature of digital writing, this issue extends across social, academic, and professional contexts, necessitating an in-depth exploration of how punctuation, or the lack thereof, influences meaning and communication effectiveness. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the role of punctuation in conveying meaning within digital writing and to examine how punctuation errors contribute to miscommunication. Specifically, it seeks to identify common punctuation-related errors in digital discourse, analyse their impact on message clarity and reader perception, and explore potential strategies for improving punctuation use in online communication. This will help to provide a deeper understanding of the communicative functions of punctuation in digital writing and offer insights into mitigating misunderstandings caused by punctuation misuse in this digital era. As technology continues to shape communication, the ability to convey meaning accurately in text-based formats is becoming increasingly essential. This shows the relevance and timeliness of this study, given the need for punctuation literacy and effective communication in both personal and professional interactions.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

The evolution of digital writing has significantly transformed the traditional role of punctuation, shifting it from a purely grammatical tool to a dynamic element in conveying nuanced meaning. As Ganiyeva (2023) highlights, punctuation is not merely a reproduction of colloquial intonation but a crucial structuring mechanism for written text, mitigating ambiguity. Kahn (2020) and Nwike (2021), in support of this argument, stated that punctuation marks are essential for guiding reader comprehension and message interpretation in the absence of tone and body language. Justifying the standpoint of Nwike (2021), Abdul and

Niruba (2021) asserted that punctuation enhances readability by replicating natural pauses and intonations in speech. This foundational perspective, while highlighting the clarity that punctuation provides, is, however, challenged by the realities of digital communication, where users often deviate from standard punctuation conventions. According to Davis (2021), the digital environment often encourages a more informal style of writing, where punctuation usage is frequently omitted, as speed often takes precedence over strict grammatical adherence in this environment. Wati (2021) noted that while this informality facilitates immediacy, it constitutes an outright departure from traditional norms, thereby raising concerns about the potential for misinterpretation, particularly in contexts that require precision and accuracy. A study by Sari (2024), approaching the discourse from a more fluid perspective, suggests that punctuation is adaptive rather than prescriptive. Through an analysis of social media interactions, Sari (2024) found that the rationale behind the adoption of informal punctuation practices by social media users is emphatic and casual rather than a grammatical oversight. To him, traditional notions consider punctuation as a fixed rule, but evolution and time have shown that it is a flexible, context-dependent tool. This critique highlights a tension between established punctuation norms and evolving digital practices. While the likes of Sari (2024) applaud the shift from the traditional punctuation norms, they fail to address how such deviations can sometimes lead to unintended ambiguity, misinterpretation, or even social friction.

In contrast to the potential for ambiguity arising from punctuation misuse, Kleppa and Basso (2024) argue that punctuation marks in speech constructionalisations provide a meaningful context. Their work suggests that there are alternative ways to use punctuation that are not bound by traditional writing rules. This is supported by the new findings that social media users are constructing new meanings for punctuation. However, the impact of punctuation extends beyond mere clarity and interpretation. As Nwike (2021) demonstrates, punctuation plays a crucial role in subtitle relevance, highlighting its significance in conveying meaning across cultural and linguistic barriers. This underscores the universality of punctuation as a semiotic tool, capable of transcending language differences. However, the digital context, with its inherent informality and evolving norms, poses a challenge to this universality. As Ologunebi and Taiwo (2025) suggest, the impact of digital communication on political dynamics and governance reveals that the use of punctuation can be manipulated or misinterpreted, leading to unintended consequences in public discourse. This manipulation highlights the importance of a nuanced understanding of punctuation's role in digital writing, considering both its potential for clarity and its susceptibility to misinterpretation.

According to Ologunebi and Taiwo (2025), the shift towards digital writing has led to a decline in traditional punctuation literacy, largely due to the prevalence of autocorrect and predictive text features. Their study found that many digital writers rely heavily on software-driven corrections, often unaware of punctuation errors in their original input. While this automation facilitates efficiency, it also fosters a dependency that may erode fundamental punctuation skills over time. Gihar et al. (2025) offer a counterargument to this position, contending that rather than diminishing punctuation literacy, digital communication has introduced new forms of punctuation awareness. Their research found that digital writers often use punctuation strategically—such as intentional line breaks, capitalisation, and creative use of symbols—to enhance meaning and tone, demonstrating an

evolving punctuation competence rather than an outright decline. Suleiman, Lubasa, and Orame (2025), in their Nigerian case study, found that while digital communication improves the spelling and grammatical correctness ability of students in Nassarawa State, its impact on punctuation literacy is negatively significant. In other words, the adoption of digital communication has led to a decline in students' punctuation literacy in the state. An analysis of the geographical scope of these studies by researchers with contrasting findings reveals that Gihar et al. (2025) conducted their case study in a developed country, whereas Ologunebi and Taiwo (2025) and Suleiman, Lubasa, and Orame (2025) conducted their case studies in a developing country. Hence, there is a potential for their findings to be environmentally specific, given that there is a possibility of the existence of more sophisticated digital communication tools able to facilitate punctuation literacy in developed countries than in developing countries. Moreover, Mawudoku (2020) linked inconsistent punctuation use to declining English proficiency, stating that digital writing often reflects arbitrary choices rather than deliberate stylistic intent.

A recurring debate in the existing literature concerns whether digital communication has features that enhance message clarity, given the shift in traditional punctuation norms within its domain. In research on how digital communication channels correct grammatical errors, Robinson (2024) argued that emojis and other digital symbols have emerged as new forms of punctuation in digital space, effectively supplementing or even replacing traditional marks. This is supported by Elhami (2020), who argued that digital users, upon discovering lapses in communicating meanings across their platforms, have developed compensatory emojis and contextual cues to mitigate miscommunication. This perspective is also partially supported by Hutauruk (2016), who observed that digital writers often compensate for the absence of punctuation with informal markers, such as elongated letters (e.g., "sooo" for emphasis) or repeated characters (e.g., "????" for heightened questioning). More so, Wang (2025) observed that these digital symbols can convey complex emotions and ideas succinctly, potentially compensating for the nuanced role of traditional punctuation. However, this shift raises questions about the universality of the meaning of these compensatory strategies across different cultural contexts, as it is an established fact that not all users interpret emojis in the same way (Wang, 2025). Tambunan et al. (2025) stated that the interpretation of emojis and digital symbols is highly dependent on individual literacy levels and cultural exposure. This reality suggests that while new forms of punctuation can enrich communication, they may also introduce new layers of ambiguity, challenging the assumption that punctuation universally enhances clarity.

According to recent literature, the role of punctuation in digital communication extends beyond grammar, influencing social identity and power dynamics. Giles, Edward, and Walther (2023) argue that punctuation serves as a marker of group affiliation, with deviations from community norms sometimes viewed as breaches of digital etiquette. While James et al. (2025) support this view, noting that younger users often perceive strict adherence to punctuation as overly formal or even passive-aggressive, this perspective overlooks the continued expectation of proper punctuation in professional and academic settings. Similarly, Pérez-Llantada (2024) highlights how punctuation contributes to the construction of identity in digital discourse, shaping tone and intent. This inconsistency underscores a broader tension: while digital punctuation norms evolve to accommodate emotional

expression and brevity, their irregularity raises concerns about clarity and literacy standards. Furthermore, the interplay between punctuation and other linguistic elements, such as pronunciation, adds another layer of complexity. Gihar et al. (2024) examine the relationship between punctuation and pronunciation skills, suggesting that punctuation serves as a visual representation of the intonation and pauses in spoken language. This aligns with the notion that punctuation is not merely a static set of rules but a dynamic tool for conveying meaning. Yet, this connection to spoken language is often disrupted in digital writing, where structural errors and unconventional syntax are common (Abdul Halik & Niruba Jayasundara, 2021). The ease of rapid communication and the influence of platform-specific norms can lead to a divergence from standard punctuation practices, complicating the visual representation of spoken nuances.

THEORETICAL STUDIES

The very act of using punctuation is a pragmatic endeavour, deeply embedded in the cooperative nature of communication. A consideration of the simple comma illustrates that its placement—or absence—is not merely a matter of grammatical correctness but a contextual cue that shapes how a reader interprets the illocutionary force of a sentence. According to the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1976; and Hagemark & Gardenfors, 2025), every sentence performs an action beyond its literal meaning—whether it be a request, a command, or a declaration. Bach and Harnish (1979) and Haro (2025) argued that a missing comma in a hurried digital exchange can transform a polite request into an authoritative demand, thereby altering the intended speech act of the writer. This unintended shift in force highlights a fundamental challenge in digital communication: punctuation functions as a structural tool that signals tone, emphasis, and intent, yet its misuse can distort the speaker's intended meaning, leading to perlocutionary effects that provoke unintended emotional or interpretative responses from the reader (Yani et al., 2025; Vanderveken, 1990).

From the perspective of Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975), punctuation serves as a crucial mechanism for adhering to the Maxim of Manner, which dictates that speakers (or writers) should be clear, orderly, and unambiguous. A lack of punctuation—or excessive, inconsistent use—violates this maxim, leaving messages open to multiple interpretations. According to Wati (2021), the omission of punctuation in digital messages often correlates with increased ambiguity and misinterpretation, particularly in high-context cultures where non-verbal cues are traditionally relied upon for meaning. For example, in the widely cited case of "Let's eat Grandma," the absence of a comma shifts the meaning from a warm invitation to a disturbing suggestion. Abdulmumini and Musa (2024) asserted that in digital discourse, where immediate clarification is often absent, punctuation becomes the primary tool for ensuring coherence and preventing ambiguity, making it an indispensable feature of effective communication. This is where discourse analysis becomes particularly relevant, as it reveals how punctuation maintains textual cohesion and structure in digital interactions. The flow of a conversation, the organisation of a social media post, or the clarity of an email all rely on punctuation as a navigational tool, guiding the reader through the intended discourse structure. Without appropriate punctuation, messages become fragmented or misleading, disrupting the cooperative principle and resulting in pragmatic failures—instances where the intended meaning of a message is lost or misinterpreted (Kleppa & Basso, 2024).

Furthermore, punctuation marks function as semiotic signs, each carrying socially constructed and negotiated meanings that extend beyond their mere grammatical roles to operate as multimodal resources within the digital interaction space. According to Kress's Multimodal Theory (2001), meaning in online discourse is not derived solely from language but emerges from an interplay of various modes. Punctuation—alongside emojis, capitalisation, spacing, and formatting—shapes interpretation, demonstrating the context-dependent and fluid nature of these textual elements. Kress (2010; 2014) posits that a period, a question mark, or even the increasingly ubiquitous ellipsis is not merely an arbitrary symbol; it is laden with contextual significance that shapes interpretation. In digital spaces, where cultural and contextual factors influence meaning, the absence or misuse of these signs can disrupt the intended semiotic function of a message. A string of exclamation points, for instance, might be intended to convey enthusiasm, but in certain online communities, it could be perceived as aggression or insincerity (Mawudoku, 2020). This variation in interpretation highlights the socially dynamic nature of punctuation, underscoring the idea that it is not only fluid and context-dependent but also reflects the multimodal flexibility of face-to-face communication, where tone, gesture, and expression modulate meaning.

Additionally, Grice's Maxim of Relation, which emphasises relevance in communication, explains why individuals adjust their punctuation usage based on audience expectations (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 2000). This concept aligns with Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which sheds light on how individuals modify their punctuation styles to reflect social identity and group affiliation (Giles, Coupland, and Coupland, 1991; Giles & Ogay, 2007). In the opinion of James et al. (2025), in informal digital exchanges, users might intentionally deviate from standard punctuation norms—for example, omitting capitalisation or using excessive ellipses—to align with the casual style of their peers. However, such accommodations can lead to miscommunication when interacting with individuals from different discourse communities or social groups who may interpret punctuation differently (Giles, Edward, and Walther, 2023). Conversely, the deliberate use of precise punctuation can serve as a form of differentiation, signalling the mark of authority and professionalism (Elhami, 2020). This conscious or unconscious manipulation of punctuation underscores the dynamic relationship between language, social identity, and context in digital writing.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate how punctuation affects meaning and contributes to miscommunication in digital writing. A total of thirty (30) social media posts, comprising ten (10) each from WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, are purposefully selected based on variation in punctuation and apparent miscommunication and to reflect diverse digital communication contexts. These posts were collected through direct observation and archival retrieval, ensuring anonymity and adherence to ethical considerations. Thematic analysis was employed to categorise recurring punctuation-related errors and their communicative implications. This helped to identify patterns of punctuation misuse and their impact on clarity, tone, and overall message interpretation. It also helped in the tabular presentation of posts with extreme punctuation issues in the *Annexure.* Content analysis was employed to effectively analyse

and discuss the substance of the collected posts in relation to the study's objectives.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The digital communication environment reveals a complex relationship between punctuation, meaning, and social context. Across digital interaction platforms, punctuation is often treated as a secondary concern, resulting in frequent omissions, misplacements, or excessive use of non-standard punctuation marks. This creates significant variations in clarity, tone, and interpretability, affecting how messages are understood. According to Perez-Llantada (2025), the digitalisation of communication has led to a significant decline in adherence to traditional grammatical norms, resulting in a new form of linguistic expression that is more fluid and interactive. While digital communication across social media tends to embrace a more fluid and informal approach to language, often operating outside traditional grammatical norms, this informality introduces challenges, particularly the risk of miscommunication (Androutsopoulos & Busch, 2021). The analysis of collected posts demonstrates that punctuation plays a crucial role in shaping online discourse, influencing both intended meaning and social interactions.

Within the digital communication space, the frequent omission of essential punctuation marks—particularly commas, periods, and apostrophes—reflects a preference for immediacy and informality over strict grammatical rules. This casual approach, while well-suited for real-time conversations within close-knit groups, often results in a lack of clear sentence demarcation and run-on sentences that require readers to actively parse meaning, sometimes leading to varied interpretations (Ivanova, Arupova, and Mekoko, 2022). A notable example is the message: *"So today one of my patient came for Obstetrics ultrasound scan placing my probe at the pelvic region I saw a live active fetus."* Without proper punctuation, the sentence becomes a dense, uninterrupted stream of text, making comprehension difficult. Such omissions, commonly observed on WhatsApp, mimic spoken language but compromise textual clarity, especially in contexts that demand precision in communication (Ali, Amin, and Ishtiaq, 2020). To compensate, users often rely on emojis as a form of visual punctuation that fills the void left by traditional marks, adding emotional cues and structure to otherwise ambiguous messages (Daniel & Camp, 2025; Tambunan et al., 2025). While this adaptation enhances expressiveness, it underscores the evolving nature of digital discourse, where punctuation norms shift based on platform dynamics and user preferences.

Beyond omissions, inconsistent punctuation usage, where writers fluctuate between excessive and absent punctuation, also influences message interpretation. At the same time, these marks are often employed to convey emphasis or emotion, Suleiman, Lubasa, and Orame (2025) opine that their overuse or underuse distorts tone and clarity. The Facebook post: *"Attention! Attention!! Attention!!! I don't need a pencil to draw your attention you have given it to me, oya bye…"* illustrates how an overabundance of exclamation marks can transform urgency into franticness, while arbitrary ellipses leave the reader uncertain about the speaker's intent. In the WhatsApp post: *"Enough is a word for the wise! As I don use this early morning advise Una, heed o!!!! Good morning have a lovely day,"* the overuse of exclamation marks in one part contrasts sharply with the abrupt ending, creating what Sari (2024) likened to a jarring shift in tone. This inconsistency suggests that punctuation, rather than being used for structural clarity, is employed arbitrarily, often reflecting an emotional rather than

grammatical function. Such patterns indicate that in digital communication, punctuation is not always applied systematically but rather based on momentary intent, which can further contribute to miscommunication (Pratginestos & Masats, 2024). Moreover, missing punctuation marks lead to convoluted sentence structures, as seen in *"Please advise me and don't judge me please I had an abortion but I don't have any side effects I don't feel any pain but since then have not pregnant again what could happen if I miss period this month I will see it early of another month,"* where lack of proper segmentation results in overlapping clauses leading to incoherence. It can also alter meaning, as seen in the classic *"Let's eat, Grandma,"* where a missing comma drastically changes interpretation.

Another significant issue is misplaced punctuation, where marks are inserted incorrectly, disrupting the natural flow of a sentence (Julaika et al., 2025). A clear example is the WhatsApp message: *"Me: Maybe, you're our generation Virgin Mary sent to deliver us from Tinubu hardship."* Here, the unnecessary comma after "Maybe" interrupts the intended sarcastic tone, making the sentence appear serious and creating confusion in the process. Similarly, the Facebook post: *"Stop judging me and don't put your final say upon my life you know why cos you dont my relationship with God and the covenant he had me and he is happy with my father and he knows what is best for me,"* lacks commas in key areas, making it disjointed and forcing the reader to mentally insert pauses to understand the message. Misplaced punctuation, therefore, not only obscures meaning but can also fundamentally alter the intended emphasis of a statement (Julaika et al., 2025), leading to unintended interpretations.

Structural errors further complicate comprehension (Isah & Ahmad, 2025), with posts like *"The worst mistake you can make in life is to allowed people who doesnt your destination in life to be the captain of your ship and you know what they will reck the ship of your life They will still mock you"* containing a combination of omitted punctuation, grammatical errors, and run-on sentences, making the message difficult to comprehend. The absence of structural markers forces readers to mentally segment and reconstruct the text, increasing the risk of misinterpretation. Without a doubt, punctuation errors compound grammatical mistakes, reducing readability and amplifying confusion (Hutauruk, 2016). Additionally, the use of shorthand, such as "cos" instead of "because," weakens coherence, making emotionally charged statements less impactful (Pratginestos & Masats, 2024). On Twitter, brevity does not always ensure clarity, as seen in *"No you think say I be good person try offend me first you go know say my name no match my personality,"* where the lack of punctuation results in a confusing stream of thought. Similarly, the WhatsApp message: *"The uppercut wey I go tear Adeboye if him hand near me when 10m dey on ground lasan! She said it depends"* becomes ambiguous due to the lack of necessary punctuation, leaving the reader unsure of whether the speaker is making a threat, a joke, or a sarcastic remark. These examples highlight that punctuation errors often do not occur in isolation but interact with grammatical inconsistencies to create additional barriers to understanding.

An analytic view of the contents of the posts (see *Annexure*) shows a reflection of the role of digital communication norms in shaping punctuation use, particularly in speech-like writing. The WhatsApp message: *"Enough is a word for the wise! As I don use this early morning advise Una, heed o!!!!"* mimics spoken language, where punctuation is sacrificed for speed and fluidity. Similarly, the Facebook post: *"Attention! Attention!! Attention!!! I don't need a pencil to draw your attention you have*

given it to me, oya bye…," prioritises performative punctuation over structural clarity. Pratginestos and Masats (2024) assert that the informality of social media fosters these patterns, where punctuation is often used as a performative tool rather than a grammatical necessity. This raises an important consideration: while punctuation in traditional writing serves to clarify meaning, in digital communication, it increasingly functions as a stylistic or expressive device, sometimes at the expense of clarity.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that punctuation errors extend beyond mere technicalities, directly impacting the perceived tone and credibility of messages. Excessive exclamation marks, for instance, can be interpreted as aggression rather than excitement, while in the notion of Ali, Amin, and Ishtiaq (2020), the omission of apostrophes and other grammatical markers erodes the writer's credibility and hinders readability. This underscores the subtle yet powerful role of punctuation in shaping social interactions within digital spaces. The observed patterns also align with communication accommodation theory, which posits that users adapt their linguistic practices to conform to platform norms and audience expectations. This adaptation, while fostering a sense of belonging, contributes to the normalisation of informal punctuation practices, potentially influencing broader writing standards (Isah & Ahmad, 2025). Across the digital communication space, observations highlight the adaptive nature of punctuation use. With most posts driven by conversational and emotional tone, in line with the Kress Multimodal theory, emojis are often relied on to compensate for textual ambiguity. Some others, which are expressive but structurally flawed, see run-on sentences and inconsistent grammar as common occurrences. Perhaps due to the character limit policies of some digital communication platforms, brevity is often prioritised, sometimes at the expense of clarity. This leads to errors like "Your going" instead of "You're going," as could be seen in the Twitter tweet: "We bring you best crypto deals from B-TEX Exchange; Bring deals lets share funds! Your going to love this," illustrating a decline in standard grammar and punctuation use. These findings underscore the communicative impact of punctuation misuse, demonstrating how omission, misuse, and overuse directly affect message perception, leading to ambiguity, misinterpretation, and even conflict.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL WRITING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study reveal significant implications for digital writing, particularly in relation to clarity, coherence, and reader perception. The pervasive misuse, omission, and overuse of punctuation in digital communication suggest that punctuation norms are shifting away from their traditional grammatical functions toward more expressive and stylistic purposes (Perez-Llantada, 2025). While this shift reflects the evolving nature of online discourse, it also introduces challenges related to miscommunication, misinterpretation, and credibility.

One major implication is the increased cognitive load placed on readers when attempting to decipher poorly punctuated messages. Research indicates that digital readers engage in "mental punctuation" when reading unstructured text, mentally inserting pauses and breaks to extract meaning (Abdulmumini & Musa, 2024). However, this process is not foolproof, as interpretations may vary based on individual linguistic backgrounds and contextual understanding. Additionally, the findings suggest that punctuation plays a crucial role in shaping online tone and engagement. The overuse, misuse, or underuse of punctuation marks can distort intended meanings, making statements appear

overly ambiguous (Suleman, Lubasa, and Orame, 2025; Sari, 2024). Inconsistent punctuation further amplifies confusion, particularly in social media posts where tone is difficult to infer without accompanying verbal or nonverbal cues. The reliance on emojis as substitutes for punctuation reflects an adaptive approach to digital writing, yet it also highlights the potential erosion of traditional writing conventions (Daniel & Camp, 2025; Tambunan et al., 2025).

Another key implication is the normalisation of informal punctuation practices, which may extend beyond digital communication into academic and professional settings. The influence of social media and instant messaging has led to an increase in run-on sentences, lack of capitalisation, and minimal punctuation use in formal writing contexts (Isah & Ahmad, 2025). This raises concerns about the potential decline in standard literacy skills as younger users become accustomed to fragmented and structurally inconsistent writing styles. Given these implications, it is essential to implement strategies that promote effective punctuation use in digital writing. The following recommendations are proposed:

- ➤ Digital Literacy and Punctuation Awareness: Educational initiatives should emphasise digital literacy, highlighting the importance of punctuation in ensuring clear and professional communication. Schools and universities can integrate modules on digital writing conventions, differentiating between informal and formal contexts. Additionally, workshops and training programs can be introduced to help users recognise common punctuation errors and their impact on readability.

- ➤ Platform-Specific Writing Guidelines: Social media platforms and messaging apps should incorporate punctuation awareness features, such as grammar-checking tools and contextual punctuation suggestions. Many digital writing assistants, such as Grammarly, QuillBot, and ProWritingAid, already integrate these features, but their accessibility should be expanded to commonly used platforms. Platforms like Twitter, where brevity is prioritised, could introduce formatting options that encourage clearer punctuation without exceeding character limits.

- ➤ Encouraging Mindful Writing Practices: Users should be encouraged to adopt mindful writing practices by proofreading messages before sending them. A simple habit of rereading text can significantly reduce errors caused by rushed typing (Ling, 2020). Additionally, digital platforms could introduce optional preview modes that highlight punctuation inconsistencies before publishing posts, ensuring that clarity is maintained in online discourse.

- ➤ Adopting Adaptive Punctuation Strategies: While digital communication enables flexible language use, it is essential to establish adaptive punctuation strategies that strike a balance between informality and clarity. This includes using punctuation marks consistently to structure thoughts while allowing for expressive elements like emojis to complement, rather than replace, punctuation (Tambunan et al., 2025; Androutsopoulos & Busch, 2021). Encouraging a hybrid approach that retains grammatical structure while accommodating digital expression can help bridge the gap between traditional and online writing.

- ➤ Promoting Standardised Digital Communication Practices in Professional and Academic Settings: Organisations and academic institutions should establish clear guidelines for digital communication, distinguishing between acceptable informal writing styles for casual interactions and formal writing expectations for academic and workplace communication. Employers could provide training on professional email etiquette, emphasising the role of punctuation in conveying professionalism and credibility.

- ➤ Leveraging AI and Smart Writing Technologies: Artificial intelligence and machine learning advancements can enhance punctuation use in digital writing. Smart writing tools can detect errors, suggest punctuation corrections, and provide real-time feedback tailored to the user's writing style (Jung, 2024). Encouraging the integration of AI-driven grammar and punctuation tools across various digital communication platforms would help users maintain clarity and coherence in their writing.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of punctuation in digital writing reflects broader linguistic shifts driven by technological advancements and changing communication habits. While digital discourse fosters speed and convenience, it also introduces complexities that challenge conventional writing norms. The fluidity of punctuation use raises critical questions about the long-term impact on literacy, comprehension, and meaning-making. As punctuation moves beyond its grammatical function to convey tone and expression, the risk of ambiguity and misinterpretation grows. This shift underscores the tension between linguistic creativity and the need for standardised clarity in communication. Rather than viewing this evolution as merely a decline in traditional literacy, it should be understood as an adaptation to new communicative demands. However, the challenge remains in ensuring that such adaptations enhance, rather than compromise, effective written communication.

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ANNEXURE

An Analytic Presentation of Selected Posts marked by Punctuation and Structural Errors

Platform	Message Type	Original Message	Punctuation Errors	Effect on Meaning & Clarity
WhatsApp	Conversational / Humorous	*So today one of my patient came for Obstetrics ultrasound scan placing my probe at the pelvic region I saw a live active fetus*	Missing commas and missing period	Reduces readability, lacks clear pauses for clarity
WhatsApp	Conversational	*She: Aaah! How come I dey pregnant say she fit swear say she no dey pregnant.*	Missing commas	Causes confusion, disrupts flow
WhatsApp	Religious Expression	*If I ever leave this God..... Am finished*	Incorrect ellipsis, missing comma, and missing period	Creates unnatural pause, weakens emphasis
WhatsApp	Social Commentary	*Some Of You, Deserve To Be Broke, You Don't Behave Well When You Have Money.*	Unnecessary commas and improper capitalisation	Alters intended tone, appears fragmented
WhatsApp	Sarcastic commentary on climate situation	*We're outside tonight. No be club oo Heat full inside*	Missing comma and missing period	Reduces coherence, forces reader to infer
WhatsApp	Advisory	*Enough is a word for the wise! As I don use this early morning advise Una, heed o!!!!*	Overuse of exclamation marks, missing comma	Affects professionalism, exaggerated tone
Facebook	Personal Confession	*Please advise me and don't judge me please I had an abortion but I don't have any side effects I don't feel any pain but since then have not pregnant again*	Missing commas and missing period	Hard to read, lacks natural pauses
Facebook	Life Advice	*Becareful whom call your friend cos he destroyed you at your back and still come open his 32*	Missing space, missing comma, and missing period	Ambiguous, grammatical errors weaken message

		teeth		
Facebook	Reflection	*You cannot expect me and you to still remain in the same page after you have backed stab me*	Missing comma and missing period	Confuses meaning, lowers credibility
Facebook	Attention-Grabbing	*Attention! Attention!! Attention!!! I don't need a pencil to draw your attention you have given it to me, oya bye…*	Overuse of exclamation marks, missing comma, and misuse of ellipsis	Creates exaggerated effect
Twitter	Informal Statement	*No you think say I be good person try offend me first you go know say my name no match my personality*	Missing comma	Makes it hard to interpret tone
Twitter	Political Commentary	*Hello Tueh Tueh, GLB NATION, I didn't sleep over the night, I was really invested in finding out about this Akpabio man and all I found broke my heart to pieces, I thought he was just a randy man but what I found is way deeper than that, it leaves me wondering how devil in human form could attain such high political height in Nigeria, what is the hop of Nigeria, those making the laws are the real devil, all I found with receipt broke my heart, you will be wondering why I added his wife picture, don't be surprised, she is more deadlier than Akpabio himself, you wonder why Akpabio can't marry another woman, all these and many more details will be revealed, I will come with receipts and pictures, I don't mind loosing my page again to liberate people and show the world who Akpabio really is, I will get backup page ASAP.*	Missing commas, missing question mark, and missing periods	Reduces coherence, affects emphasis
Twitter	Sports Reaction	*What a night!!! I can't believe it!!! Real Madrid always finds a way!!!*	Excessive exclamation marks, missing question mark, and missing period	Exaggerates emotions, lacks moderation, and distorts emphasis
Twitter	Advertisement	*We bring you best crypto deals from B-TEX Exchange; Bring deals lets share funds! Your going to love this.*	Missing apostrophe	Weakens professionalism, affects credibility
WhatsApp	Personal feeling and craving	*With the way my body dey do me now, I need: milk bread, eggs and cheese, I'm not sure…*	Missing period, missing commas, and misuse of ellipsis	Creates ambiguity, leads to uncertainty, and increases reader cognitive load