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Age and Linguistic Innovation: A Comparative Study of School-Based and Digital Language Practices among Ghanaian Senior High School Students

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Abstract

Adolescents are widely held to lead linguistic change. However, the evidence for that claim comes almost entirely from communities observed in a single domain. Ghanaian students move daily between a school domain governed by an English-medium policy and a digital domain governed by very little. This study asks whether age shapes innovation similarly in both. Four apparent-time cohorts of 120 students each (12 to 14, 15 to 17, 18 to 21, and 22 to 26 years) in Greater Accra and Ashanti supplied a 214,000-token digital corpus of donated WhatsApp, TikTok, and X material, a 118,000-token school corpus of written work and recorded classroom interaction, a recognition and evaluation task covering 24 innovative forms, and 16 focus group discussions. Innovation density peaked at 15 to 17 years in the digital domain (34.7 per thousand tokens). In the school domain, it peaked at 12 to 14 (11.8 per thousand), where the 15 to 17 cohort came second lowest at 6.3. Coding for placement accounts for the inversion: the youngest cohort's school-domain forms sit in assessed text, unmarked for register, while the 15 to 17 cohort's sit in marginalia and peer commentary. A school-only sample would, therefore, report that the youngest students lead innovation and that the cohort the incrementation model predicts should be leading it is among the most conservative in the sample. Across twelve tracked forms, the 15 to 17 cohort originated all of the orthographic and morphological innovation, while the 18 to 21 cohort originated three discourse-pragmatic markers, one semantic extension and the only two borrowings in the set, one from global digital English and one from Nigerian Pidgin. The youngest cohort originated almost nothing and adopted at a median lag of 4.5 months. Older students responded mainly through register quarantine (71.3 per cent); only 22.9 per cent criticised the forms themselves. The adolescent peak in a digitally saturated multilingual setting is therefore better modelled as a peak in domain control than as a peak in innovation.

Keywords: Age, Linguistic Innovation, Apparent Time, Ghanaian Student Pidgin, Digital Sociolinguistics

Introduction

The finding that adolescents lead linguistic change is close to settled. Labov (2001) modelled it as vernacular reorganisation; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2009) demonstrated the resulting apparent-time peak across variables well beyond phonology, and Denis et al. (2019) confirmed the trajectory in real time. Eckert (1997, 2000) supplied the social account: adolescence is the life stage where peer orientation displaces family orientation, and linguistic differentiation is one of the things that displacement produces.

What the model does not tell us is which domain the peak sits in. The silence is not accidental. Most of the classic evidence comes from settings where the sociolinguistic interview was effectively the only site of observation, and the interview is itself a domain, with an audience, a set of norms, and a well-documented distorting effect on what a speaker produces. A peak measured there is a peak measured under one set of conditions. Those communities were also not routinely operating across three or four named languages before lunch. Ghanaian students are in neither position. They sit inside a language-in-education policy that has changed repeatedly, and that currently makes English the medium of instruction from the upper primary years (Ansah, 2014; Anyidoho, 2018; Owu-Ewie, 2006; Owusu et al., 2021). They also carry a phone.

The school domain is policed. Agbozo and ResCue (2021) show that the de facto medium of instruction in many Ghanaian classrooms is code-switching, not any monolingual variety, and Owusu et al. (2022), reviewing language use in West African multilingual classrooms, reach a similar conclusion: the classroom repertoire is consistently wider than the policy that governs it. Wider, but not unpoliced. The direction of institutional pressure is unambiguous, and students know exactly what it is. The digital domain has no comparable authority. It has affordances instead, and those affordances reward precisely the kind of play that the school domain penalises.

This matters because Ghana already has a well-documented student-led variety. Ghanaian Student Pidgin emerged in high-prestige boys' secondary schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s, spread through boarding schools and universities, and was for decades characterised as a masculine in-group code (Dako, 2002; Huber, 1999; Rupp, 2013). Owusu et al. (2016) place the Ghanaian student variety within a regional family of Pidgin Englishes whose members differ sharply in prestige and in institutional tolerance, and Yakpo (2024) argues that Ghanaian Pidgin has indigenised substantially while Ghanaian English has not. Ghana therefore has a functioning student vernacular whose relationship to the school register was already contested before smartphones arrived.

The issue is that two literatures speak to Ghanaian students' language, and neither answers the question this study asks. Work on Ghanaian Student Pidgin describes a peer

variety and its social meanings, usually without a matched sample of the same speakers' school-domain output. Work on classroom language describes what happens inside the institution, usually without any account of what the same pupils do on their phones. Claims about youth innovation in Ghana therefore rest on observation in one domain at a time.

That is a problem because the two domains impose opposite pressures. Measure innovation only in school data and the students who are best at keeping innovation out of school will look conservative. Measure it only in digital data and the analyst cannot tell whether a high rate reflects innovativeness or the simple absence of an invigilator. Either sample, taken alone, may locate the adolescent peak in the wrong cohort. The risk is not that the measurement is noisy. It is that the measurement is systematically biased by the site, and biased in opposite directions depending on which site is chosen.

There is also a practical problem. Staffroom and public commentary in Ghana routinely treat digital forms in schoolwork as evidence of falling standards, a framing with a long history in commentary on Student Pidgin (Dako, 2002; Rupp, 2013). Whether that framing matches what students themselves believe has not been tested against evidence from the students in question. Therefore, this study addresses both problems by sampling the same speakers in both domains and by collecting their own evaluations of the forms by using the following objectives:

1. To compare the density and type of linguistic innovation produced by four age cohorts of Ghanaian students in the digital domain and in the school domain.

2. To determine which cohorts originate which categories of innovation, and to trace the direction and speed with which forms spread between cohorts.

3. To examine how older students evaluate and respond to the forms that emerge among younger students.

Theoretical/Analytical Frameworks

The study has some theoretical and analytical underpinnings: Apparent Time, Incrementation, Three Waves, and Enregisterment.

Apparent Time and Incrementation

The apparent-time construct uses differences between age groups at a particular point in time to examine language change in progress. It is based on the assumption that linguistic behaviour becomes relatively stable after adolescence, although this assumption does not always hold across all linguistic domains. Differences between age groups may therefore reflect either age grading, in which linguistic behaviour changes at different stages of life, or generational change, in which an innovation is gradually adopted by successive generations (Wagner, 2012). Apparent-time findings should consequently be

interpreted with some caution, especially when there is no real-time evidence to support the observed pattern.

The concept of apparent time is closely related to Labov's (2001, 2007) account of incrementation. Labov proposes that younger speakers may advance an ongoing linguistic change beyond the level found among older speakers. Thus, while apparent time provides a means of identifying possible changes in progress, incrementation helps to explain how such changes may develop across generations. Labov (2007) also distinguishes transmission, which concerns the development of linguistic change across generations, from diffusion, which involves the spread of linguistic features between communities. This distinction is particularly relevant to the present study, given the ease with which digital communication enables linguistic forms to circulate across social and geographical boundaries.

Three Waves and Enregisterment

The study further draws on Eckert's (2012) Three-Waves Framework, particularly the Third Wave, which views linguistic variation as a resource for expressing social meaning, style, and identity. The First Wave largely examines the relationship between linguistic variables and broad social categories, while the Second Wave pays greater attention to local communities and the social meanings attached to variation within them. The Third Wave moves further towards understanding how speakers use linguistic forms in particular contexts to construct and negotiate social meanings.

This perspective is complemented by Agha's (2003) concept of enregisterment, which explains how linguistic forms become socially recognisable and acquire particular social meanings and associations. The concept is relevant to digitally mediated language, where repeated use of particular forms may contribute to their recognition as markers of particular styles, identities or social groups. For example, Ilbury (2020) demonstrates how orthographic variation on Twitter can participate in the enregisterment of AAVE. In the present study, frequency data are therefore considered alongside participants' recognition and evaluation of innovative forms. Frequency can indicate that a form is in circulation, but it does not, by itself, explain the social meaning or communicative function that users attach to the form.

Literature Review

Domain, Language Mode and Translanguaging

Domain is used throughout in Fishman's (1972) sense of a recurrent cluster of setting, participants, and topic that conventionally selects one part of a repertoire over another, and this study's central comparison sets two domains against each other that have

been given opposite norms. The construct needs careful handling here. Fishman (1972) formulated it for stable, community-level allocations of the kind found in classic diglossic settings, whereas the digital domain is recent, institutionally unanchored, and negotiated by participants as they go. What this study claims is the weaker and more defensible version: that the two sites reliably select different parts of the same repertoire, whether or not the allocation is stable enough to count as diglossia. Bell (1984) supplies the account from the speaker's side, since audience design treats style shift as a response to the addressee and to whoever else can hear. Both are needed for the findings reported in this current study, where older students keep a form in one place and refuse it in another.

One language model that explains why the same speaker produces different output in separate situations is the language mode model. Grosjean's (2001) language mode model treats the bilingual as occupying a position on a continuum between monolingual and bilingual modes, with the position set by the interlocutor, the topic, and the setting rather than by competence. Owusu and Afram (2020) apply the model directly to Ghanaian primary classrooms and show that the mode a pupil activates is a function of the situation the classroom creates, not of what the pupil can do. That is precisely the logic this study extends to the digital domain: if the school activates one mode and the phone activates another, then domain, not competence, is the variable that moves.

García and Li Wei (2014) provide a complementary perspective through the concept of translanguaging, which views multilingual speakers as drawing on an integrated linguistic repertoire rather than switching between separate language systems. From this perspective, a Ghanaian student's language use in school and on digital platforms represents different selections from the same repertoire, shaped by the demands of particular domains, audiences, and communicative purposes rather than by separate linguistic competencies.

Age and the Adolescent Peak in Language Change

Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2009) located the adolescent peak in discourse-pragmatic and morphosyntactic variables rather than in phonology alone, which is what makes the incrementation model relevant to the lexical and orthographic innovation studied here. Tagliamonte (2016) synthesises two decades of work on adolescent speech and shows that the features adults find most objectionable are typically the most systematically patterned. Denis et al. (2019) tracked the peak in real time and found the arrowhead shape that the model predicts.

Tagliamonte and Denis' study (2008) directly precedes the domain question asked here. Their instant messaging data showed teenagers operating a hybrid register that was neither speech nor formal writing, and that adult commentary had badly mischaracterised. The present study asks a version of their question in a setting where the formal register is

a second language for most participants, which is the condition their Canadian sample did not have.

None of this work samples the same speakers in two domains with opposed norms. The peak gets reported from whichever site the analyst happened to observe. Whether the site determines the answer has never been tested, and the literature has had little occasion to notice the gap, because in most of the communities studied there was only one site available to observe.

Innovation in African Urban Youth Languages

Kiessling and Mous (2004) were among the first scholars to establish urban youth languages as a distinct area of sociolinguistic inquiry. Their work identifies common features of these varieties, including lexical innovation, metaphorical extension, semantic shift, and the strategic use of opacity. Subsequent studies expanded the scope of research across different African contexts (Nassenstein & Hollington, 2015). More recently, Hurst-Harosh (2025) highlights rapid lexical turnover as a defining characteristic of urban youth languages, while Hurst-Harosh (2019) argues that these varieties serve broader social and ideological functions, including forms of resistance and identity construction that extend beyond youth affiliation.

The growing influence of digital communication has added a new dimension to the study of urban youth languages. Hurst-Harosh and Kanana Erastus (2018) suggest that digital media not only provide spaces for the use of youth language but also contribute to the creation, spread, and transformation of linguistic innovations. This perspective is important for the present study, which seeks to distinguish between innovations that emerge through online interaction and those that originate in face-to-face communication before gaining wider circulation through digital platforms.

A recurring limitation in the literature is the tendency to focus on forms that are already widespread among young people without adequately accounting for their origins. As a result, the processes of innovation and diffusion are often treated as the same. However, the fact that a linguistic form is frequently used by a particular group does not necessarily mean that the group created it. High frequency may indicate widespread adoption rather than authorship, especially in contexts where linguistic innovations can spread rapidly across social networks and digital platforms.

Digital Sociolinguistics and Orthographic Variation

Androutsopoulos (2016) reframed media as a force in sociolinguistic change and not a container for it. Bamman et al. (2014) and Eisenstein (2015) established that orthographic variation in social media carries reliable social meaning and is patterned, not

random. Ilbury (2020) demonstrated that respellings alone can enregister a persona. Bolander and Locher (2020) go further and argue against treating online and offline as separate objects at all, a position that complicates the very domain distinction this study relies on.

The boundary between the school domain and the digital domain is not physical, and it has moved. Where instruction itself runs on a messaging platform, which set of norms applies is something participants have to settle in practice, and Owusu (2024) indicates how unevenly Ghanaian language teachers were placed to settle it. The present study does not cover that case. Its school corpus was collected under in-person instruction, and the platform-based classroom is left to the further research proposed.

The Ghanaian Sociolinguistic and Policy Setting

Ghana's language-in-education policy has oscillated for decades between mother-tongue and English-medium models, and the current settlement leaves English as the medium from the upper primary years with Ghanaian languages taught as subjects (Ansah, 2014; Anyidoho, 2018; Owu-Ewie, 2006). Owusu et al. (2021), reviewing comparable policies in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda, note that the oscillation is a regional pattern and not a Ghanaian peculiarity, and that the shift to an international medium is repeatedly justified on grounds the classroom evidence does not support. Agbozo and ResCue (2021) argue that the monoglossic framing misdescribes what actually happens in Ghanaian classrooms, where code-switching functions as the working medium. Owusu et al. (2022) reach the same conclusion across West Africa more generally. The policy, in short, describes a classroom that does not exist.

Against that policy background sits Ghanaian Student Pidgin. Huber (1999) gave the first full account of Ghanaian Pidgin English and distinguished the student variety from the older non-institutionalised one. Dako (2002) characterised Student Pidgin as the code of an educated male elite. Rupp (2013) documented its spread to female speakers and into the home. Owusu et al. (2016) situate the Ghanaian varieties within the wider West African group and note the contrast between Nigeria, where Pidgin has broad public currency, and Ghana, where it remains institutionally marked. Agyepong and Amfo (2022) describe its present distribution, and Yakpo (2024) places it within an argument about differential indigenisation.

The relevant point for this study is that Ghanaian students already occupy a sociolinguistic position in which a peer variety and an institutional variety coexist under open evaluative tension. Digital media did not create that tension. It gave one side of it a domain with no invigilator, and in doing so it made visible a partition that had always been there but had never been easy to observe.

Gaps in the Literature

Three gaps follow from the review. First, the adolescent peak has not been tested across two domains with opposed norms within the same speakers, so we do not know whether the peak is a fact about innovation or a fact about the observation site. Second, the youth language literature documents circulation but rarely establishes origination, so claims about which cohort innovates rest on frequency instead of chronology. Third, older speakers' responses to youth forms are usually inferred from declining frequency alone. The possibility that a speaker retains a form while reassigning it to a different domain has not been examined directly, and a frequency count is structurally incapable of detecting it. Taken together, these gaps generate the question that organises this study. If innovation peaks in adolescence, and if the digital and school domains impose opposite pressures on innovation, does the peak appear in the same cohort in both domains, or does age govern something other than raw innovativeness?

Methods

The study used a mixed-methods design employing an apparent-time approach with a domain comparison, drawing on four data streams. The mixed approach was adopted out of necessity, not convention. The quantitative and qualitative components carried equal weight and were integrated during interpretation. The study took place within one semester. The population comprised students in formal education in the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions of Ghana. From this population, 480 students were recruited through eight institutions: two junior high schools, two senior high schools, two public universities and two colleges of education. Sampling was stratified by sex, school type, and region, with four apparent-time cohorts of 120 students each. Cohorts B and C sit on either side of the age at which the incrementation model predicts stabilisation, so the band boundary was set at 18 years rather than an educational transition.

Table 1: Cohort structure and corpus composition (N = 480)

Cohort	Age band	Educational stage	n	Female / Male	Digital tokens	School tokens
A	12 to 14	Junior high school	120	61 / 59	41,300	27,600
B	15 to 17	Senior high school	120	58 / 62	62,800	30,100
C	18 to 21	Tertiary, years 1 to 2	120	63 / 57	58,400	31,700
D	22 to 26	Tertiary, years 3 to 4 and postgraduate	120	59 / 61	51,500	28,600
Total			480	241 / 239	214,000	118,000

Source: Field data (2026).

Data Collection Instruments

The study used a digital corpus comprising approximately 214,000 tokens donated by the participants who exported WhatsApp chats with peers, their own TikTok comments, and their own X posts. The participants selected the material themselves after we briefed them on the study's rationale. Group chats were included only where every member consented. Screenshots were transcribed, and all names, numbers, and locations were removed before coding.

Again, a school corpus of 118, 000 tokens comprising written assignments and examination scripts from the same participants for the same term was collected, together with 24 hours of recorded classroom and corridor interaction. Examination scripts are controlled documents, and access was granted by each institution's examinations officer as well as its head, for the current term only and after marking was complete and results had been released. The written and spoken components were coded separately so that domain effects could not be confounded with modality effects.

Twenty-four forms drawn from a pilot corpus were presented in randomised order. For each form, participants indicated whether they knew it, whether they used it, where they first encountered it, and how they would evaluate a person using it in each of four settings.

Regarding the focus group discussions, sixteen groups of six to eight participants, four per cohort, were conducted in a mixture of English, Akan and Pidgin at participants' discretion. Groups were single-cohort by design, since cross-cohort groups would suppress exactly the metapragmatic candour the study depends on.

Coding Scheme and Reliability

From Table 2, innovative forms were coded into six categories. A form counted as innovative if it was absent from the reference descriptions of Ghanaian English and Ghanaian Student Pidgin (Dako, 2002; Huber, 1999; Owusu et al., 2016; Rupp, 2013) or had acquired a demonstrably new function.

Table 2: Taxonomy of innovation types

Type	Definition	Coded exemplars
Lexical coinage	New form, with no prior attestation in the reference descriptions	F5, F12 (Table 4)
Borrowing and adaptation	Item from Akan, Ga, Ewe, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin or global digital English, phonologically or morphologically adapted	chale †, wahala †, F10, F11 (Table 4)
Semantic extension	Existing form with a new sense or a new referent range	F6 (Table 4)
Orthographic innovation	Respelling, clipping, letter-number substitution, iterated graphemes	F1, F2 (Table 4)
Morphological innovation	Blending, clipping plus affixation, reduplication used productively	F3, F4 (Table 4)
Discourse-pragmatic innovation	New marker, intensifier or stance device, including emoji functioning grammatically rather than illustratively	koraa †, dier †, paa †, F7, F8, F9 (Table 4)

Source: Field data (2026).

† Documented in the existing Ghanaian literature and included as anchors for the coding scheme rather than as novel findings.

Thus, Table 2 presents six categories of linguistic innovation, covering lexical coinage, borrowing, semantic extension, orthographic, morphological and discourse-pragmatic changes. School-domain forms were also classified by their placement as deliberate or unintended, based on their position in scripts rather than assumed intention. Ambiguous cases were treated as unintended to ensure a conservative classification. Two coders independently assessed 20% of both corpora, achieving Cohen's kappa values of .87 for type assignment, .91 for innovation status, and .83 for placement. Disagreements

were resolved through discussion, and the coding scheme was revised before the full analysis.

Ethical Considerations

In order to avoid ethical breaches, several actions were taken. To be with, we sought content from parents, to include the participants who are under the age of 18. Again, the participants' group chats were included only with full-group consent. Moreover, we sought teachers' consent before the in-class recording was done, after notices were posted at the various doors to alert other people. The corridor recordings were done during break periods and were confined to two signposted areas only. The real names of the participants on all the data collected were concealed. The participants who wanted to withdraw were aloud.

Results

Age, Domain and the Location of the Peak

Table 3: Innovation density by cohort and domain (occurrences per 1,000 tokens)

Cohort	Digital domain	School domain	Domain ratio	Digital 95% CI
A (12 to 14)	24.1	11.8	2.0: 1	[21.6, 26.7]
B (15 to 17)	34.7	6.3	5.5: 1	[31.8, 37.7]
C (18 to 21)	29.5	9.2	3.2: 1	[26.9, 32.2]
D (22 to 26)	18.6	4.1	4.5: 1	[16.4, 20.9]

Source: Field data (2026).

From Table 3, type distribution shifted with age. Orthographic innovation dominated cohorts A and B and fell away sharply in D. Discourse-pragmatic innovation rose across the range and was the only category in which cohort D was not lowest. Borrowing and adaptation stayed flat across cohorts, which is consistent with its status as an established feature of the Ghanaian repertoire and not a youth-specific practice (Agbozo & ResCue, 2021; García & Wei, 2014; Owusu et al., 2022). These distributions are reported descriptively; the type counts by cohort are held with the project data and no test of the gradient is offered here, so the pattern should be read as a shape worth explaining and not as an established effect.

Origination and Diffusion of Innovative Forms

Table 4: Origination and diffusion for twelve tracked forms

Form	Type	Originating cohort	Direction of spread	Lag to 25% recognition in adjacent cohort
F1	Orthographic	B	B to A, B to C	3 months (A), 5 months (C)
F2	Orthographic	B	B to A	2 months
F3	Morphological	B	B to C to D	4 months (C), 11 months (D)
F4	Morphological	B	B to A	6 months
F5	Lexical coinage	B	B to A, B to C	4 months (A), 7 months (C)
F6	Semantic extension	C	C to B	5 months
F7	Discourse-pragmatic	C	C to B to A	4 months (B), 9 months (A)
F8	Discourse-pragmatic	C	C to D	6 months
F9	Discourse-pragmatic	C	C to B	3 months
F10	Borrowing (global digital)	C	C to B to A	2 months (B), 5 months (A)
F11	Borrowing (Nigerian Pidgin)	C	C to B	4 months
F12	Lexical coinage	A	A to none	Not applicable

Source: Field data (2026).

Even though the nature of their contribution varied, Table 4 shows that the 12 tracked forms came mostly from Cohorts B and C. While Cohort B introduced five forms, which comprised all the orthographic and morphological innovations, Cohort C was made up of six forms, which included discourse-pragmatic markers, semantic extension, and

borrowings from worldwide digital English and Nigerian Pidgin. Particularly, the influence from Cohort C was not limited to borrowing since four of its innovations developed within the cohort. Cohort A created one form (F12) that did not go beyond its school, while Cohort D introduced none of the tracked forms. Therefore, the two cohorts functioned largely as receivers of linguistic innovations. Adoption was largely quicker among neighbouring cohorts, with the movement from Cohort B to A recording the shortest median lag of 3.5 months. By contrast, the dispersal of F3 to Cohort D took eleven months, the longest period recorded. The comparatively rapid spread from Cohort B to A was attributed to shared boarding-school experiences and sibling relationships, which provided chances for the circulation of new expressions. Overall, the findings point to distinct contributions by the different cohorts, with Cohorts B and C serving as the principal sources of innovation and Cohorts A and D participating mainly in their subsequent adoption.

Responses of Older Students

Table 5 shows the results of older students' responses. The recognition data show that older students are not out of the loop.

Table 5: Recognition and reported use by cohort (of 24 forms)

Cohort	Mean recognised	Mean reported use	Recognition-use gap	Use as proportion of recognised
A (12 to 14)	14.2	9.6	4.6	.68
B (15 to 17)	21.7	17.3	4.4	.80
C (18 to 21)	20.9	13.1	7.8	.63
D (22 to 26)	16.8	7.4	9.4	.44

Source: Field data (2026).

Thus, from Table 5, it is obvious that Cohort B recorded the highest recognition (21.7) and reported use (17.3) of the 24 forms, with 80% of recognised forms reportedly used. This amount reduced to .68 in Cohort A, .63 in Cohort C, and .44 in Cohort D. This shows that older students were progressively choosier in their use of the innovations. However, the wider recognition–use gap among older students should be interpreted carefully, as social desirability may have encouraged under-reporting. Focus group discussions nevertheless suggest that these students recognised the forms but used them selectively, depending on the context. Analysis of the discussions and open-ended responses identified three main strategies through which participants responded to the

innovations.

Table 6: Older-cohort response strategies

Strategy	Definition	Focus-group segments	Survey respondents endorsing
Register quarantine	Form accepted in digital peer contexts and refused in school and workplace contexts, without negative evaluation of the form itself	94	71.3%
Adoption with re-semanticisation	Form adopted but redirected: used ironically, used to index the younger cohort rather than the self, or narrowed to a new sense	41	38.8%
Evaluative distancing	Form explicitly criticised and framed as corrupting, immature or damaging to English competence	27	22.9%

Source: Field data (2026). Percentages exceed 100 because respondents could endorse more than one strategy across different forms.

From Table 6, the ‘Register quarantine’ category dominated. The typical cohort D account was not that the innovations were bad but that they belonged somewhere, and that the somewhere was not an assignment, a job application, or a conversation with a lecturer. The participants articulated this as a matter of knowing where things go, not as a matter of correctness. Several of them described teaching younger siblings the boundary rather than the forms, which is worth pausing on. This suggests that the partition is transmitted explicitly within families, as a skill, and not simply absorbed from institutional pressure.

The second strategy, Adoption with Re-semanticisation, is seen as the most theoretically interesting of the three strategies. In these cases, older students used the form while marking distance from it, through quotation, exaggerated delivery, deliberate misuse, or attribution to a younger persona. This is stylisation in Eckert's (2012) third-wave sense and enregisterment in Agha's (2003), and it is the mechanism by which a form acquires an age index. Once Cohort D uses a form only to sound like Cohort B, the form has become a marker of Cohort B. Ilbury (2020) documents the same process operating through

spelling alone. It is worth being precise about what the data can carry here. Enregisterment in Agha's (2003) sense requires uptake across a population, not stylisation by individuals, and the evidence for uptake in this study is the 38.8 per cent endorsement figure and the consistency of the focus group accounts across eight separate groups. That is reasonable evidence of a shared pattern. It is not evidence that the register has stabilised, which only repeated observation could establish.

The third strategy, Evaluative Distancing, was the minority position and clustered in a recognisable profile: education students, participants who intended to teach, and participants who linked the forms to declining English standards. That framing has a long history in Ghanaian commentary on Student Pidgin (Dako, 2002; Rupp, 2013) and an even longer one in adult commentary on youth digital writing generally, where it has repeatedly turned out to be empirically wrong (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). The clustering is the part that matters for practice. A framing held disproportionately by the students most likely to become teachers is a framing with a delivery mechanism into classrooms.

Table 7: Summary of principal findings

Research question	Principal finding
Age and social media language use	Digital innovation peaks at 15 to 17 years; school density peaks at 12 to 14 years and is largely unintended leakage. The domain ratio rather than raw density tracks the adolescent peak, subject to the qualifications in Section 4.1
Origins of innovation	Cohort B originates formal innovation (orthographic and morphological); cohort C originates imported discourse-pragmatic material; cohort A originates almost nothing and adopts at a median lag of 4.5 months
Older students' responses	Register quarantine (71.3%) far exceeds evaluative distancing (22.9%); adoption with re-semanticisation is the mechanism by which forms acquire an age index

Source: Field data (2026).

Discussions

The Peak is Achieved through Domain Control rather than Innovation

From the study, it was revealed that the school and digital peaks fall in different cohorts. Had the study been run on the school corpus alone, it would have reported that innovation is highest among the youngest students and that Cohort B, the cohort the model predicts should be leading change, is among the most conservative in the sample. That

conclusion would have been an artefact of the observation site. It would also have been perfectly defensible on its own evidence, which is the uncomfortable part.

What Cohort B is best at is not producing novelty. It is partitioning it. Its domain ratio of 5.5 to 1 is the highest in the sample, and the qualitative difference between Cohort A's accidental leakage and Cohort B's deliberate placement supports reading that ratio as a competence and not as suppression. The ratio dips at Cohort C in a way that suggests it also tracks what leakage costs in a given setting, and its denominator pools deliberate forms with unintended ones. It indicates partitioning; it does not easily measure it. Subject to that, the reading follows from the language mode model as cited in Owusu and Afram (2020), which indicates that the mode a student activates is set by the situation, so a student who reads two situations accurately will produce two different outputs with no change in competence at all. On this reading, the adolescent peak in a multi-domain setting is a peak in stylistic control. That sits comfortably with Eckert's (2012) third wave and distinctly less comfortably with a purely quantitative incrementation account, which has no obvious place for a variable that is about the management of a repertoire rather than its contents.

None of this overturns incrementation. Cohort B still leads on formal innovation, and Cohort A still behaves as the conservative youngest members, as cited in Labov (2001), and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2009). What the domain comparison adds is narrower and, we think, more useful: the observable expression of the peak depends on which domain the analyst samples. The model is not wrong. It is underspecified for communities that live in more than one domain at once.

Innovation and Innovator in two Kinds Each

From the results, separating origination from circulation revealed a division that the youth language literature tends to collapse. Cohort B manipulates the code. Cohort C borrows and repurposes. Both are innovation, and they are not the same process. Thus, the African urban youth language tradition has always identified manipulation as central: metaphor, phonological play, semantic shift, and deliberate opacity (Hurst-Harosh, 2025; Kiessling & Mous, 2004; Nassenstein & Hollington, 2015). Ghanaian Student Pidgin developed through these very strategies (Dako, 2002; Huber, 1999; Owusu et al., 2016). Cohort B is continuing that tradition on a new platform, as Hurst-Harosh and Kanana Erastus (2018) would predict, and the continuity is worth stating plainly: the platform is new, the strategy is not.

Again, the results showed that importation is a different mechanism, and Labov's (2007) distinction between transmission and diffusion captures why. Two of cohort C's six forms, F10 and F11, arrived from outside the community, were adopted by adults instead of acquired by children, and showed the structural simplification typical of diffusion. The other four are not imports, and the diffusion account should not be stretched to cover them.

Neither borrowing came from a Ghanaian language. That is worth noting alongside Yakpo's (2024) argument about differential indigenisation, since the borrowing channel that is open here is not the one running through Akan or Ga. Two forms are a thin basis for that claim. We offer it as an observation for a larger tracked set to test.

A caution is needed about the older forms in the anchor set. Items such as *chale, koraa and dier* are not innovative. They are established features of the Ghanaian repertoire and of translanguaging practice documented for years (Agbozo & ResCue, 2021; Amfo & Anderson, 2019; Owusu et al., 2022). Treating them as youth innovation because they appear in youth digital writing would be a coding error. We suspect it is a common one in work that samples digital data without a reference description to code against, and it is the reason the anchors were carried in the scheme and then excluded from every count.

Register Quarantine and What Age Grading Actually Looks Like

We see in the results that the standard reading of an apparent-time gradient in a stigmatised feature is age grading: individuals retreat from the feature as they take on adult roles, while the community remains stable (Wagner, 2012). On the frequency measure, the Cohort D data look exactly like age grading. The commentary shows something more specific. Cohort D was not retreating from the forms. Its members were assigning them a domain. Register quarantine is our label for the pattern, and it names a special case of domain allocation in Fishman's (1972) sense, one in which the allocation is not merely visible in the distribution but is stated and defended by the speakers themselves. In Bell's (1984) terms, the shift responds to the auditor and the overhearer, not to any property of the form. Seventy-one per cent endorsed a position amounting to the forms being acceptable where they belong; only twenty-three per cent endorsed the corruption framing with which adult commentary on youth language usually leads. The retreat visible in the corpus is a retreat from certain contexts. It is not a retreat from the forms.

This has consequences for how age grading is modelled. If older speakers keep a form in one domain and drop it in another, a corpus drawn from the dropped domain will show a clean age-graded curve that misrepresents the speaker's repertoire. The variable moving with age is the domain assignment, not the competence. The distinction matters because the two make different predictions: lifespan retreat predicts that the form becomes unavailable, while domain reassignment predicts that it remains available and surfaces the moment the domain changes. Ghana's institutional language pressure (Ansah, 2014; Anyidoho, 2018; Owu-Ewie, 2006; Owusu et al., 2021) gives that assignment a very clear shape, and Yakpo's (2024) account of corrective realignment describes the machinery that enforces it. Adoption with re-semanticisation is how a form acquires an age index in the first place. When Cohort D uses a form in quotation marks, in exaggerated delivery, or attributed to a younger persona, its members are performing the form instead of using it,

and performance is what turns a variant into a marker of a social type (Agha, 2003; Eckert, 2012). The moment a form becomes performable as young, it stops being simply available. That is a one-way door, and it may be the clearest mechanism the study has for how a form ages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ghanaian students of different ages do not differ mainly in how innovative they are. They differ in how well they keep two domains apart. The digital peak sits at 15 to 17 years. In the school domain, the highest density belongs to the youngest students, and almost all of it is leakage, not innovation. The cohort with the sharpest separation between the two domains is the very cohort the incrementation model predicts should be leading change. Origination divides. Senior high school students manipulate the code and produce orthographic and morphological innovation. Tertiary students import discourse-pragmatic material from global digital English and from Nigerian Pidgin. The youngest students originate almost nothing and adopt at a lag of a few months, which the leakage of digital forms into their schoolwork tends to disguise. Older students respond by assigning domains, not by rejecting forms: seven in ten described a position best called register quarantine, against fewer than a quarter who framed the innovations as corrupting. The minority position is the one that dominates public commentary. It is not what most older students think. The methodological point generalises beyond Ghana. Where a community has a policed register and an unpoliced one, the adolescent peak will appear in different cohorts depending on which the analyst examines. Both should be sampled, and the distance between them treated as the finding rather than as a nuisance to be controlled away.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

1. Teachers should take note that students who bring digital forms into assessed writing are the youngest ones, and they do so because they have not yet learned to partition, not because they are careless. Partitioning is teachable, and the older cohorts show it is learnable. We therefore recommend that teachers should frame the issue as one of domain, not of correctness, since that framing matches how students already talk about it and has the better evidential support (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Exercises in which pupils render the same content for a peer chat and for an examination script would make the boundary visible earlier, and would treat the skill as something to be built rather than a failing to be corrected.

It is truism that the school and digital domains are separated by policy rather than by nature, and students manage the separation without institutional help. Given the documented distance between policy and classroom practice (Agbozo & ResCue, 2021; Amfo & Anderson, 2019; Owusu et al., 2021, 2022), a policy that acknowledged the repertoire students actually hold would concede nothing they are not already doing. We, therefore, recommend that for policy makers, curriculum and assessment documents should name register control as an objective in its own right.

Again, we recommend that teacher training programmes should address the empirical record on youth digital writing directly, since the trainees most likely to enter classrooms holding the corruption framing are the ones least likely to have met the evidence against it.

For further research, we recommend that a panel study should revisit Cohort B in five years to separate age grading from generational change, and it is the single study that would do most to settle what this design cannot. A replication in northern Ghana and in rural schools would test whether the origination pattern holds where the contact ecology differs. A study of digitally mediated instruction, building on Owusu (2024), should examine what happens to register boundaries when the school itself moves onto the platform where the unpoliced register lives.

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