

The use of South African languages by youth on social media: The case of Limpopo Province

ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is to discuss new media choices and use of selected South African languages on social media by youth residing in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The use of language on social media facilitates communication between communicators and use of one's cultural language can ensure that this communication is better. This paper summarises a study of youth in Limpopo Province. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe languages used by youth on social media and identify reasons for the communication engaged in. The research methodology used to collect and analyse data was a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. For the quantitative part of the research, a survey and online observation were used for data collection and statistical methods and semiotic analysis used to analyse data. For the qualitative aspects of the study, personal interviews and focus groups were employed for data collection and thematic analysis used to analyse data. The findings indicated that the majority of the youth do not prefer to use their African mother tongue languages to communicate on Twitter and Facebook but chat in the English language on those forums. However, the young people prefer to use their African languages when communicating to others on the WhatsApp social media platform. Reasons for these choices are stated. The discussion contributes to the academic debate on the role of language in decolonising higher education, and to debates about promoting the use of African languages.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This study aimed at examining whether Limpopo Province youth use African languages on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. World Wide Worx (2017:1) revealed the Facebook is the most popular social networking site in South Africa, with 14 million users, followed by YouTube and Twitter, each with 7.7 million users. According to South African Mobile (2017:6), WhatsApp is used by 83% of South Africans on mobile phones, 51% use short message service (SMS), and 40% use Facebook. Further, Antheunis, Schouten and Krahrmer (2014:2) state that social media such

Prof. Carol Lesame lectures in Media and Communication Studies. Her research interests are mass and digital media, telecommunications and broadcasting policy, ICT policy, women, gender and media, technology, and development issues. She is affiliated with the University of Limpopo and the University of South Africa, and acted as Co-Supervisor for Dr Malatji's PhD thesis. Dr Edgar Malatji is a Lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Limpopo. He is the paper's principal researcher and conducted the study to obtain a PhD degree in 2019. His research interests are Media and Representation, Language in the Media and New Media.

as Facebook and Twitter are deeply rooted in people's daily routines so it would be reasonable to think that people use their own languages in their daily communication. Facebook, Twitter and Mixit are the most popular social networks in South Africa and the world (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; World Wide Worx, 2014). However, that may not always be the case in social media communication. South African social media statistics also indicate that 70% South Africans access the internet through mobile phones, and social media are used to communicate with friends, relatives, colleagues and other social as well as business partners to promote brands, businesses, culture and craft (Lesame et al., 2012a: 5; Kung, Picard & Towse, 2008: 69).

Against this background, the power of social media to reach and influence South Africans is evident. It is argued, that if one wanted to promote a particular language of their choice, doing so on social media might be ideal to promote that language and exposing it to millions of social media users. The primary functions of media are to inform, educate and entertain media users in mass communication (Fourie, 2007). However, in reality, there is no certainty that one can promote an African language on social media even if one's intention is to educate other social media users about that language. Social media, consequent to their digital interactive nature, have changed how people communicate with others in the public sphere. According to Velasquez and LaRose (2015:899), Twitter and Facebook are the main platforms for people all over the world to exchange ideas and perceptions regarding topical issues such as climate change, political disputes, health aspects, fashion, music and sports. In South Africa, social media play a pivotal role towards disseminating information amongst individual users across the world (Mawela, 2014:63). A large percentage of social media users are youth, one factor that motivated the principal researcher to conduct this study among Limpopo Province young people. This researcher is also a proponent of Afrocentricity (Salawu, 2006; Adegaju, 2008; Asante, 2009; Ndebele, 2014, 2018) with a view to promote African languages and culture on social media to avoid their extinction in the intellectual world.

1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

This study examined the role of social media towards conserving African languages among Limpopo Province youth. There is a conspicuous marginalisation of African languages on social media by speakers of these languages, who prefer to converse in the English language. This challenge could hinder the conservation of the African languages in future. The social media sites do not recognise the selected African languages (Sepedi, Xitsonga and Tshivenda) linguistics and this may adversely affect the use of these languages online. These languages are not part of the language options on FaceBook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

Therefore, social media are not designed and convenient for the usage of these African languages. There are 11 official languages in South Africa and nine of them are indigenous African languages (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). It is cumbersome to observe that these nine indigenous African languages being less used by its speakers on social media. According to Text100 (2015:3); (2006:150), English is the dominant language that is used on social media and many South Africans, particularly the youth, are following and practicing this trend. As much

as indigenous people in South Africa use English on a daily basis, yet they find it difficult to reflect on their cultures through it as a medium of communication. In other words, to some people mother tongue is a more effective language for communication purposes than a foreign language such as English. This mother tongue effectiveness in communication shows the importance of these African languages as far as conserving and promoting culture is concerned (De Klerk & Gough, 1996:55). Language planning and policy advocates believe that one way of developing or preserving the status of a language is to have it spoken and written (Educational Ministerial Committee, 2003). Social media give their respective users latitude to chat in their own languages in an effort to conserve those languages and cultures.

With this challenge of unused African languages on social media, the researchers pondered on the issue and set the following research questions to explore possible reasons for it among the youth in Limpopo Province.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study research questions were the following:

- (a) What languages do you use on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with other people?
- (b) Do you use your language (mother tongue) on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with other people or do you use English? and
- (c) Do you use your own language to communicate with other people on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to promote and preserve your language and culture?

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

3.1 Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of social media in conserving the selected African languages among youth in Limpopo Province.

3.2 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study were to:

- (1) analyse the manner in which the youth use different languages in their social media profiles
- (2) identify the effects of social media use on the selected African languages, and
- (3) establish and describe the challenges and opportunities of using social media to promote and conserve the selected African languages.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Audience activity and social media

Scholars are now beginning to investigate audience motives for using newer, computer-based communication technologies (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Since the first empirical attempts to explore the potential effect of new media on old media in the 1940s (Lee & Leung, 2004), there have been two main approaches to this issue and these are:

- (1) The first is focused on the medium and attributes and supports a displacement and replacement hypothesis, and
- (2) The second is focused on users' needs and often results in proposing a complementary effect of the new media on old. In this study, this second approach applied because it set out to explore what languages the youth use on social media, and identify which new media are used more by youth in this digital era.

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp have become an integral part of human life, and their usage has increased considerably in recent times (Uysal, 2015; Mawela, 2017). According to Uysal (2015), social media have become a pivotal part of mass communication among youth in the world. The latter statement by Uysal validates that social media are catalysts of human development. This, therefore, means that people use ICT, and social media in particular, to enhance and promote their values, beliefs and African languages. Ndebele (2014:122) points out that "the integration of African languages with information communication technology is essential in promoting and intellectualising African languages". Moreover, communication scholars attest that the dominance of English online has been a contentious issue in both scholarship and online discussion forums (Lesame et al., 2012; Milton & Mano, in Fourie, 2017).

4.2 Use of African languages on social media platforms

Some minority South African languages are mute on social media. Therefore, in order to encourage the use of African languages in media platforms, consideration should be paid to Van der Rheede's assertion (2004) that African language heritage is undoubtedly a valuable resource, but that it requires state resources to develop it further and establish it as a core economic driver on various media platforms. If African people have freedom to create their own content on social media platforms, that would allow them to accurately represent their identity, indigenous African languages and culture (Warschauer, El Said & Zohry, 2002:2). Social media allow the development and proliferation of user-generated content, which, therefore, means that people have latitude to create their own content in languages of their choice. English has been dominant in mass and electronic media for many years. The dominance of English is evident across the world on integrated networks (Lesame et al., 2012b:82). However, in this digital era, the dominance of English could be less of a concern

to proponents of African languages because one has an opportunity to use and promote any language on social media. In this study, the principal researcher's theoretical point of departure is Afrocentrism, the idea that African languages should be used constantly on social media to preserve them and avoid "linguicide" or "death of a language". Languages do not die, literally, but their use decreases among its speakers as they adopt and use other languages.

4.3 Relationship between information and communication technology and African languages

Social media are forms of information and communication technology (ICT) or internet-based websites that all users to create content (Bosch in Fourie, 2017), hence the need to assess how ICT influences African languages. It is argued, that social media have a great potential to promote and preserve the African languages selected for this study because most youth who speak these languages use social media daily and social media are a large part of human life, especially in the lives of young people. It is important to highlight that ICT is at the centre stage of modern human life, and there is a commendable relationship between ICT applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and others, and exponents of African languages. "Language is a significant marker of distinctiveness and therefore an important part of our individual and group identity" (Milton & Mano, in Fourie, 2017:190). Languages therefore identify people and groups.

Social media play a crucial role in allowing the speakers and users of African languages to communicate in their respective languages (Warschauer et al., 2002). The promotion of African languages and other aspects of culture on social media could be regarded as a positive mechanism to mitigate current adverse habits concerning minimum use by Africans of African languages on the World Wide Web and social media (Maseko et al., 2010:312). The speakers of African languages should appreciate these languages by constantly using them (Salawu, 2006:86). This use of African languages should be extended to using them online and in social media where they can be globally visible and exposed. This could spark interest in other people around the world who could be interested in learning about them. African languages no longer dominate in African conversations. Salawu (2006) and Adegolu (2008) postulate that the technological innovations and modernity have contributed towards the lack of African languages in African conversations. However, the responsibility to use and promote these languages in media also lies with the same African speakers and users of these languages. They should therefore promote a language that they would like to preserve on social media platforms by writing about it and making practical use of it.

5. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE STUDY

The theoretical foundation of this study was based on two theories, viz., the African linguistic dynamism (ALD) theory (Batibo, 2005; Salawu, 2006), and the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Katz, 1959; Levy & Windhal, 1984; McQuail, 1984; Levy, 1987; Perse, 1990; Kim & Rubin,

1997; Kaye, 2007; Fourie, 2007, 2010; Luo, Chea & Chen 2011). These two theories were selected and applied due to the former theory explaining the need to promote the use of African languages in communication to decolonise African communication spaces and contexts; and the latter theory describing audience activity, choices and obtained gratifications in media environments.

5.1 The African linguistic dynamism theory

The ALD theory emphasises that the language situation is basically complex, and that there are many dynamics between ex-colonial languages, the dominant languages and the minority languages that have brought along certain tendencies to the general profile (Batibo, 2005:26). A number of factors have favoured the expansion or extended use of some languages at the expense of others (ibid.). According to Batibo (2005) and Salawu (2006:88), in some African countries there is a tendency for ex-colonial languages to work their way down through the social system, thus taking over some of the domains of the dominant languages. In the interest of this study, English is the dominant language on social media amongst youth. However, in the lives of the youth sampled for this study, their mother tongues are dominant languages. The dominance of English on social media could be because of the expansion of education, with more young people having access to education and technology, and because education is, to a large extent, delivered in the English language at schools. In an era where decolonisation of education is discussed and promoted in the public sphere, it would have been expected that education is partly delivered in African languages that most citizens understand and communicate with daily. The ALD theory is relevant for the scope of this study to examine the use of English and selected African languages by youth on social media. It is on these social media where most youth converse with others in different languages, but mostly English.

5.2 Uses and gratifications theory

The UGT explains that different media audiences use media (traditional and digital) for various reasons (Kaye, 2007:129). It is a known fact that media users view television characters as their friends or role models pertaining to how they relate to those characters (Fourie, 2010:236). The main media usage questions that the UGT asks are, according to Fourie, all about:

- (1) What do people do with the media? and
- (2) What do they use the media for?

Thus, the UGT is relevant for this study because it was instrumental in examining and understanding media consumer behaviour, i.e., youth using social media for different reasons. The UGT articulates aspects of new media usage by youth selected to participate in this study. The theory also assisted the researchers to identify which social media are used by the youth participants, in what languages and for what communication purposes. Frequency of how the youth use these social media was measured through the application of the UGT.

Over the past 20 years, audience activity has emerged as an important concept in mass communication research (McQuail, 1984; Metzger & Ferguson, 2002). This study is about audience activity, what Limpopo Province youth do on social media, what languages they communicate with on social media and why they choose to use those languages online. According to the uses and gratifications researchers, audience activity refers to the degree to which media consumers choose to use specific media in order to satisfy felt needs (Levy & Windhal, 1984; Levy, 1987; Perse, 1990; Kim & Rubin, 1997). The UGT is further suitable for this study because it explains the uses and functions of social media for the selected youth or groups of persons in their respective societies. According to Katz (1959:56), “this approach differs from other theoretical perspectives in that it regards audiences as active media users as opposed to passive receivers of information”. In contrast to traditional media effects theories which focus on “what media do to people”, and assume audiences are homogenous, the uses and gratifications approach is more concerned with “what people do with the media”. In this study, the selected Limpopo Province youth were the analysed media audiences in terms of languages they communicate with on social media.

6. AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to examine the extent to which the selected Limpopo Province youth use and promote their African languages on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp towards preserving the languages. The sampled youth were aged between 16 and 34 years. Qualitative methodology (using focus groups and personal interviews as research methods) and quantitative methodology (using a questionnaire and online observation as research methods) were used to collect and analyse data. The focus group and interview data were analysed by identifying and selecting the main themes from respondent answers. This data analysis method is called thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Five Honours students at the University of Limpopo in 2017 acted as research assistants for the principal researcher. These research assistants were 2018 Masters students (supervised by Dr Malatji). A survey questionnaire was prepared and administered to the young research participants, most of which were university students. Survey data analysis methods included descriptive statistical methods, percentages, frequencies, tables and graphs. The execution of the mixed method research or triangulation is encapsulated by the usage of different data collection tools such as observations, focus groups and questionnaires (Neuman, 2011:200). Qualitative methodology is all about elucidating properties, values and attributes of certain concepts as they are, and verbal descriptions were used to accentuate the significant aspects of the research (Patton, 2002:41). Further, qualitative study as an investigation procedure was used for understanding social or human problems (Creswell, 1998; Bitsch, 2005). For this study, this paradigm was relevant to use for understanding the use of African languages by youth on social media.

Quantitative research, including the use of questionnaires, focuses on the use of calculations, measurements and scales. These calculations, within the framework of this study, are presented

in the findings and discussion section of the article. The principal researcher used online field observation to observe social media interactions by 23 active WhatsApp members of a group the researcher was also a member of. The researcher also observed youth online interactions on Facebook through his page, and the Twitter handle was used to access tweets from users. Online field observation, as a data collection technique, is more convenient and efficient because it is affordable and stimulates data collection if applied effectively (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Data collected through online field observation can be used to supplement data collected through other methods of research such as interviews and focus groups. A researcher can follow online activities and interactions by observing Facebook statuses, comments, videos and images. Data collection through online field observation was analysed through theme identification and discussion.

The data collection instruments were apt for that process because they assisted the researcher to identify and discover factors that influence youth opinions, attitudes and behaviour. Purposive sampling was chosen to select the youth. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2004:144), purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling whereby units to be observed are sampled on the basis of a researcher's prerogative about their relevance and prominence thereof. De Vos (2005:202) and Welma, Kruger and Mitchell (2005:56) posit that purposive sampling is used where a researcher selects a sample for a specific purpose, by directing and choosing the available subjects. In this case, Limpopo Province was purposively selected by the researcher because he resides and works in that province. He also selected 100 youth that were conveniently available at his disposal and place of domicile, who are using social media for educational and other communication purposes daily. The principal researcher was also in a convenient position to determine which students or youth speak which African languages, from the targeted languages. The research participants were sampled from three towns or residential areas, viz., Thohoyandou, Tzaneen and Mankweng. These areas are described forthwith.

6.1 Thohoyandou

This largely urban area is located in Thulamela Municipality, Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. Thohoyandou is known as the capital city of the Venda region. The inhabitants of this town are mostly educated and working-class people and most of them use mobile phones and other new technology to access the internet. The majority of youth in Thohoyandou use social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Thohoyandou is situated about 149 kilometres north of Polokwane, the capital of Limpopo Province. Small entrepreneurship is the dominant source of living in Thohoyandou and the majority of residents speak the language of Tshivenda (Limpopo Tourism Agency, 2017). In this study, Thohoyandou youth were involved by participating in focus groups and answering the questionnaire. Thirty-three (33) young persons were selected.

6.2 Tzaneen

Tzaneen is a town situated in the Tzaneen Municipality within the Mopani District of Limpopo Province. It is the second largest town in Limpopo Province after Polokwane. The

area is a subtropical paradise with indigenous and exotic plants including baobab trees. There are 650,000 people who reside in a 30-kilometre radius in areas such as Lenyenye, Nkowankowa, Letaba, Duiwelskloof, Magoebaskloof, etc. (Limpopo Tourism Agency, 2017; South African Places, 2017). Tzaneen is also characterised by fruit farming. The inhabitants of Tzaneen predominantly speak the languages of Xitsonga, English and Khilobedu (a Sepedi dialect). Tzaneen residents, including youth, have internet access and use mobile phones and social media.

6.3 Mankweng

Mankweng is a township geographically located 27 kilometres east of Polokwane. This area is located within the Capricorn District of Limpopo province. Mankweng is located between Polokwane and Magoebaskloof and is home to some University of Limpopo students. The majority of Mankweng residents are youth who speak different languages, including Sepedi, English, Xitsonga and Tshivenda. The area is known as Sovenga, which is an acronym for Sotho, Venda and Tsonga, because the majority of its people originate from these groups (University of Limpopo, 2017).

6.4 Ethical considerations

Research ethical principles such as informed consent (Bless et al., 2006:142; Hammersley & Traianon, 2012:75) and respect for respondent privacy (Du Plooy, 2002; Bless et al., 2006; Neuman, 2011) were observed and upheld. The research participants were treated with dignity and honour (Hammersley & Traianon, 2012). The respondents' right to remain anonymous and their privacy were protected by the principal researcher who interacted with them during and after data collection processes. The identities of the research participants were not revealed. However, data collected through the research methods are published for public knowledge and academic educational purposes. Data collected through online field observation reveals names of participants on social media but the researcher exercised care and caution when dealing with these identities and did not reveal any participant names. Online field observation, even though it can produce large amounts of data, is a research method that was, and should be, handled with utmost care because it is a form of unobtrusive research method in its very nature.

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to explore and examine how selected youth in Limpopo Province use social media to promote and preserve their African languages.

7.1 Quantitative data

A total of 100 youth were sampled and 93 individuals completed the questionnaires, while seven withdrew from the study.

7.2 Demographic details

7.2.1 Age and occupation

With regard to age 26 and 34 years, and of the participants, 74% of the sample were aged between 16 and 25 years, six per cent (6%) aged between 26 and 35 years, 19% did not specify their age and seven persons withdrew from the study. Ninety (96% of sample) participants were high school and university students, seven per cent did not answer the questionnaire, three per cent of them were unemployed. No one was employed.

7.2.2 Gender, racial group and place of domicile

Forty-six (49.4% of sample) respondents were females and 51.6% of them were males. One hundred (100%) of the participants were black. The majority (62%) of the respondents came from rural areas, 12% of them were from urban areas, and 26% of them resided in semi-urban areas.

7.2.3 Youth social media preferences

The majority (40%) of the youth indicated that they prefer to use Facebook and WhatsApp, 36% of them preferred to use WhatsApp only, and 12% preferred to use three social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter & WhatsApp). The data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Youth social media preferences

Social media	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
FaceBook (only)	7	8%
Twitter (only)	1	1%
WhatsApp (only)	34	37%
Both (FaceBook & WhatsApp)	37	40%
Both (FaceBook & Twitter)	0	0%
Both (WhatsApp & Twitter)	1	1%
All of the above (FaceBook, Twitter & WhatsApp)	11	12%
Other(s)	2	2%
Total	93	100%

7.2.4 Languages used by the youth on social media

Data revealed that 42% of the respondents prefer to write messages to friends, family and other social partners in English and African languages (translanguaging or using more than one language), 54% of the youth prefer to write in English only, while 4% of them have a preference for writing messages in their African languages (Sepedi, Tshivenda & Xitsonga). These results indicate that English is preferred by this youth for conversing on social media, because, as most stated, English is “convenient” and

“accommodates people from all cultural groups”. Some stated that English allowed them “to shorten words and phrases” when they type. Others stated that English enables them to connect with people from different countries and social backgrounds, and can make them “famous” all over the world.

The 54% of respondents who prefer to use English and African languages stated that they did not join social media platforms to be famous locally or in South Africa but want to be globally relevant and known so English is the best language to connect to people of other countries who do not know African languages. Some stated that English is “simple” and “saves time” when one has to type because it is difficult to type words in African languages because some of these words are “too long” and some people from other cultural groups do not understand their meanings if one writes them, some online “friends” ask for translations, which wastes conversation time. Some stated that they use African languages with family members only and with local WhatsApp groups whom they know are speakers of that language and understand words written in the language. The persons (4%) who indicated that they use only African languages on social media stated the reason that they like to use their “mother tongue”.

7.2.5 Time spent on social media

A majority (43%) of the respondents spent more than five hours on social media daily. This is an interesting finding in a period where most internet users in South Africa are calling for data costs to “fall”. Two of these respondents stated that they spend more than seven hours on social media daily. Additionally, 32% of the participants spent two to four hours on social media daily, 25% of them spent an hour on social media daily and seven of them withdrew from the survey.

7.2.6 The frequency of African language use on social media

The majority of the respondents (51%) used African languages less on social media. Those who use them more frequently comprised 49% of the sample. This finding indicates these young people do not use mother tongue on social media as some would have expected.

7.2.7 The attitude of the youth towards their African languages on social media

Most (70%) of the youth indicated that they have a negative attitude towards the African languages on social media, while only 29% of the respondents mentioned that they have a positive attitude towards the use of African languages on social media. One respondent (1%) was undecided. It is argued that most of these young people are influenced by the use of English as a communication tool at home and school, in terms of their English preference over their own mother tongue. Also, the fact that schools are diverse in cultures could influence these young people to communicate with others in English because of the cultural diversity they find themselves in, at school and on social media.

7.2.8 The need for the development of social media applications in African languages

The majority (88%) of the young people agreed that social media applications using African languages should be created in order to promote African languages. If the African language Xhosa can be included in a successful international American movie known as “Black Panther”, then African languages can be included in social media and, therefore, Africans should not be reluctant to make use of African languages on social media.

7.2.9 The structure of social media limits the use of African languages

Eighty-four (90%) respondents stated that social media do not accommodate the use of African languages as they are today, but accommodates English that they were designed with and for. Some of the respondents stated that if one types an African language word on social media, the software indicates in red that the word is unknown or not recognisable, or meaning is not known in English or that there is a spelling error. It was suggested that these semantic processes waste communication time and it is best for them to simply communicate in English. Sixteen (17%) respondents stated that social media do not limit the usage of African languages on their online activities.

7.2.10 The future of African languages on social media

The majority (59%) of the respondents mentioned that their African languages have a future on social media, but 41% of them suggested that their African languages have no future on social media. These responses are interpreted as individual views based on how the youth view the use of these languages online.

7.2.11 The most suitable language to use on social media

A massive 77% of the youth stated that English is the “best” and “most suitable” language to use on social media, while 23% of them had the contrasting view that English is not the most suitable language to use on social media – that any language is suitable to use on social media if appropriately used. Of the respondents, 70% stated that they felt pressured to use English in order to be understood by others who are on social media with them, their “online friends”. Some stated emphatically that their “friends” did not understand their home languages and therefore, English allowed them to connect better with their “friends”.

In this group of respondents, there were some who stated that English is the medium of instruction at school so this makes it easy for them to make “use of English outside of school”. Some mentioned that there is no need for translations when English is used in social media communication, because English accommodates most persons who know English, regardless of cultural group. They stated that African languages differ a lot between these group participants and require inter-group translations that most of them cannot do because they do not know some words from other South African languages (e.g., Sepedi differs from Xitsonga in dialectology, syntax, grammar, etc.). English, on the other hand, is “conducive for social media because it allows one to type quickly

using autofill”, and allows “short phrases and abbreviations”. On the contrary, 30% of the respondents posited that they do not feel pressured to use English on social media but use it because they prefer to. The main reason stated in this regard is that they are happy to use it as it promotes communication “inclusion”, “cultural integration”, “social cohesion” and “understanding” between those interacting online.

8. FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that social media platforms do not play a pivotal towards conserving the selected African languages. It is evident that the African languages, namely, Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga, do not exist in the language options of Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The study further confirmed that the sampled African youth believe that English is the most suitable language for their social media conversations. The consumers of social media spend a large proportion of their spare time active on various social media platforms. The significant outcome is that the social media platforms do not contribute much to the conservation of African languages.

The African youth somehow desert their own languages when they convey messages on social media. Facebook is the most popular social networking site in South Africa, with over 14 million users and, from the findings of this study, the African youth prefer to use English on this forum. Social media systems do not recognise African languages and that could have detrimental effects on the languages and attitude of the youth towards their languages. Despite the fact that the majority of the African youth who participated in this research speak African languages outside social media, they do not use them on social media.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study aimed at examining the role played by social media in conserving African languages among youth sampled in Limpopo Province. The researchers recommend the following, based on the study findings:

- (1) Development of short words and youth-friendly African language terms and phrases for use on social media

The non-usage of the selected African languages (Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga) appears not to stem from a natural dislike of the languages by their own speakers but from the fact that these languages have long difficult words that people of other cultural groups are unfamiliar with and cannot comprehend, which negatively affects communication between a social media group. Language not understood does not facilitate communication but creates barriers to understanding. The main aim of these youth to join social media is to “make many friends” and have “fun conversations”. English is regarded as the language that makes conversation simple and straightforward. Some respondents stated that there is no need to discuss “cultural issues” on social media because these are embedded in African languages and English does not accommodate those cultural nuances and traditional demands. One respondent stated that social

media are not for discussing “serious matters” such as traditional cultural issues but is for “fun conversations” and socialising about what is happening out there for youth and how youth can have “fun”. Traditional cultural issues “should be discussed at home, verbally and not on social media”, stated this respondent. English is regarded as the language that can afford them many “friends”, from “all social groups”, “regardless of mother tongue”, to ensure that communication is understood by all participants on a social media platform. It is therefore apparent that the purpose of communicating on social media, for these young people, is fame-seeking or global recognition, social inclusion or cohesion, promotion of cultural diversity and understanding between cultural groups, “fun conversations”, communication clarity and common understanding.

(2) Need for the creation of African social media applications because current social media applications do not recognise African languages

Afrocentricity is a philosophical underlying concept in this study. Afrocentricity advocates that Africans should be agents of transformation. They should act as agents of social change, as this study explored the impact of Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (social media) in conserving the African languages (particularly Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga) amongst youth in Limpopo Province. Mass media are used to promote and inculcate cultures and languages. Africans have to promote and preserve their languages and cultures as well through the use of mass media, especially new media such as Social Media. A plethora of media content was made up of attributes of Western cultural identity.

To some extent, some of these aspects still exist today. Scholars, namely, Salawu (2006); Maseko et al. (2010) as well as Solo-Anaeto and Jacobs (2015), have agreed that colonialists have been using mass media to drive their agenda and ultimately to nullify the cultural identity of African people among other aspects. Despite the fact that there are many media houses in Africa, the majority of them are owned by Westerners from Europe and the United States of America. It is arguable that these owners and creators decide the manner in which they want to depict and represent the realities of African people. In the midst of this discourse, one should consider the influential power of the media and that of the English language. Social media, however, present an opportunity for Africans to create new content about themselves and record it online.

Since media as the channels of mass communication process have a considerable amount of power, Africans cannot afford to ignore their capacity. This enormous influence of media is both positive and negative in nature in the eyes of the consumers and creators. The manner in which media content is packaged and conveyed has a huge implication for the public. Many Africans lack knowledge in terms of the interpretation and comprehension of media content. However, in this study the focus is on the impact of social media towards conserving African languages.

(3) Recognition of African languages by existing social media creators

In the midst of this philosophical discourse, one should highlight that there are key questions that were asked by Asante (2009). The emphasis of his question encapsulated that Africans should

imagine their continent without any influence from Westerners. The three selected Social Media applications (Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp) were developed by Americans (more especially citizens from United States of America) and United Kingdom respectively. Facebook and Twitter were established in the USA and WhatsApp was brought to life in Eastern Europe.

These social media applications have a myriad of users across the world. Facebook has over one-billion users in the world, and these statistics make it the world's largest social network. Twitter has over 310 million monthly users in the entire world. On the other hand, WhatsApp messenger has over a billion users in more than 180 countries (World Wide Worx, 2017). These large numbers demonstrate the overwhelming use and popularity of these Social Media applications. Once again, some Africans find themselves in a situation whereby they are only reduced to a level of consumers of Western products. The major difference between traditional and social media is that the latter always facilitate user-generated content. In contrast, traditional media provide limited latitude and authority for one to generate own content. One critical aspect is that the social media applications should afford users unlimited authority to generate their own content in their own African languages.

The argument concerning the impact of social media on African languages covers aspects of Afrocentricity. There is a need to consult the Afrocentricity as the basic aspect of African society. The overview of African society would enable Africans to position social media in an effort to conserve African languages. To this end, social media should be used as a communication tool to sustain African languages. They should have positive impact towards reflecting fundamental attributes of African identity. For these African languages to survive for future generations, their speakers should constantly use them in various platforms of mass communication.

Youth should be encouraged to utilise their African languages in different platforms, especially on social media. The young people who speak African languages are duty bound to ensure that their own languages thrive over colonial languages. According to Salawu (2006), Africans have negative attitude towards their own languages. Salawu's assertion suggests that Africans attitudes towards their own languages help to elevate colonial languages. The western worldview as far as media are concerned marginalised the African worldview postulated by Asante (2009). For many years, western concepts have been used as point of reference to narrate the manner in which media are perceived by African people.

As far as conversations are concerned on social media, English dominates as a preferred language. Social media has infiltrated the African community with all attributes attached to it including the languages. Africans did little to question the dominance of English over African languages on FaceBook, Twitter and WhatsApp. There is nothing wrong with African people using social media on a daily basis but the question this study aimed to address is: what is the contribution of social media towards preserving African languages? The answers to this question should inform the African community on the manner in which they should use social media to preserve their identity (language and culture). The attributes of the African community are at the periphery of social media. It is therefore the responsibility of Africans to ensure that their being is

at the centre of social media conversations. African studies scholars contend that for a language to survive it should be constantly spoken and written (Salawu, 2006; Adegaju, 2008; Chisenga, 2002). Since the majority of the African youth spend most of their time on social media, there is a need for them to prioritise African languages in an effort to preserve them.

(4) Afrocentricity and Africanisation or Decolonisation of Research Methods

This research is positioned within an African perspective in location and time that is suitable for African originality concerning the interpretation of information. The impact of social media on African languages cannot be debated in isolation. Hence, the need to discuss and develop this debate from an African perspective. Over the years, Africans have mostly been consumers of Western media content. According to Asante (2009:1), "Afrocentricity cannot be reconciled to any hegemonic or idealistic philosophy. It is opposed to radical individualism as expressed in the postmodern school." Within the context of this study, the researcher adopted the aforementioned philosophy including both approaches of Afrocentricity, namely, postmodernist and Afrocentrist. It is cardinal for both schools of thought for Afrocentric philosophy to be advanced. The postmodernist view dictates that "African" is a vague phenomenon due to the fact that from Cape to Cairo there are different types of Africans let alone across the world. This view affirms that Africans have full potential to eradicate any obstacle that hinders socio-economic development. Nevertheless, Africans have not fully taken advantage to capacitate themselves towards preserving their identity and culture through undertaking research that identifies African ideas and scholarship and promotes African languages and schools of thought. As a result of making use of current scientific research methods which are western in nature, Africa absorbs a lot of European and American ideologies at the expense of their own. This therefore means that Africans are dependent on their Western counterparts because they have not asserted themselves, African schools of thought and languages as Africans. Consequently, "the postmodernist would begin by saying that there is no such thing as Africans" (Asante, 2009:2). This firm stance manifests because there are myriad kinds of Africans and they are not equal.

Contrary to the postmodernist approach, the Afrocentrist viewpoint highlights that Africans exist as a collective with their differences (Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014). Diversity in cultures, languages and traditions are the key attributes of Africa from the Afrocentrist perspective. Asante (2009:4) accentuates that "the Afrocentrist would look to the questions of location, control of the hegemonic global economy, and marginalisation and power positions as keys to understand the underdevelopment of African people". Fundamentally, Asante postulates that Afrocentricity is a philosophical school of thought that encourages Africans to bring socio-economic change and transformation in an effort to mitigate instability and underdevelopment. African people should defend and promote their being and identity. There is a need to critically develop ways to narrate African stories from an African perspective – in other words decolonise research approaches by implementing less scientific methods that emphasise relating these stories in more personal forms of communication.

The Afrocentric philosophical discourse concerns transformation for Africans for the benefit of Africans, even in knowledge creation. Postmodernism emphasises that Africans do not exist

in isolation from the global scale. Afrocentrism affirms that Africans have been, somehow marginalised through centres of power and that Africans should imagine the status quo of their language and preferences of material artefacts without western influence.

Finally, Asante (2009:4) advocates that “Afrocentricity enthrones the centrality of the African, that is, black ideals and values, as expressed in the highest forms of African culture, and activates consciousness as a functional aspect of any revolutionary approach to phenomena”. The rationale is that Africa without any influence from outside its borders is the location for Africans for their own development. Africans would have the latitude to re-affirm their culture, languages, moral values and religion. African languages should be a mainstay of cultural preservation for future generations to come. Language is a communication channel and any group of people has a language that represents its heritage (Lohdi, 1993). Countries like China, managed to use their language after many years of colonialism. Arguably, some Africans represent the attributes of Western culture and identity. Africans should take a stance by reclaiming their African identity and this identity includes speaking one’s African language offline and online. This study has revealed that young South Africans in Limpopo Province are far from reclaiming that identity through social media language use. This is a concern that parents can address in future if they want to promote African languages online.

10. CONCLUSION

Social media have a great potential promote African languages, if used for that purpose. For this social media potential to have constructive meaning, those who use and write specific African languages for specific communication purposes should use and promote their languages. This activity could ensure that these languages continue to exist in the public space, beyond the home environment, so that they continue to exist over future generations and to make sure that these languages are visible and recognisable online like many other languages of the world. Currently, most South Africans, including youth, use English when they engage in social media conversations with friends and close associates. This trend will have to change if African languages are to be promoted in public discourse. When a language is not used, people may forget about some aspects of that language. It is therefore in the interest of those who aim to promote these languages to start using them on social media platforms, to inform other people who may be interested in understanding the languages.

Acknowledgements

Dr Malatji conducted his PhD research from 2015 to 2018 and acknowledges his gratitude to the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NHSS), for affording him research funding to carry out the research. He also appreciates and thanks his research assistants, Joseas Mphaga, Marumo Chuene, Tshepiso Mphahlele, Orange Lesudi and Lucky Mabuza, who are MA students at the University of Limpopo, and who assisted him to conduct focus groups and administer the survey. We also thank Dr Malatji’s other supervisor, Professor S.O. Mmusi, for her expertise.

REFERENCES

- Adelore, O. (2017). *Using WhatsApp mobile application as tutorial delivery tool for advanced level learners in adult literacy programme: Lessons learned*. Abadan: University of Abadan, Department of Adult Education.
- Adegoju, A. (2008). Empowering African languages: Rethinking the strategies. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2(3): 14-32.
- Antheunis, M.L., Schouten, A.P., & Krahmer, E. (2014). The role of social networking sites in early adolescence' social lives. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 1, 24.
- Asante, M.A. (2009). *The African worldview: Afrocentricity*. Trenton: African World Press.
- Balibo, H.M. (2005). *Language decline and death in Africa: Causes, consequences and challenges*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- Bitsch, V. (2005). Qualitative research: A grounded theory example and evaluation criteria. *Journal of Agribusiness*, 23(1): 75-91.
- Bless, C., Higson-Smith, C., & Kagee, A. (2006). *Fundamentals of social research methods: An African perspective* (4th ed.). Cape Town: Juta.
- Bosch, T. (2017). What are social media? Introductory definitions. In P.J. Fourie (ed.) *Media studies: Social (new) media and mediated communication today* (Vol. 4). Cape Town: Juta.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77-101. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chisenga, J. (2002). Indigenous knowledge: Africa's opportunity to contribute to global information content. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science*, 68(1): 16-20.
- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Quali inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- De Vos, A.S. (2005). *Research and grassroots*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Ferguson, D.A., & Perse, E.M. (2000). The world wide web as a functional alternative to television. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(2): 155-174. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4402_1
- Fourie, P.J. (2007). *Media studies: Media history, media and society*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Fourie, P.J. (2010). New paradigms, new theory and four priorities for South Africa mass communication and media research. *Critical Arts*, 24(2): 173-191. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560041003786474>
- Hammersley, M., & Traianou, A. (2012). *Ethics in qualitative research, controversies and contexts*. California: Sage. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957619>
- Kaye, B.K. (2007). Block use motivations: An exploratory study. In M. Tremoyne (ed.) *Blogging, citizens and the future of media*. New York: Routledge.
- Katz, E. (1959). Mass communication research and the study of culture. *Studies in Public Communication*, 2: 1-6.
- Kim, J., & Rubin, A.M. (1997). The variance influence of audience activity on media effects. *Communication Research*, 24(2): 107-135. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365097024002001>
- Kung, L., Picard, R., & Towse, A. (2008). *The internet and the mass media*. London: Sage.

- Lee, P. & Leung, L. (2004). *Assessing the Displacement Effects of the Internet*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Internet Communication in Intelligent Societies. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, School of Journalism and Communication.
- Leedy, P.D. & Ormrod, J.E. (2010). *Practical research: Planning and design*, 9th edition. New Jersey: Boston.
- Lesame, Z., Sindane, S., & Potgieter, P. (2012a). New media: Theories and applications. In Z. Lesame, B.T. Mbatha, & S. Sindane (eds.) *New media in the information society*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Lesame, Z., Sindane, S., Magocha, M., & Makondo, L. (2012b). New media use by individuals and organisations. In Z. Lesame, B. T. Mbatha, & S. Sindane (eds.) *New media in the information society*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Levy, M.R., & Windhal, S. (1984). Audience activity and gratifications: A conceptual clarification and exploration. *Communication Research*, 11(1): 51-78. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365084011001003>
- Levy, M.R. (1987). VCR use and concept of audience activity. *Communication Quarterly*, 35(3): 267-275. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463378709369689>
- Limpopo Tourism Agency. 2017. *The strength in our offering is our diversity*. Available from: <http://www.golimpopo.gov>
- Lohdi, A.Y. (1993). The language situation in Africa today. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 2(1): 79-86.
- Luo, M.M., Chea, S., & Chen, J.S. (2011). Web-based information service adoption: A comparison of the motivational model and the uses and gratifications theory. *Decision Support Systems*, 51(1): 21-30. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2010.11.015>
- Maseko, P. Sam, M. Dalvit, L., Nosilela, M. & Terzoli, A. (2010). *Towards rethinking multilingualism*. Available from: <http://www.ru.ac.za>
- Mawela, T. (2017). Exploring the role of social media in the G2C relationship: A South African perspective. *Information Development*, 33(2): 117-132. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266666916639743>
- McQuail, D. (1984). With the benefit of hindsight: Reflections on uses and gratifications research. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1(2): 177-193. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038409360028>
- Metzger, M., & Ferguson, A. (2002). *Audience orientations toward new media communication research reports*. California: University of Southern California.
- Milton, V.C., & Mano, W. (2017). Identity 2.0: Negotiating identity and the politics of belonging in cyberspace. In P.J. Fourie (ed.) *Media studies: Social (new) media and mediated communication today* (Vol. 4). Cape Town: Juta.
- Mkhize, N., & Ndimande-Hlongwa, N. (2014). African languages, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), and the transformation of the humanities and social sciences in higher education. *Alternation*, 21(2): 10-37.
- Ndebele, H. 2014. Promoting African languages through information and communication technology localisation: A language management approach. *Alternation Special Edition* 13: 102-127.

- Ndebele, H. (2018). Social software as a tool of promoting indigenous African languages in higher education. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 15(1): 92-112. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2017.1365870>
- Neuman, W.L. (2011). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston: Pearson.
- Papacharissi, Z., & Rubin, A.M. (2000). Predictors of internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(2): 175-196. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4402_2
- Perse, E.M. (1990). Audience selectivity and involvement in the newer media environment. *Communication Research*, 17(5): 675-691. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365090017005005>
- Salawu, A. (2006). Indigenous language media: A veritable tool for African language learning. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 1(1): 86-95. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10382040608668533>
- South African Mobile. (2014). *South African Mobile Consumer Survey*. Available from: <http://www2.deloitte.com/South-Africa-mobile-consumer-survey.html>
- South African Mobile. (2017). *South African Mobile Consumer Survey*. Available from: <http://www2.deloitte.com/South-Africa-mobile-consumer-survey.html>
- South African Places. (2017). *News about South African Places*. Available from: <http://www.bing.com>
- Subrahmanyam, K., Reich, J.M., Waechter, N., & Espinoza, G. (2008). Online and Offline Social Network: The use of social networking sites by emerging adults. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29(6): 420-433. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2008.07.003>
- University of Limpopo. (2017). *Historical Background*. Available from: <http://www.ul.ac.za/index.php?Entity=UL>
- Uysal, R. (2015). The predictive role of social safeness and flourishing on problematic Facebook use. *South African Journal of Psychology. Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Sielkunde*, 45(2): 182-193. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246314560010>
- Van der Rheede, C. (2004). *Creating Wealth through Indigenous Languages*. Available from: <http://www.ngopulse.org/creatingwealth-thru-indigenous-languages->
- Velasquez, A., & LaRose, R. (2015). Youth collective activism through social media: The role of collective efficacy. *New Media & Society*, 17(6): 899-918. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813518391>
- Warschauer, M., Said, G.R.E., & Zohry, A.G. (2002). Language choice online: Globalisation and identity in Egypt. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 7(4). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2002.tb00157.x>
- Welman, C., Kruger, F., & Mitchell, B. (2005). *Research methodology* (3rd ed.) Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- World Wide Worx. (2014). *South African social media landscape*. Available from: <http://www.worldwideworx.com/.../10/...Social-Media-2014.pdf>
- World Wide Worx. (2017). *South African social media landscape*. Available from: <http://www.worldwideworx.com/2016/09/Social-Media-2017>