

Textism in the Classroom: A Writing Destruction for School Learners in South Africa

Kganathi Shaku

University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

shakukj@unisa.ac.za

Abstract: The rise of the Third Industrial Revolution (3IR) introduced various interactive digital platforms such as computer-mediated communication (CMC). These platforms include social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Instagram. During the exchange of messages, social media users use language distinctively to express their thoughts. Both conventional and non-conventional writing styles manifest. For instance, while others use well-formed language in line with the conventions of a standard language, some use unconventional language, which is termed multiple names such as textism, textese, and social media language. Since most of the social media users' age profiles match the age group of learners in secondary schools, it became necessary for this study to explore the possible impact of social media on learners' academic writing, particularly in the official indigenous languages of South Africa. This study used a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of social media on learners' writing of the Sepedi language in 10 secondary schools in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using focus group interviews and document analysis, the paper discovered that learners' application of writing mechanics such as grammar and punctuation marks are affected by social media. The paper is conceptualised through cultivation theory.

Keywords: Textism, Sepedi language, Social media, Social media effects, Cultivation theory

1. Introduction: Social Media and Language

The technological advancement of the 21st century is centred around the Internet and Internet of Things, which enable the operation of computer-mediated communication (CMC). The CMC facilitates the creation and expansion of social relationships through digital communication platforms such as social media. Social media allows its users to share information (Goldstuck, 2018) and interact either synchronously (having real-time communication with immediate feedback) or asynchronously (posting messages to be attended during the user's spare time). Such social interactions are made possible through social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat.

Moreover, on social media, language (verbal and non-verbal) is used as a channel through which information and messages are disseminated. According to Datareportal (2023), English is the widely used language on social media worldwide, making it a mutual language between international communities. This makes English to be a dominant language on social media, as compared to other languages. In South Africa, social media users use local languages for communication in addition to English. These local languages include isiZulu, Sepedi, isiNdebele, siSwati, English, isiXhosa, Tshivenda, Sesotho, Afrikaans, Xitsonga, and Setswana (Shaku, 2021).

Researchers such as Crystal (2008), Majola, Pillay, and Hlongwane (2019), and Odey et al. (2014) studied the use of language on social media and reported a distinctive use of language. These studies found that social media users' application of language mechanics differs from the norm. The key findings of the previous studies are that social media is characterised by extensive use of abbreviations, emoticons, shortcuts (word omission), and unconventional grammar. The social media language explained above is termed multiple names such as textism and textese. This paper uses textism to refer to social media language. According to Shortis (2007), textism refers to words written using nonstandard orthography.

Per observation, when social media users send text messages to each other, they often use a special type of register called *textese* (the register that allows the omission of words and the use of *textisms*) (Dyers & Davids, 2015:2; Van Dijk, Van Witteloostuijn, Vasić, Avrutin & Blom, 2016). For instance, social media users usually use English slang language such as '*thanx for reading*', instead of '*thanks for reading*' or *LOL*, as a substitute for '*laughing out loud*'. In comparison, when the Sepedi language (one of the official languages of South Africa) is used on social media, textism also manifests. In such instance, textism appears in the form of unconventional use of grammar and writing style, orthography, and the application of punctuation marks (Shaku, 2021). A case in point, the Sepedi language uses disjunctive orthographic writing (dominated by the writing structure of separating sentential units) (Taljard and Bosch, 2006); however, the orthographic structure of the Sepedi language used on social media is conjunctive (dominated by grouping of sentential units). Therefore, instead of writing '*Sepedi se re: sethokgwa se se tšwago phuti ga se tsebjwe*' (the forest that has a duiker is unknown), one would write '*Sepedi sere: sethokgwa se setšwago phuti qase tsebjwe*'. Furthermore, on social media,

punctuation marks are used differently. This appears in a form of extended or exaggerated punctuation marks, and haphazard use of upper and lower cases (Shaku, 2021).

Mittal (2015) and Omar, Miah, and Belmasrou (2014) inform that the kind of language used on social media often has a negative impact on learners' academic writing skills in the classroom. They explain that the continual use of textism negatively affects academic writing mechanics such as punctuation rules, and grammar (morphological and syntactical rules). Their findings reflect the following writing trends in the academic writing of school learners:

- Punctuation errors,
- Capitalisation errors,
- Spelling and typos errors,
- Use of abbreviations (Initialisms) and acronyms; and
- Vowel deletion.

This study explores the impact of social media on secondary school learners' application of writing mechanics in the classroom. It sees a need to explore the impact since the age range of secondary school learners is categorised under people who use social media extensively (Shaku, 2021; Statista, 2023). Since previous analysis of the impact of social media was done only on the English language, this study examines the impact of social media on the writing of the Sepedi language. The Sepedi language is a case of the study as it is the official language in South Africa (National Language Policy Framework of South Africa) and a third largest language spoken in South Africa with 9.7% outside home usage and 10.1% inside-home usage (Statista, 2023). The language is also taught in public schools (South Africa. Department of Education, 2011). The angle taken by this paper is significant as it demonstrates that social media does not only affect the English language, as established by Majola, Pillay and Hlongwane (2019), Marwa and Sabrina (2017), Thubakgale and Chaka (2016), Steyn and Van Greunen (2015), Odey, Essoh and Endong (2014), Risto (2014), Farina and Lyddy (2011), Barasa (2010), and Mphahlele and Mashamaite (2005), but also other languages.

2. Social Media in the 21st Century

According to Al-Tarawneh (2014:1), "social media is the fastest-growing web application in the 21st century. The nature of applications like Wikis, video streaming and applications, and social networks makes it the phenomenon of the century". In South Africa, popular social media platforms include Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, TikTok, Telegram, Snapchat, X, and LinkedIn.

The growing trend is that teenagers are the leading participants in social networking platforms, (Al-Tarawneh, 2014). Allison (2013) emphasises a strong association among young people, popular culture, and digital technology. This is explained as a bond brought about by the availability of MP3 players, games, the internet, digital film and television, mobile phones, and apps. Thurairaj, Hoon, Roy and Fong (2015) also note the domination of social media, as they explain that it has become the main form of communication in the 21st century.

CMC makes the world to be a connected village through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. People from different geographical areas, races, educational levels, and ages get connected through social media (Ali, Iqbal, & Iqbal, 2016). Ali et al. (2016) hold that social media plays an important role in people's lives; however, it also affects them positively and negatively. People are exposed to either positive or negative effects of social media as they use it for learning, entertainment, and innovation purposes. More often, language finds itself on the receiving end of social media's negative effects.

The following section presents some of the negative markers of social media observed from school learners' use of language in the classroom.

3. Textism and Writing Mechanics

The studies of McSweeney (2016:109), De Jonge and Kemp (2012), Odey et al. (2014:93), Go'mez-Camacho, Hunt- Go'mez and Valverde- Macías (2017), Lyddy, Farina, Hanney, Farrell and O'Neill (2014, and Verheijen (2013) reveal that, more often, textism appears in the following forms:

- Use of abbreviations and acronyms;
- Words contraction, shortening of words, and vowel omission;
- Capitalisation;

- Spelling and typo errors; and
- Punctuation.

3.1 Abbreviations

The use of abbreviations and acronyms dates to the history of non-formal writing settings (McSweeney, 2016), mostly during notes taking, list-making, and letter writing. With the inception of short messaging services (SMS) and social media in the 1990s, the use of abbreviations and acronyms became widespread and continued even today. When writers use abbreviations, they shorten words or phrases – ‘Laughing Out Loud’ to ‘LOL’ (Marwa and Sabrina, 2017). This is closely related to word contraction and vowel omission, presented below.

3.2 Word Contraction and Vowel Omission

Social media users shorten words to form contracted words or omit letters either at the beginning or the end of a word (De Jonge and Kemp, 2012). Odey et al. (2014:93) point out that “vowel deletion is often used for the purposes of brevity. Vowel deletion occurs when the texter create a contracted version of the word(s) he/she intends to use. While the vowels of the intended words are omitted, the consonants are maintained to represent the whole word”. The instance of contraction can be seen when a phrase like ‘how is it’ is written as ‘howzit’ and ‘what is up’ is changed to ‘whatsup’.

3.3 Capitalisation Errors

In the case of capitalisation errors, words are usually written without appropriate capital letters or with extra capitalisation (Lyddy, Farina, Hanney, Farrell & O’Neill, 2014; Verheijen, 2013). A more noticeable scenario is when social media users use a capital letter in the middle of a sentence or write a whole word, sentence, or paragraph using capital letters (Yi Kay, Jing Kai & Yew Hor, 2014). Thus, even when words are not proper nouns, they are initiated by capital letters in the middle of a sentence. Similarly, proper nouns are initiated by lowercase.

3.4 Punctuating

In addition, punctuation marks are usually disregarded when social media users text; this is because the focus is put on information sharing rather than grammatical aspects (Odey et al., 2014; Lima, Majo, & Nseme, 2017; Sherman & Švelch, 2015). Thus, punctuation marks such as quotation marks, commas, and periods are not prioritised when language is used on social media. Verheijen (2013) and Yi Kay et al. (2014) postulate that punctuation errors on social media do not only involve the punctuation being left out of a sentence but also involve their reduplication (extension). When such happens, their purposes shift from being grammatical markers to emotional markers. In other situations, punctuation marks are replaced by emoticons (Kemp, Wood, & Waldron, 2014).

3.5 Social Media and Education

After the identified control taken by social media and its impact on the use of language, teaching and learning of language becomes vulnerable (Thurairaj et al., 2015). This is evident in the shift from the appropriate use of language, which puts the language grammar (sentence construction, punctuation marks, etc) and orthography at risk. The studies of Singh, Gupta, and Tuteja (2015), Tayebinik and Puteh (2012), and Maryam and Marlia (2012) report that social media affected and continues to affect the youth negatively. The results of such impact include smartphone addiction, poor time management, and poor academic performance. Youth or teenagers (most of whom are still learners/students) spend most of their time participating on social media, which seems to be a daily activity (Datareportal,2023). Nevertheless, Al-Tarawneh (2014) enlightens that social media have both advantages (improving productivity, communication, and injecting fun into the educational system) and disadvantages (addiction, wasting time, and isolation from physical society) in students’ lives. Therefore, although authors discovered a shortfall of social media usage by the youth, there is still hope for the potential benefits of social media on youth. Thus, social media could be used to improve youth’s lives, benefiting them educationally and socially.

The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of social media on secondary learners’ writing of the Sepedi language in the classroom. The focus of this paper is relevant and significant since the engaged literature presented the detriment of social media on the youth.

4. Theoretical Underpinning

One of the assumptions of Gerbner's (1976) cultivation theory is that mass media platforms such as social media often cultivate the minds of their consumers. This paper is conceptualised through Gerbner's theoretical lenses to understand the aftermath of social media language consumption. In the context of this paper, the cultivation theory suggests that the longevity of youth's presence on social media puts them at risk of being affected negatively. Thus, the more they are exposed to textism on social media, the more such kind of language would reflect in their academic writing (Singh, Gupta, & Tuteja, 2015). Making inferences from the study of Tayebinik and Puteh (2012) and Maryam and Marlia (2012), the negative repercussions of social media could be linked to learners' poor academic writing of the Sepedi language, affecting their academic performance. The theory becomes relevant in the context of secondary school learners as Statista (2023) and Datareportal (2023) position them at the centre of social media content consumption. The theory is used to illustrate how school learners' consumption of social media content such as ungrammatical language affects their language in the classroom.

5. Methodology

This paper used qualitative research inquiry to explore the perceptions and experiences of secondary school learners regarding the possible impact of social media on their writing of the Sepedi language in the classroom (Kumar, 2019). The research inquiry allowed me to collect data from secondary schools – the site where learners as participants and consumers of social media are found (Creswell, 2014).

5.1 Research Setting

I collected data from 20 learners in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The learners were randomly selected from two secondary schools. These learners were from Grades 10 and Grade 11 and were taught the Sepedi language as their home language. All learners who participated in the study confirmed that they were active on social media.

5.2 Instruments

I used semi-structured focus group interviews to engage with 20 learners from selected secondary schools. The focus group interviews were guided by the following questions:

- Are you using any social media platform for socialising with your peers after school hours?
- What is your favourite social media platform?
- What do you do most of the time when you have logged into a social media platform?
- Do you follow grammar rules when texting or writing statuses on social media?
- What type of language do your peers or friends use on social media to text or share thoughts? Is it a formal or informal language?
- Do you sometimes use social media language unconsciously when writing in a formal setting like school?
- Do you think your exposure and use of unconventional language on social media might be affecting your writing of Sepedi language in the classroom?

5.3 Data Analysis

I analysed the collected data through thematic analysis – a data analysis strategy that allowed me to categorise learners' responses into similar themes (Given, 2008; Kumar, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

6. Results

The results of the paper show that secondary school learners use social media to communicate with friends and family outside of school hours. WhatsApp, Facebook, and X emerged as the mostly used social media platforms., with WhatsApp topping the list. It also appeared that learners use both their home language (Sepedi) and English on social media.

The data also show that learners do not follow grammar rules when texting on social media. However, some of the learners indicated that they use correct grammar on social media. The learners who participated informed that their peers also use informal language (different from the one used in a schooling environment) during communication on social media. Moreover, learners also admitted that social media affects their use of language in the classroom. They indicated that it destroys their minds as they sometimes use textism and

forget that they must use formal language in the classroom. Besides the identified negative effects of social media, some learners indicated that they are aware of the impact of social media, and they try to avoid grammatical blunders in the classroom. Ultimately, learners' use of textism in the classroom leads to poor academic performance of the Sepedi language.

7. Discussion of Findings

Grade 10 and Grade 11 learners are affected by social media positively and negatively. Both types of the impacts will be discussed separately.

7.1 Positive Impacts

On a positive note, it has been discovered that learners use social media as a teaching and learning platform. They use it as a channel to share academic information such as question papers and memoranda, and to communicate with their peers about school-related topics. Therefore, social media becomes an instrumental tool that connects learners and enables teaching and learning to continue out of the classroom. Social media has become a convenient tool for information sharing because learners are able to communicate and have instant feedback.

7.2 Negative Impacts

Regarding the negative impact, learners are affected by their imitation of social media language in the classroom. This imitation results from an extensive use of textism (ungrammatical language on social media), which leads to the reproduction of similar language in the classroom. It shows that the regular use of ungrammatical language on social media has an impact on the writing reflexes of learners as texters, and it influences them to use social media language even in the classroom (Odey et al., 2014). Considering this, it has been discovered that learners transfer writing errors such as incorrect use of punctuation marks, sentence structuring (syntax), spelling, and orthography from social media to the classroom. Such writing errors may be intentional or unintentional. They may be intentional because learners assume that teachers will understand their writing. Again, their writing may be unintentional because their minds are accustomed to ungrammatical writing on social media; even if they write ungrammatically, they do not realise it.

The aftermath of using textism in the classroom is realised during the post-classroom assessment. More often, learners become aware of their writing transgressions after teachers have assessed their work and scored them lower. It was also revealed that learners are aware of the impact of social media on their writing of the Sepedi language in the classroom. Although teachers continually make learners aware of acceptable and unacceptable language, learners' language usage does not show improvement. The cultivation theory explains that this is a case because learners are habituated to ungrammatical writing. Consequently, it becomes difficult for them to adjust back to conventional writing. Furthermore, learners' incompetence in the writing of the Sepedi language in the classroom affects their academic performance; this is because teachers deduct marks when learners' written work contains errors. Writing mechanics (such as the use of punctuation marks, syntax, and spelling) are usually allocated between 15 and 20 marks. Therefore, if learners' written work is full of errors, they are at risk of losing the marks. Nonetheless, some learners can distinguish between social media language and classroom language. With such learners, there is no transfer of ungrammatical language from social media to the classroom.

8. Mass Media Cultivation Effects and the Impact of External Factors

The above discussions support Gerbner's (1976) argument that mass media (including social media) can cultivate people's behaviour. Grades 10 and 11 learners agree that their consumption of social media language affects how they write the Sepedi language in the classroom. The learners argued that:

Re fele re šomiša mongwalo wa social media. Re šetše re tlwaetše go ngwala ka mokgwa wo re nyakago, ka hlogong re no re morutiši le yena o tla kwešiša se re se ngwalago. Like ka gore re šomiša social media, ge re ngwala ditaodišo re fele re lebala mantšu a nnete gomme re šomiša ao re a šomišago Facebook. Ke gore menagano ya rena e šetše e tlwaetše. Le English le yona re a e šotekhatha. Ka English essay o kereye re ngwala se mxit, then ga e sharp. (We usually use social media language. We are used to writing as we wish; in our minds, we conclude that a teacher will understand what we wrote. Because of the use social media, when we write essays, we often forget the correct words and we opt for what we use on Facebook. This is because our minds are already accustomed to social media language. In the English subject, we also use shortcuts. In English essays, we often write as if we are writing on Mxit and this is not correct).

The above excerpt shows that the more learners remain active on social media, the more their language in the classroom gets affected. Nonetheless, to some learners the notion of social media cultivation is not the case because they have writing consciousness; thus, when they are on social media, they use textism, but in the classroom they write well without distractions.

9. Conclusion and Limitation

The introduction of social media lead to textism – a writing style used on different social media platforms. Textism is not reduced to English as an international language; other languages such as South African languages also adjusted to textism. This led to a distinct usage of writing mechanics; therefore, one can draw a clear line between unconventional language used on social media and conventional language used in official settings such as the schooling environment.

Social media users' prolonged usage of textism cultivates their minds. Ultimately, some social media users transfer textism from social media to the schooling environment. This is because their minds are accustomed to using textism, hence the conscious and unconscious use in the official setting. As a result, the quality of language written by learners declines and their academic performance drops down.

This paper explored the impact of social media on Grades 10 and 11 learners' application of writing mechanics in the classroom. Many studies showed that there is an existing impact (positive and negative) of social media on the English language (how it is used in official settings such as schooling). This study informs that other world languages such as Sepedi are not immune to the effects of social media. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to further explore the relationship between language and social media. Research needs to look at how social media becomes a destruction to social elements like language learning and how it aids as a tool through which people learn and share important information. However, the above-mentioned findings cannot be generalised because the study does not represent all the secondary schools and learners in South Africa. Moreover, the focus was only on the Sepedi language and its learners.

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