

AN ANALYSIS OF THE (RE)CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER IDENTITIES THROUGH
LANGUAGE USE ON SELECTED FACEBOOK PAGES OF NAMIBIAN YOUTH:
A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA'S POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The rising popularity of social networking sites among university students has led to invisible lines between students' offline and online identities. Students are often lured into expressing themselves openly on social networks in ways that expose their personalities. The study explored how the University of Namibia's post-graduate students (re)construct their gender identities on Facebook through language use. The researcher further explored whether students performed and sustained the societally assigned gender roles on virtual spaces as often as they may do during daily face-to-face conversations. Previous scholars have provided inadequate data surrounding aspects such as socio-pragmatic competence, cyber language and gender differences among post-graduate students, and this has prompted this study. By employing the Linguistic Appraisal Theory, the Difference Approach and the Dominance Approach, the researcher pinpointed different ways of gender performance and presentation on social networks. A qualitative approach was used; ethnographic analysis was performed on Facebook walls of 12 male and 12 female students. Furthermore, one-on-one interviews were conducted with eight participants. It emerged that male participants use language that portrays dominance and order (harsh and direct). On the other hand, female participants use polite and subordinate language when engaging in conversations in virtual spaces. It is thus safe to conclude that when engaging in conversations, post-graduate students present 'an extended offline self' in virtual spaces. Social networks grant them an opportunity, not to reconstruct identities, but rather extend their already existing ones into more socially acceptable ones. The choice of language employed in virtual environments is similar to the traditional patterns of the language; this shows that Facebook users are still deeply engrossed in culture and maintain societal expectations on virtual environments.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Mee Susan and Tate Ambrose, and to my siblings; Mike, Gerry, Chris, Ndina, John and Heinrich.

DECLARATION

I, Gerhard Matheus, declare hereby that this study is a true reflection of my own research, and that this work or part thereof has not been submitted for a degree in any other institution of higher education.

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Definition of Terms

Identity construction: The process in which an individual's identity is produced, and changed, in part or whole, by a person's interactional, situational, sociohistoric and cultural contexts (Taylor, 2015).

Gender identity: The dynamic configuration of the defining characteristics of a person (Huang et al., 2018).

Identity: A stable constellation of attributes, beliefs, values and experiences residing in the individual that defines the self (Nematzadeh & Narafshan, 2020).

Sociopragmatic competence: Focuses on the relationship between linguistic action and social structure and is concerned with the influence of socio-contextual factors in language as social action (Delahaie, 2015).

Culture: A combination of the ideas, customs and social behaviour of a particular people or society (Maluleke, 2012).

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Social networks have become an integral part of day-to-day social interactions. The establishment of these social networks has brought about a new era of access to information, the latest modes of communication and individual expression. Social networks represent an aspect of social media, which broadly focuses on creating and transmitting information to others. Social media is a broader term that Grahl (2013 as cited in Lomicka and Lord, 2016) categorises into six groups, namely; social networking sites, bookmarking sites, social news, media sharing, Microblogging and Blogging). The present study explored conversational interactions performed on Social networking sites with a particular focus on the Facebook platform.

Social networking is the practice of expanding one's social contacts by making connections through web-based social interactions (Bamaiyi, 2010). Social networking sites and virtual worlds carry a complexity of many cultures, and they both manifest and forge new connections and communities (Kozinets, 2015). More than 1.5 billion individuals use the internet around the world (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2017). One of the reasons social networking sites have become widespread and grown in popularity is because they allow people to interact and to (re)construct and reveal their desired personalities. Social networking sites also awaken desires to develop and maintain social relationships, which leads to community building, self-expression and interactions with others (Thome, 2010 as cited in Lomicka & Lord, 2016).

The dominance of social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter has affected social interactions, communication and exchange of information between individuals. The increased popularity of these sites may be linked partially to a need or desire to connect with other individuals, to share opinions, to keep in touch with friends and close acquaintances and to share information with a wider group of followers (Thome, 2010 as cited in Slim & Hafedh, 2019).

It has also affected the use of language especially by the youth affecting such aspects as socio-pragmatic competence as well as linguistic repertoires (Nakale, 2018). Besides the effect on youth language, social networking sites have also made a great impact on individuals' expressions of the self, during online and face-to-face interactions, thus affecting individuals' identities and the creation and modification of these identities in their day-to-day conversations. This study examined how men and women use language to create, reconstruct and maintain gender identities on social networking sites.

Over the last decade, social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube have exploded in popularity globally, Namibia included. Statistics from Digital Communications (n.d.) indicate that, in 2017, social media platforms had 3.8 billion active users worldwide. Being the holder of the largest number of users, Facebook is constantly changing itself and creating new possibilities, redesigning existing ones and resigning from those that were not used by the users (Biernatowska, Balcerowska & Bereznowski, 2017).

Ali and Khan (2012) asserted that there are roles and patterns of behaviour which have been attributed to a society based on gender. Men and women are believed to behave in ways that are (different) from each other, which do not only involve physical roles but also their use of language. Society thus shapes their identities as men and women. Individuals are taught how to identify as women and as men through the roles that are assigned to them. However, with the enlightenment

and the emergence of social networks and their online interactions, there has been an observed fluidity in terms of gender representations and new explorations of new forms of identities during online engagements and face-to-face conversations (Miller, 2013). The study sought to discover the different identity presentations on social networking sites, and how individuals perform gender with the intentions of constructing or reconstructing their societally awarded identities.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The study explored how women and men change or shape their identities on social media, through the use of language. The study closely examined the socio-pragmatic roles and linguistic repertoires; that is, exploring the use and competence of language on social media platforms of some of the Namibian youth as well as in their face-to-face interactions (offline lives). Traditionally, society has prescriptive ways of ascribing behaviour patterns based on gender (Ali & Khan, 2012). Society believes that there are ways in which men and women ought to behave, not just in roles but even in the manners in which they speak, what they speak about and how they speak about it. The study attempted to identify any, if there were, distinctions and digressions from these traditionally perceived behaviours and identity creations. This study further explored if these societal trends are also sustained in discussions on social networking sites, particularly Facebook. Furthermore, the study sought to explore the extent to which these sites encourage the prevalence of gender identities that are or are not highly polarised.

1.3. Research Objectives

The study:

- 1.3.1** assessed the socio-pragmatic competence of the Namibian youth (University of Namibia postgraduate students) on social networking sites;
- 1.3.2** examined the link between gender, identity and language and how these are intertwined on social networking sites, particularly Facebook; and
- 1.3.3** explored how female youth and male youth perpetuate the socially conceived feminine and masculine identities and sustain them on social networking sites.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study is both theoretically and practically significant because it enhances our current knowledge of the relationship that language use creates between social media, gender and identity representations, the youth's socio-pragmatic competence on social media. Furthermore, the study also enhances the readers' understanding of the phenomena of social media and identity production and self-representations in the specific virtual environment of the Namibia context. It is hoped that this study will prompt further and broader investigations into social media users' interactions on other social media sites in Namibia. Furthermore, with the aid of the employed theories, the study fostered awareness on the relations between language, gender and social media. The theories also assisted the researcher in acquiring the desired data, which contributes to the already existing knowledge that surrounds socio-pragmatic competence and social (re)constructions of gender identities on social networking sites.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

There were some limitations that were beyond the control of the researcher. The sample size of the study was a specific group of students, the post-graduate students at the University of Namibia, Main Campus from the Faculty of Education. The researcher analysed Facebook walls of 12 male and 12 female students and interviewed eight participants; therefore, the results could not be generalised to all students whether at the university or beyond.

1.6. Delimitations of the Study

The scope of the study was limited to first-year post-graduate students at the University of Namibia in the Faculty of Education, aged between 23 and 40 years who were active users of Facebook at the time of the study. Additionally, the study was limited to only one social networking platform- Facebook. It has been demonstrated that the specific features of the different social networking platforms vary; results of this study could therefore not be generalised to all the social networking sites.

1.7. Organisation of the Study

This study is organized in the following manner and contains the following parts: Chapter 1 presents the introduction to the study and it comprises of the background of the study, the statement of the problem, research objectives, significance of the study as well as the limitations and delimitations of the study. The second chapter consists of the theoretical framework employed to inform and direct the study and the literature review. Chapter three deals with the research methodology, which highlights the research design, population, sample, data collection procedures, data analysis and research ethics. The fourth chapter presents an analysis of the

collected data and discussion. The last chapter, Chapter five concludes the study and offers recommendations.

1.8. Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this chapter presented an overview of the orientation of the study by emphasising the purpose of the study. It also looked at the statement of the problem, research questions, the significance of the study as well as the limitations and delimitations of the study. The next chapter will review the literature and studies conducted on socio-pragmatic competence and online gender constructions and re-constructions.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of the present study, outlining the theories which have been employed in achieving results for the study. Herein, the reviewed literature, which relates to the theme of this study, is also presented.

2.2.Theoretical Framework

The study employed three theories in the analysis of data: The Discourse Linguistic Appraisal theory which was established by Magda Arnold in 1960; the Dominance Theory which was coined by Robin Lakoff in 1975 and the Difference Approach which originates from the works of Maltz and Borker in 1982.

2.2.1. The Discourse Linguistics Appraisal Theory

The Discourse Linguistics Appraisal Theory was put forward by James Martin in the 1990s originating from the works of Magda Arnold from the 1960s, and it is an extension of Mike Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Liu, 2010). The appraisal theory is concerned with how writers and speakers approve and disapprove, enthuse and abhor, applaud and criticise (White, 2015). The approach focuses on how writers construe for themselves particular authorial identities or personae, with how they align or misalign themselves with actual or potential respondents, and with how they construct for their texts an intended or ideal audience (White, 2015). Furthermore, this theory does not only allow researchers to examine how speakers exploit different ranges of appraisal to construct particular personae for themselves, but also involves a negotiation of solidarity (Oteiza, 2017). They seek to solicit a response of solidarity from the addressee.

The Discourse Linguistics Appraisal Theory was formed through what was initially known as ‘write it right’, created by a crew of scholars who focused mainly on monologic texts (Wei et al., 2015, p. 237). They found Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics less helpful; they claimed that it did not make any reference to the interpretation of evaluation meaning (the speaker’s feelings, estimations and their judgements on values of various phenomena or experiences). Hence, they found a necessity to shift from grammar to lexis and formed a systemic lexico-grammatical framework known as the Discourse Linguistics Appraisal Theory. According to Wei, Wherrity and Zhang (2015), the Discourse Linguistics Appraisal theory is an approach to exploring, describing and explaining the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas, and to manage interpersonal positioning and relationships.

The Discourse Linguistics Appraisal Theory provides an analytical tool for individuals to better understand issues associated with evaluative resources and the negotiation of intersubjective positions and also opens new areas of interpersonal meaning (Liu, 2010). Evaluative lexis expresses the speaker’s or writer’s opinion on good and bad boundaries.

2.2.2. The Difference Theory

The philosophy which underlies the Difference Approach states that its main principles contain two paths, namely Sameness and Difference (MacKinnon, 2014). The Difference Approach states that sex is a difference, a division and distinction beneath which lies a stratum of human commonality and sameness (Uchida, 2013). The path of sameness in the Difference Approach merely advocates for social equilibrium between the male and female genders (MacKinnon, 2014). The approach is put forward to explain misunderstandings between men and women, and it advocates for equality between men and women.

The Difference Approach developed the two-culture model of ‘men and women’ where children are raised and socialised in separate groups (Mellor, 2011). As Tannen (2007) has outlined, Difference is an approach that advocates for equality between the genders, and the varying communicative styles of men and women are a result of differentiating women and men’s subcultures during childhood socialisation. This therefore means that there are gender differences in ways of speaking, and “women’s independence is not as significant as men’s” (Mellor, 2011, p.17).

From a psychological point of view, Thompson (2008) defines individual differences as psychological traits or chronic tendencies or habits that convey a sense of consistency, internal causality and personal distinctiveness. These differences play a major role in how people react generally to situations they encounter. They thus tend to affect behaviour, but only when paired with conditions that induce stress (Carver & Scheier, 2000, as cited in Thompson, 2008).

The advocates of the Difference (Cross-Culture) Approach believe that women and men speak differently because of fundamental differences in their relation to language (Alami, 2016). This is due to different socialisation in early childhood. Other researchers suggest that differences between men and women’s discourse are biological in nature (Giddens, 1991 as cited in Miller, 2013; Alami, 2016). This means that when individuals are undergoing socialisation, that is, when they are learning to be male or female during gender socialisation years, they do not only learn about distinctive roles, but they also learn how to use the appropriate language associated with each gender. When individuals talk, they make use of linguistic resources to present themselves as a particular kind of person. Aspects of language such as tone, pitch of voice, intonation patterns, diction, pronunciation and even grammatical patterns can signal gendered aspects of the speaker’s presentation (Alami, 2016).

In the ultimatum, the Difference Approach takes on the notion that men and women are believed to have arose cross-culturally and thus belong to two different subcultures, that girls and boys were not socialised similarly, and they thus have different sociolinguistic subcultures. The patterns of women speech differ from that of men. Thus, according to the Difference Approach, sex is a difference, women should be valued and compensated on what they are or have become. On the other hand, the Difference Approach also advocates for sameness in the sense that women should be treated as men; society should grant women access to what men have access to.

2.2.3. The Dominance Theory

The Dominance Approach was coined from the works of Maltz and Borker (1982). Social Dominance posits that group-based dominance societies have intersecting organisations of power regarding gender and age categories. The Dominance Approach states that “language patterns are interpreted as manifestations of patriarchal social order, which perpetuates and reproduces women’s subjugation and the power of men” (Talbot, 2010, p. 98). The Dominance Approach sees language practices of women as neither deviant from, nor inferior to the male norm, distinguishing their studies from those taking the deficit position (Uchida, 2013).

The Dominance Approach considered that men and women could express their language differently because there exists an inequity of power relations between men and women (Rhami, 2015). In speech, the Dominance Approach is concerned with the imbalance of power between the sexes in the sense that it considers language differences to be a reflection of traditional social roles (White, 2003).

Men and women inhabit the same cultural and linguistic contexts in which power and status are distributed unequally (Gyamera, 2012; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Women and men have access to the same set of linguistic and conversational devices which they use for the same purpose, but the

differences are brought about in status goals (Gyamera, 2012). In her theory of tag questions, Lakoff (1975) explains how the Dominance Approach goes on to show that women act less dominantly when they are around men; that is, they use tag questions not only for politeness, but also for a male opinion to ascertain their viewpoint (reassurance) (Gyamera, 2012; White, 2003). This shows that powerless features of speech that women use help them in contributing to maintaining a subordinate position within society.

In essence, the Discourse Linguistics Appraisal Theory deals with the negotiation and approval of interpersonal meanings derived from the use of language. It merely calls for attempts in understanding and accepting the different ways in which language is used. While the Difference Approach is presented as an appeal for equality and equity between the male and female genders, the Dominance Approach denotes group-based power imbalances in terms of gender, status and language. It thus places much emphasis on the role of power in competitive discourse.

2.3. Literature Review

The realm of social networking sites is increasingly emerging as the subject of research in the field of social sciences. Studies have been conducted around the world to inspect the influence of these sites on issues of language, gender identity and self-presentations. An attempt has been made in this section to review studies and articles related to the themes of this research. The review of relevant literature allows us to study the main perspectives of studies conducted in the same field. This gives a proper guideline to the research work and enables integration of the past studies, thus leading to the expansion of knowledge.

2.3.1. Language and Gender Variations

The term *gender* is sometimes misunderstood by people who consider it to be synonymous with the term *sex*. Sex is designated based on biology whereas gender is socially and psychologically

constructed by the processes of interaction in families (Rhami, 2015). This means that while sex is a biological categorisation based primarily on reproductive potential, gender on the other hand, is something that individuals perform and do rather than something that they own. The concern about language and gender began in the 19th century whereby authors of that era wrote about two distinct issues pertaining to gender- its nature and the significance of gender bias (Rhami, 2015). They posed questions that inquired whether or not men and women used language in different ways, how sexist language is constituted and reflected, and how it can be changed.

The assertion that men and women typically employ different linguistic styles is pursued in a wide range of studies. This implies that a significant interest on sociolinguistic variations associated with speakers of the different genders has been observed. A study was conducted to determine whether women's language is indeed 'powerless' as claimed by American linguist, Lakoff (1975 as cited in Michael, Chone, Muthusamy & Veeravagu, 2010); the study focused particularly on women and workplace settings. Women are constantly expected to adhere to the already existing linguistic norms in work settings. The more women there are in work settings, the stricter the societal patterns of behaviour become. On the contrary, male individuals in the workforce are not confronted with similar constraints. Language is indeed one of the main contributing factors to gender inequality.

In their study on gender and language variations, Bamman, Eisenstein and Schnoebelen (2014) analysed the use of language by the youth on Twitter. The study deduced that from the various linguistic features that young people use, there are observable differences in the choices of language employed by men and those employed by women. The high accuracy of linguistic features indicates a great deal of language's predictive power with regard to gender.

Social media have been theorised as an avenue for girls and women to expand not only their spheres of engagement and influence, but also the strength of their influence on constraining understandings of gender (Bailey et al., 2013). This suggests that girls and women will be better enabled to exchange comments, build relationships, and exchange social capital (Senft, 2008; Shade, 2007 as cited in Bailey et al., 2013). A study conducted by Michael et al. (2010) affirmed Lakoff's claim in which she asserted that women's speech is considered powerless language. Lakoff (1973, 1975, 1977 as cited in Michael et. al., 2010, p. 21) claims,

As women begin to enter the professions in greater numbers, there are calls for women to adapt to the linguistic norms of the public domain. As a result of the inequalities between the sexes, women have been thought to be differential and unassertive through a variety of linguistic variables that reflect women's place in society.

Similarly, Tynes et al. (2012 as cited in Helsper, 2014) conducted research with ethnic minorities in order to demonstrate that a strong ethnic identity and ethnic self-confidence allows teens to interact more freely. The study found out that girls feel more peer pressure to demonstrate identity-conforming behaviour as compared to boys (Mack et al., 2007; Roos, 2004). O'Brian et al. (2000) and Renold (2006) argued that in relation to communication and relationships that surround femininity and establishing womanhood, girls are more socialised explicitly from an earlier age to understand in which situations they should feel confident in comparison with masculine activities (as cited in Roos, 2004). These stereotypes directed to a specific gender, mark clear gender differences and societal expectations.

A study conducted by Bamaiyi (2010) explored how gender influences language use in university students. The study found that gender impacts language in the sense that it leads to linguistic

change. The study also found that the ways in which females and males talk can be used to identify variations between the genders and their style of language use. Social gender can be understood as the social separation between masculine and feminine roles. The influence of society and the environment in which a language is being communicated largely contributes to the speech differences that men and women experience.

2.3.2. Gender Discrimination on Social Media

Social networking sites such as Facebook have created an opportunity to use internet as an extension of real-life social interactions and to follow other people's lives moment-by-moment (Boyd & Ellison, 2007 as cited in Biernatowska et al., 2017). Being the holder of the largest number of users, Facebook is constantly changing itself and creating new responsibilities, redesigning existing ones and resigning from those that were not utilised by users. This section explores different ways in which men and women express discrimination on social networking sites.

Although forms of online harassment have been examined since the earliest days when the internet had just been invented, the internet largely remains socially, legally or academically misunderstood (Simons, 2015). Regardless, the changing technologies generate different capabilities and limitations for both online and offline harassment. Simon (2015) outlines different forms of online harassment and coined a definition that best explains what harassment really is. She refers to gender-based harassment as "harassment or victimisation that is predicated on perceived gender identity, particularly discrimination and hatred directed towards women" (Simons, 2015, p.1).

For many people, social networking sites have become important platforms for socialising. These platforms are programmed spaces which have been designed for digital constructions of identities

(Bivens & Haimsons, 2016). Social networking sites also make new interactions possible and therefore help in creating new forms of sociability (Duenas, Ponton, Belzunegu & Pastor, 2016). The forms of sociability, together with the rules for online interactions are intertwined with those in physical spaces. Social media are responsible for maintaining the limiting traditional stereotypes but keep them less strict, allowing an extended freedom of speech for online users.

Garimella and Mihalcea (2016) explored the problem of gender discrimination on social media. The study sought to identify the linguistic differences found between the male and female genders. The study identified semantic and psycholinguistic word classes that reflected systematic differences between men and women as well as differences in the way they use the same words. These differences have exposed gender identities of individuals which led to serious online threats such as placing their personal safety at risk. Women have been threatened and have faced exploitation as a result of the gender differences in terms of language use (Garimella & Mihalcea, 2016; Miller, 2013).

As much as social profiles lend authors an unprecedented authority to control their public persona, they equally pose equal threats. In many spheres of online interactions that expose gender identities of individuals, women have faced countless acts of discrimination directed towards them. The role that society plays in the upbringing of male and female children makes clear but unequal distinctions between men and women. It would thus be safe to suggest that women are victims entirely because of cultural socialisation.

Within this perspective, construction of gender should therefore be regarded as a discursive, interactive process in which individuals are both objects and subjects of gender definition through their physical and textual performances (Bailey et al., 2013). The nature and influence of an

individual's contribution within this expansive process are thus affected by both available cultural representations that compose the sources of mean-making and by existing powers.

2.3.3. Gendered Communication and Style of Language

Scholars have studied speech communities or cultures since the early 1970s. Wood (1994) provided insights on the systematic differences in the ways men and women use language. A speech community is defined as existing when a group of people shares a set of norms regarding communicative practices. This kind of culture exists when people share a mutual understanding about communication goals as well as strategies for enacting these goals and ways of construing communication (Wood, 1994 as cited in Verdeberer, 1995). Differences between male and female speech have been approached from various angles with different methodologies. The notion of gender difference is a popular one that has earned recognition in fields such as psychology, sociolinguistics and feminist studies.

Studies of gendered communication have shown that in many ways, men and women operate from incongruent moulds of goals and strategies of communication (Wood, 1994). This indicates that language does not only express cultural views of gender, but also constitutes individuals' gender identities. Communication practices that individuals use define them as masculine or feminine; individuals plainly create their own gender talk (Wood, 1994).

Michael et al. (2010) conducted a study on gendered differences in terms of language use and communication. The results showed that female presenters used many qualifiers and a higher frequency of affirmative words and did not show uncertainty. On the other hand, a male presenter made many false starts and repeated words. Contrary to popular belief, it is evident that men also tend to sound uncertain at times, a character normally given to women (Michael et al., 2010). This

means that although differences between women and men's ways of communication are distinct, it is possible that certain characteristics can exist in both genders.

Other studies have been conducted on gendered communication, investigating whether differences between the genders can still be observed (Emara, 2017; Martin, 2015; Merchant, 2012 & Nevala, 2015). Gender differences in communication styles put women at a disadvantaged position when they interact with other people. Women use impersonal, fact-oriented, less powerful language and few swear words. They speak more politely, are likely to thank, appreciate and are quick to apologise. They also tend to get upset by the violation of politeness strategies. Men, however, appear less concerned with acts of politeness and are more assertive in their tone. This leaves an impression that men are more confident and thus capable of earning higher statuses and being leaders. Women are then left in subordinate positions, mostly because of the way they present themselves, because of socialisation during childhood.

In a different study, Dabrowska (2013) investigated communication on virtual spaces (Facebook and YouTube) as well as the reasons for interactions. The study revealed differences in men and women's choices of language. Women and men used swearwords at varying lengths to express different emotions. The study also established that some men and women used language to either open up or be discreet with self-expression. Linguistic politeness and impoliteness were observed where female users used more polite words with the intention of maintaining positive relationships with their audiences. Men, on the other hand, were more interested in being resource providers; they are particularly interested in sharing information and opinions and thus use less impolite language, which is more semi-formal or informal language. This study was also aimed at identifying observable differences in language choices that male and female users of Facebook make use of during interactions.

The studies cited above have also examined, in greater detail, new emerging trends when writing on online platforms and how these writing styles differ between men and women. These studies were conducted outside the Namibian context, which this study explored.

2.3.4. Culture versus Gender Identity

Every social grouping consists of specific traditional practices and beliefs some of which have become harmful to a specific group, such as women. Scholars have attempted to distinguish between social identity as well as gender identity. Gender, in this regard, is defined as a stable constellation of attributes, beliefs, values and experiences residing in the individual that defines the self (Nematzadeh & Narafshan, 2020). Whereas gender identity refers to the dynamic configuration of the defining characteristics of a person (Huang, Kumar & Hu, 2018). While social identity is largely shaped by cultural and social factors, gender identity is centered more around the individual attributes of each person- the idea of either being masculine or feminine. However, these are also ascribed by society through the roles assigned to each particular individual or to a particular gender. Hence, gender is central in shaping and defining one's or people's identities in the sense that it may, at times, pose negative impacts on certain people (Huang et al., 2018; Nematzadeh & Narafshan, 2020).

In his study, Maluleke (2012) discussed the impacts of culture, tradition, custom, law and gender equality. His study outlined some harmful practices and how they are a violation of women's rights and that they perpetuate inequalities between men and women. Gender is reflected variously across areas of social science. In a specific social setting, culture legalises values, expectations, meanings and patterns of behaviour and communication of its society (Rhami, 2015, p. 02).

Based on what emerges on television, magazines or personal experiences for instance, various representations of gender issues are shown (Gu, 2013; Rhami, 2015). Women are assumed in home-making, care-giving and assigned to perform acquiescent roles. Contrarywise, men are seen as leaders and breadwinners. In most cultures, women take their spouses' names after marrying. Additionally, at certain schools, girls and boys are placed in gendered positions during student recruitment. Due to daily practices, such gender issues are considered normal or not even realised as gender identities (Rhami, 2015). Expectations on attributes and behaviours appropriate to women or men and their relations are shaped by culture.

Gender identities and gender relations are important aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived in the family, school, and the workplace and in the wider community (Gu, 2013; De La Rey, 1992). Gender functions as a classifying principle for society because of the cultural meanings given to being male or female. Most societies clearly outline labour divisions according to gender. The patterns of men and women's work, both in the household and in society are largely stipulated, and their explanations differ and change in various societies from time-to-time (De La Rey, 1992). Although this may be the case, the general pattern however indicates that women have less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal and limited influence over decision-making processes that shape their societies and lives. This pattern of disparity is both a human rights and development issue (Schalkwyk, 2000). When various forms of women expressions and the need for gender transformation are being discussed at forums, someone always claims that some values and practices will be difficult to change because it is tradition (De La Rey, 1992). Unfortunately for women, gender negotiations of this nature are still at large.

A study by De La Rey (1992) asserts that in the South African context, the concepts of culture and tradition were almost always applied to African ethnic groups so that in the popular political

discourse, tradition usually applies to the cultural continuities of one of the disenfranchised groups. The layered complexities in the ways that culture, tradition, race and gender interweave have become increasingly apparent in determining the daily lives and reflections of these lives. The way one chooses to live is an enactment of cultures and traditions which take gender specific forms. De La Rey (1992) revealed how deeply culture and tradition mould individuals' lives and reflections.

Being described as belonging to a particular race or social category meant that one had to share common cultural attributes with others in that category. Such label masked a variety of cultural influences, some of which are race, ethnicity and resources (money) (De La Rey, 1992; Gu, 2013; Schalkwyk, 2000). On top of that, some differences also arose. The significant milestones were accompanied by specific traditions and customs across various cultural identities; birth, puberty, adolescence, career choices as well as sexuality and sexual relationships (De La Rey, 1992). Clearly, societies set boundaries between men and men through assigning unequal roles to men and women which are justified with explanations that differ from time-to-time.

2.3.5. Cyber Language: Identifying Gender Boundaries

A plethora of studies has been dedicated to the description of differences between women and men in different linguistic situations. Studies conducted by Naveed, Aziz and Mehfooz, (2014); Estonia, Zelenkauskaitė and Herring (2008) investigated the notion of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) typography, which focused on differences and similarities of gender differences on CMC. CMC is regarded as a language that promotes abbreviations, contractions and structural reduction. This particular research has discovered corresponding similarities regarding gender differences in language use in CMC despite the fact that virtual spaces provide ideal conditions for one to hide their identity in that it conveys minimal physical clues. Cyber

spaces reveal significant typographic (writing and arranging words), orthographic (standardised way of using a particular system to write a language), morphological (study of word structure) as well as syntactic (rules of sentence construction) variabilities (Naveed et al., 2014).

Further differences have been observed between male and female use of language such as stylistic, lexical and discourse-pragmatic aspects of language (Merchant, 2006; Estonia et al., 2008;). These have been identified evidently through traditional modes of speaking and writing. One of the primary physical cues that users use to express themselves and convey information about their identities include non-standard language which may include non-verbal phenomena such as laughter (emoticons), volume (all caps) and behaviour (waves) (Estonia et al., 2008; Pahlavannezhad, Aklaghi & Ebrahimi, 2013).

Orosa and Lopez (2019) examined the use of language by political actors on social networks (Twitter) for communicative purposes. The study's findings indicated that there was an extensive use of a formal register. Political language appears as hybrid, heterogeneous and multimodal; within these aspects are an activation of orthographic, lexical, syntactic and coherence elements (Orosa & Lopez, 2019). The results also showed that the actors converge at specific moments, which led to a formation of sociolects and that there were no observed distinctions between the way men and women interacted on the social network.

Estonia et al. (2008) explored the relationship between various linguistic aspects of cyber language and gender. Their findings lean on the view that women post more messages than men, tend to use more reduced and contracted forms (homophones, phonetic spellings and clippings) more than males. In contrast, men omit punctuations more often and tend to post messages containing spelled out numbers. This analysis has demonstrated that users of language in cyber spaces create subtle

cues through which they communicate their gender identities (Naveed et al., 2014; Estonia et al., 2008).

Another study conducted by Staehr (2014) analysed how young rappers express their affiliates in popular cultural affiliation with rap music on YouTube. The researcher was particularly interested in analysing the linguistic practices and rap songs in relation to their sociolinguistic and the ethnography of their musical activities. The rappers employed signs (indexical) stereotypically associated with different cultural models (formal school) marks and linguistically vernacular style. This outcome, however, contrasts with global hip hop, which makes use of more hybrid and limitless linguistic practices (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2003; Pennycook, 2007 as cited in Staehr, 2014).

Gender is largely performed in online chat spaces which are inclusive of Facebook. Unconscious use of gendered discourse styles can reveal one's actual gender even when one is performing a different gender. In their study on the gender inconsistencies, Brouer, Stefanone, Badawy and Egnoto (2017) describes women as being disadvantaged language users. They are a passive gender waiting for men's attention in most cases to gain confidence, while males are shown ignoring, exploiting or directing women. Gender presentation might be affected by new features available on internet applications such as profile-building, amending personal information and staying anonymous; these features enable a wide range of activities for users in the virtual world, activities in which they are not able to take part offline (in their real lives) (Lomicka & Lord, 2016).

2.3.6. Socio-pragmatic Competence

The term social media functions as an umbrella that encompasses internet-based sites and services that function or promote social interactions between individuals who use them as part of their interpersonal communication (Jimma, 2017). Individuals further utilise content and language

differently on social media postings to self-promote, thereby formulating an impression management (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014; Siibak, 2010). Like Grahl (2013) has stated, the different types of media vary from service to service, which means that the different social media perform different functions; this affects the ways in which individuals engage in conversations on these media.

Globally ranked as one the mostly used social platforms, Facebook accounts for 71% of internet users which equates about 1.86 billion users worldwide (Slim & Hafedh, 2019). Research interest is now expanding due to its popularity and the possibilities it provides, such as sharing large amounts of data through communicative interactions. Above that, Facebook allows its users to send and receive prompt messages, making it an efficient means of information sharing, socialisation and adaptation to university life among students and instructors (Bowers-Campbell, 2008 as cited in Slim and Hafedh, 2019; Roblyer et al., 2010 & Yu et al., 2010;). A study conducted by Blattner and Fiori (2009) found that when students use Facebook, they earn an opportunity to improve their socio-pragmatic competence.

Sociopragmatics is culture-specific; it focuses on the relationships between linguistic action and social structure and is concerned with the influence of socio-contextual factors in language as a social action (Leech, 1883 as cited in Delahaie, 2015). Sociopragmatics is an aspect of language that relates to our everyday usage of language. Sociopragmatics is not simply concerned with mapping regular patterns of language usage in interactions, but it is also interested in understanding how those patterns are utilised and exploited in various interactions (Anderson & Aijmer, 2012). During authentic interactions, individuals involved in the conversation may implore and provide information about themselves, accommodate social meaning and relate to those with whom they

interact and at times may even negotiate interpersonal needs (Hymes, 1972 as cited in Abrams, 2013).

Sociolinguists have observed that the language of the youth on internet includes heavy use of vernacular, slang, preference for local varieties, fondness of slang, heavy use of taboo words and modification, clipping and syllable re-ordering (Ekert, 1997 as cited in Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003; Romaine, 1984). Socio-pragmatic competence does not only imply lexical knowledge, but also the ability to vary speech-act strategies according to the situation or social variables which are present during the act of communication (Ruggeri, 2018).

During online interactions, when a language travels, there is usually a tendency for varieties to be created because of contact between the foreign language and mother tongue. In computer-mediated communication, this leads to varieties of spelling and pronunciations that feature in Facebook posts (Onipede & Olotin, 2019).

Sociopragmatic competence therefore calls on individuals to not only stick to the appropriateness of a language, but to also provide readers or language users with new information which they should be able to successfully acquire and understand. Language users should derive a new type of knowledge from the information presented to them.

2.3.7. Social Networking and Gender Representations: Online and Offline Identities

Historically, cyber spaces were constructed as a world apart from offline (Leander & Mckim, 2003 as cited in Staehr, 2014). However, persistent engagement on social networks or cyber spaces as they are well-known has led to the integration of social media into people's everyday interactions leading to a breakdown of the artificial gap between offline and online contexts. This implies that people have begun to incorporate their online lives into their face-to-face orientations.

When this happens, individuals tend to perform various aspects of social identity simultaneously (Webb & Temple, 2015). Social aspects such as biological sex, sexual orientation, sexuality, and sexual identity all form part of social identity, and they interact frequently and co-occur with the aspect of gender. Other aspects such as race and class also shape gender performance often by limiting and shaping the ways in which individuals enact their feminine and masculine identities (Weatherall, 2002; Webb & Temple, 2015). This in itself is an influence on online and offline as well as gendered behaviour. This section looks at the ways in which individuals present their identities on social networks and how offline and online gender performances differ.

As it is known, on social media and in digital environments, identity is manufactured in and through languages, concepts and ideas, which are available to specific cultures, for specific meanings in a specified period (Cover & Doak, 2015). Certain practices of communication used offline and online and are both transmissional and ritualistic in nature are thus implicated in identity production. Unlike the real world which is limited by space and time, the cyber world is growing at a much faster pace and seems to contain no limits. This means that individuals can autonomously decide who they want to be on such platforms (Cover & Doak, 2015; Lee, 2017).

According to Cover and Doak (2015), many a times on social networks, many individuals tend to present themselves anonymously. Individuals refrain from revealing their original identities. In remaining anonymous, individuals maintain a sense of security of the consequences of any action that they may perform on the site. Zimbardo (1969) claimed that individuals who possess anonymous identities tend to be aggressive and contribute greatly to cyber bullying; the reason being that it will be impossible to trace an individual with a pseudonym and whose geographical location and contact details are fake (as cited in Cover & Doak, 2015). This anonymity poses a

threat which may not only affect victims on their social network lives, but it will also affect their wellbeing in the real worlds.

Additionally, in as much as anonymity allows one to be whoever they want to be and stay undiscovered, it may pose such extreme consequences to an individual (Lee, 2017). Self-expression is undoubtedly a necessity in identity construction; however, when the comfort and security of being different goes too far, an individual may experience identity conflict. This implies that if an individual portrays an anonymous identity that closely resembles an identity of the person whom they want to be, their health and wellness may be affected in such a way that their social network (anonymous) identity and original identity may end up conflicting (Lee, 2017;

Roos (2004) compared the modes of communication between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face interactions. The study found that for online conversations, there was less flow of information, less mutual understanding, more polarization and less solidarity. This denotes a high sense of uncertainty among interlocutors which tends to be accompanied by the absence of physical co-presence (Merchant, 2006). Meanwhile, face-to-face conversations turned out to be smoother and even integrated the online interactions (Roos, 2004). This also indicates that face-to-face conversations are truly multimodal in the sense that the interlocutors share physical space and exchange information with a rich content (Merchant, 2006).

The self is created through dynamic processes that are inherently social in nature (Blumer, 1969 as cited in Caffrey, 2017). There is what is referred to as a ‘shifting array of accessible selves’ which individuals may choose to portray depending on the particular course of interaction. This means that each particular self is only useful and only achieves its central existence once it is situated in an activity (Caffrey, 2017).

Various features of online systems and the timing of the messages promote distorted self-presentations by reducing immediate accountability (DeAndrea et al., 2012). A study concerning deceptive communication showed that many a times, users of online date-finding systems suspected that other users frequently misrepresent themselves (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006 as cited in DeAndrea et al., 2012). The cause of these misrepresentations was the self-administered measures of social desirability which implied that when an individual possesses characteristics that deviate from the socially desirable norms, biased self-reports were produced (DeAndrea et al., 2012).

On another note, it is generally crucial that one knows the identity of the interlocutor in order to understand and evaluate the interaction especially for gender, which is conventionally associated with different norms, roles and communicative styles in most human cultures (Herring & Martison, 2004). This is simply to prevent deceptive identity and gender performances which are unarguably easier to carry on text-based computer-mediated communication as compared to face-to-face interactions (Merchant, 2006). Although individuals may at times indicate that they are male or female, the fact that social networks allow participants to freely self-present through selective posting indicates that there is less reliability because the internet attracts strangers from different geographical location and with whom the individual has slim, if any, chances of ever meeting them (Herring & Martison, 2004).

Through the ‘Turing game’, Herring and Martison (2004) assessed the authenticity of deceptive gender performance. This occurs when an individual attempts to behave like another gender. From the game, it was observed that contestants produced stereotypes whenever they attempted to pass as the other gender or when they persisted in giving off stylistic cues at word and sentence levels for their real-life gender (Herring & Martison, 2004). This has only led to a high rate of errors in

identifying the gender of each contestant. It is thus safe to conclude that stylistic gender differences are not as accessible as conventional beliefs about gender.

In terms of language usage, despite attempts to switch genders, evidence has proven that males and females use language differently (Hall, 1996; Herring, 1993, Hills, 2000; Kendall, 1998; Thomson & Murachver, 2001 as cited in Herring & Martison, 2004). While men make use of assertions, self-promotion, rhetorical questions, sexual references, sarcasm, challenges and insults, women choose to use hedges, justifications, expressions of emotions, personal pronouns and supportive and polite language. This shows how the unconscious use of gender discourse styles reveals one's actual gender even when they attempt to portray another gender.

Writing online allows individuals to 'author oneself' to sustain a narrative identity (Merchant, 2006). Individuals are then provided with an opportunity to explore different stories of the self. This implies that individuals can then choose to be who they want to be online- even if it means forging identities while engaging in their online interactions with others.

In the ultimatum, for one's identity to reveal, there is a call for interactions with other individuals. Individuals' are only socially identifiable through engagements and associations with others. Phillip (2009 as cited in Bailey et al., 2013, p. 93)" states:

Identity is social not merely in the sense of being relational; it is also social in the sense that it is negotiated. We do not only stride into the social world as wholly formed individuals. Nor are we putty in the hands of the collective. Instead, we become who we are in relation to others, as others become who they are in relation to us.

This implies that identity not only relates to one as an individual, but further relates to the understanding of who one is, how they relate to others and to the world in which they live. Identity

is deeply embedded in socio-cultural context: any change that occur within the cultural sphere is a potential influencer of every individual's identity. This encourages individuals to re-shape and re-organise their self-definition.

2.3.8. Research Gap

Scholars including: Abrams, 2013; Bamaiyi (2010); Brouer et al (2017); Garimella & Mihalcea (2016); Lomicka and Lord, 2016; Martin (2015); Merchant, 2006; Webb and Temple, 2015; and Nevala (2015) have examined issues that pertain to this study and these include issues of gender, language, self-presentations on social media as well as socio-pragmatic roles of the youth. All of the research findings are of great value, but shortcomings remain. Researchers have not explored these issues from a Namibian perspective; hence, the provoked interest of this study.

2.4. Chapter Summary

This Chapter discussed the three theories: The Linguistic Appraisal Theory, the Difference Approach and the Dominance Approach, and how they may be merged and employed as a theoretical framework for this study. Relevant literature pertaining to the theme of the study was presented. This chapter also identified the gap that stemmed from the reviewed literature. The next chapter will review the methodology that was used in this study.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed literature relevant to the present study. This chapter (Chapter 3) outlines the research methodology providing the relevance of qualitative approach in realising the research objectives. It considers aspects such as design, population, sample, instruments used in data collection as well as data analysis and ethical consideration.

3.2. Research Design

Research design is the description of the procedures that need to be followed when conducting research. Griffie (2012) defines it as “an operating model or blueprint for a research project, which accounts for internal reasoning (causality) and external reasoning (generalizability)” (p. 44). The research design stipulates the parts of a research paper, how they are arranged and how they function. The present study employed a qualitative exploratory approach for data collection. This is because the researcher intended to explore qualitative attributes which included the context of the aspects of cyber and offline language and the contexts and actions of the individuals. The researcher also sought the required insights on the participants’ experiences on social media platforms rather than merely attempting to acquire a representative sample.

3.3. Population

The population of the study included a total number of 160 post-graduate students from the University of Namibia Main Campus whose ages ranged from 23-40 and who were, at the time of the study, active Facebook users.

3.4. Sample

Criterion sampling was used for the present study. This is a type of purposive sampling which involves searching for cases or individuals who meet some predetermined feature of importance (Suri, 2011). This study focused exclusively on individuals who actively use language to engage in conversational interactions, in the process revealing self-presentations as either men or women; hence, shaping and reshaping their identities through these interactions on Facebook. From the population, a sample of 12 males and 12 females was drawn, and their Facebook walls were analysed in the study. The sample was selected on the criteria that these were post-graduate students at the University of Namibia. They were in the age range of 23-40 years, and they actively engaged or initiated conversational interactions on Facebook.

3.5. Research Instruments

For the first part, the researcher collected information regarding the participants' activities from their Facebook walls. The information was downloaded as raw data for the aim of achieving accurate results, but it was later coded and analysed via netnography. For the second part, the researcher conducted post-Netnographic one-on-one interviews with the participants to acquire in-depth information. These involved purposeful discussions between the researcher and each participant which were used to gather in-depth, valid and reliable data relevant to the research objectives. The interview questions were semi-structured (open-ended questions) in order to allow for feedback and additional information.

3.6. Procedure

Due to the COVID-19 epidemic and its restrictions, the researcher was only able to access participants via their respective class WhatsApp groups and Microsoft Teams. The researcher then

provided a brief introduction to the students about the study and shared with them the information sheets and consent forms. The information sheet provides a brief description of the study, its aims and ethical considerations; whereas the consent form entails request for permission to access the participants' Facebook pages as well as consent to be interviewed. In the consent form, participants had to provide their Facebook usernames to enable the researcher to send them friend requests in order to gain access to their Facebook walls. Subsequently, participants signed the consent forms electronically and sent them back to the researcher. Once consent had been granted, the researcher then accessed participants' Facebook walls and analysed the postings (posted in the time period between January 2018 and June 2019) using Netnography.

The researcher actively studied participants' pages for a period of one month to ensure effective data collection and analysis. Subsequently, participants who had consented to the interviews were interviewed. Given the circumstances during the period of data collection, physical meetings were temporarily prohibited; there was no access to the university premises; hence, it was impossible to conduct one-on-one interviews. Interviews were therefore conducted electronically, either telephonically or through the Zoom application depending on participants' preferences. Similar to the consent forms, declaration of the participant was also signed electronically and referred back to the researcher. Interview sessions lasted for 15-20 minutes; furthermore, each participant had authority to choose their preferred interview timeslot. The researcher also sought permission to voice-record participants during the interview sessions; alternatively, the researcher resorted to note-taking. After data harvesting was completed, the researcher unfriended the participants.

3.7. Data Analysis

The researcher employed the method of Netnography, a qualitative research method used to study people's social activities and encounters on social networking sites (Ahmed, 2018). Netnography

is a specialised form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today's social worlds, (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography is an established flexible approach to qualitative research which allows scholars to explore and explain rich, diverse and cultural worlds, as well as to understand individuals' virtual worlds (Kozinets, 2015; Kozinets et al., 2017). Netnography is closely related to other qualitative research methodologies for the online environment such as digital ethnography, online, virtual as well as cyber ethnography (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018).

Netnography examines groupings, gatherings or collections of people which emerge from the internet; it allows one to examine interactions resulting from internet connections or through computer-mediated communications. Hence, it requires interpretation of human communications under realistic contexts, and situations of interaction when human communications are shaped by new technologies (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography is used to describe and draw conclusions about what people say or think, by analysing their online interactions and conversations.

Unlike ethnography, Netnography can be conducted in an unobtrusive manner that offers the researcher a view of an individual's life. It approaches cultural phenomena in their local contexts, providing windows on naturally occurring behavior (Kozinets et al., 2017; Ferreira, 2015). It exposes certain aspects such as emotional matters, for example, disclosure, honesty, trust, reciprocal support, expressions of affiliation and of intent to be social. Netnographic data are often described as rich and naturalistic with the ability to depict the lived realities of individuals, (Kozinets, 2015). The data generates thick descriptions through grounded interpretations, providing a detailed presentation of the lived online experience of cultural members.

The collected data were coded according to the themes that emerged from the results of the study. Data coding refers to the process of systematically reorganising raw data into a format that is easy

to analyse (Neuman, 2014). For this study, the researcher performed a netnographic analysis of the participants' Facebook walls. Afterward, content analysis of the data collected from the interviews was done, and the information was presented in a report format. These gave rise to conclusions and recommendations.

3.8. Research Ethics

Ethics refer to an ethos, 'way of life' and social norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (Akaranga & Makau, 2016 p. 1). Research ethics are a branch of established rules and guidelines which professional researchers apply to protect the dignity of their subjects and publish well the researched information (Fouka & Matzorou, 2011 as cited in Akaranga & Makau, 2016). For this particular study, research ethics were considered towards participants. All participants were contacted to give their consent beforehand in order to partake in the two parts of the study. Firstly, consent to access and analyse participants' Facebook walls was sought. Secondly, participants were also asked to give consent in order to participate in the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed and maintained for all participants. That is, participants were given pseudonyms, and their data and real names were not shared nor revealed. Participants were also informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without negative consequences, should they have felt the need to discontinue. The researcher further sought ethical clearance from the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Committee. Collected data which was used entirely and solely for the purpose of the intended study.

3.9. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the methodology of the study. The population, sample and the instruments for data collection as well as the research ethics were identified. The next chapter will discuss the research findings.

Chapter 4

Findings and Discussions

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the present study which are based on the study's objectives. Specifically, the study assessed the socio-pragmatic competence of the youth on social media; examined the link between language, culture, gender identity and social networking sites, and finally explored how individuals maintain the socially conceived gender identities on social networking sites. The data collected was categorised into different themes. The findings are presented in two sections according to the methods of data collection and analysis which are netnography and one-on-one interviews. For the analysis, the data was already available on online platforms so the researcher easily accessed participants' information. The collected data was then presented in two sections: findings from Facebook walls and the interview discussions.

4.2. Facebook Walls

Findings from the participants' walls were not only restricted to differences between men and women's speech in terms of grammatical features, but the study also ventured into other possible gender bias which could be transmitted through linguistic codes. On Facebook walls, the researcher analysed participants' walls, consisting of usernames, profile pictures and status updates, based on the following key aspects: grammatical features (verbosity, formality, slang, use of questions); politeness; intention for conversing; gender identification; gender discrimination and gender bias as informed by the Linguistics Appraisal Theory (White, 2015) as well as the

Dominance Approach (Maltz & Borker, 1982). The researcher presented original excerpts as copied from participants' Facebook walls.

No. of participants	Facebook wall analysis	Interviews
12 Females	12	4
12 Males	12	4

4.2.1. Remaining Discreet Online

A total number of 24 Facebook walls were analysed. The researcher analysed Facebook profile pictures, usernames and status updates of these individuals. In this section, the themes employed in the participants' Facebook profiles; profile pictures, usernames and language usage are discussed.

Profile pictures and usernames are constantly updated due to the users' whims. This may also depend on how active or inactive individuals are on Facebook and how often they feel the urge to change their names and pictures. For the profile pictures, three users updated their profiles at least thrice in a period of one week. About 95% (n=23) users used their real names for their Facebook profiles and kept profile pictures of themselves or their friends or relatives. All male participants kept their real names which indicates self-consciousness in male Facebook users. By identifying themselves with their real names, male users showed that they are more comfortable using their real names in online settings and any platforms that reveal their true self online.

Furthermore, some individuals may use their real names on Facebook for ease of identification by friends or to easily befriend people on social media platforms that they may know in person. This claim supports Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz's study (2017), which was conducted on first-year students at university level. The study established that first-year students are new on Facebook; therefore, there is a need to use their real names in order to make friends. This, however, does not

apply to the participants of the present study as they are postgraduate students, old users of Facebook who have already made enough friends on such platforms.

On the contrary, female users of social media present a different impression. One female participant's profile picture was of a teddy bear. The same individual also used a unisex name, so it was impossible to identify their gender identity at first. A possible explanation for the use of a teddy bear in this regard could be the need to remain anonymous. Anonymity refers to the state of one's identity being unknown. Anonymity implies that one is nameless, non-identifiable, unreachable and untraceable (Sarda, Sotirakopoulos & Monaghan, 2019). Individuals may choose to use anonymous names on Facebook so that they protect themselves from cyber harassment as well as cyberbullying. Additionally, choosing an animated or non-living image for a profile picture may be an indication that an individual is not comfortable with self-disclosure in terms of their physical appearances as this may make them prone to cyber bullying.

4.2.1. Vulgar Language: Who is Meaner?

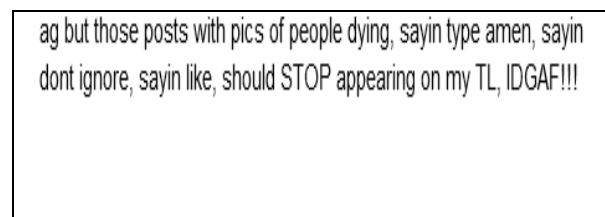


Figure 1. Vulgar language

A significant use of slang was observed which comprises mostly of swear words and vulgar language. Vulgarity refers to the use of vulgar, derogatory, profane or swear and curse words (Cachola, Holgate, Preotiuc-Pietro, & Li, 2018). Vulgarity is often used to express emotions in language; this choice of language can either express negative sentiments or intensify the sentiment present in a post (Cachola et al., 2018; Muhanovic, Babic & Latic, 2018). Vulgar language can

also be used to entertain, attract, as well as influence audiences (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2009; Muhanovic et al., 2018).

Pinker (2007 as cited in Cachola et al., 2018) outlines groups of swear words into five categories namely; abusive (intent to offend or cause psychological harm); cathartic (used in response to pain); dysphemistic (intent to convey negative sentiments); emphatic (to draw attention) and idiomatic (used for no purpose or to signal informality). Obscene language is generally considered as the strongest clue of harassment on web spaces (Maisto, Pelosi, Vietri & Vitale, 2017); however, it must be clarified that the use and presence of swear words in a post does not always indicate the presence of offensive behaviour.

For the present study, the researcher observed that a large number of participants (75% of which 50% are male) use swear words to fulfil the different functions as outlined by Pinker (2007 as cited in Cachola et al., 2018). A total number of six male and three female participants used swear words in their Facebook updates or comments. Figure 1 above presents the use of derogatory and profane language through the use of the abbreviations (*IDGAF*). The abbreviation *IDGAF* stands for '*I don't give a fuck*'; an impolite way of saying '*I do not care*'. Considering that the given number of male participants who use swear words is higher than that of female participants, it would then be safe to conclude that in many situations and on various social media platforms, profane language is most likely to be associated with or tends to be used by males. Emara (2017) and Martin (2015) also agree with this finding, claiming that men are more likely to be direct in self-expressions without taking into consideration the violation of or usage of politeness strategies. This makes them appear less polite and rude on social networks creating social distance in the relationships they have with their audiences.

As Cachola et al. (2018) state, slang, profane and derogatory language choices are used for different functions. Profanity can be used with comical or satirical purposes and bad words are often just an expression of strong emotions (Maisto et al., 2017). Participants use swear words in expressing positive emotions on Facebook. Facebook users sometimes use profane and derogatory phrases which are generally considered inappropriate to convey a positive message. While the language choice shown in Figure 1 denotes disrespectful and offensive behaviour, Figure 2 below represents the use of profane language and swear words to fulfil the emphatic and idiomatic functions.

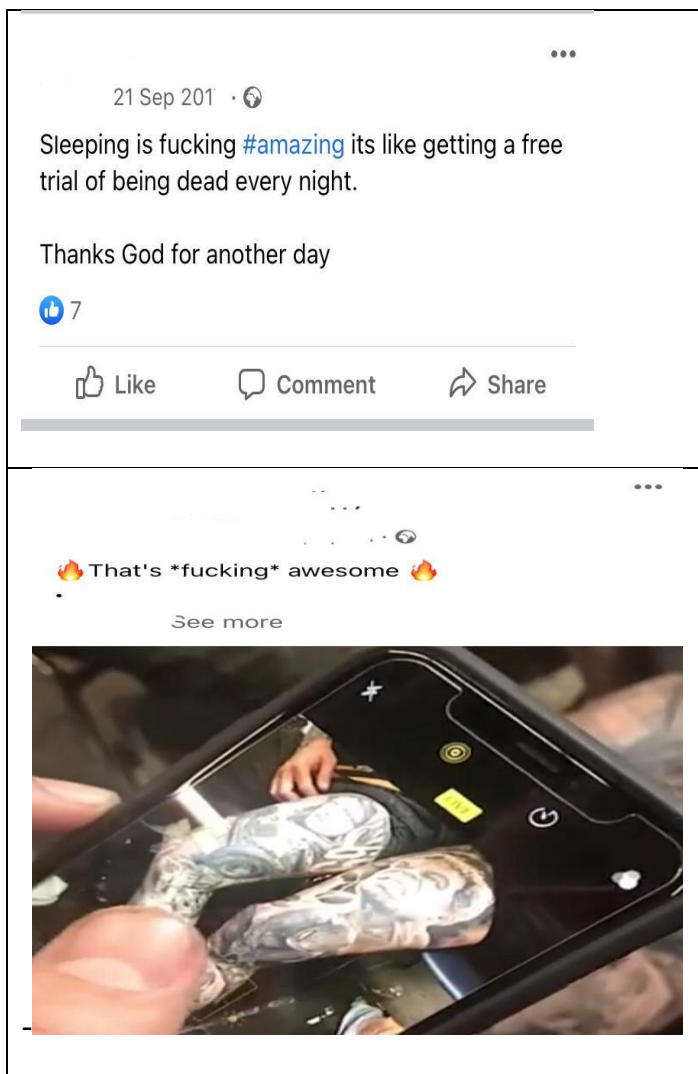


Figure 2. Vulgar language

The posts shown in Figure 2 were derived from Facebook walls of two female participants. It is evident that the choice of language used denotes the use of profane language to convey positive sentiments and non-offensive intentions. Female participants are more cautious than male participants in their use of slang and swear words in the sense that they mostly, if not always, use vulgar language to express positive intentions and feelings unlike men who use vulgar language to further express negative emotions such as frustration (for example, as shown in Figure 1.) Based on this evidence, the researcher can suggest that women tend to present themselves online in similar ways as in face-to-face contexts; ways that conform to stereotypical gender-specific expectations such as those highlighted in the Dominance Approach as well as the Politeness Theory. Women are typically careful when saying or posting inappropriate information sometimes with fear of societal rejection, or sometimes to retain their reputation.

Studies conducted by Reyes, De Vera and Medriano (2018) explored the functions of language use in posting on Facebook among Fillipino ESL learners. The study found that most respondents set their own preferred language as a default language in social networking sites; social media grants individuals the freedom to use standard or informal language as well as polite or impolite language. The findings presented in figures 1 and 2 are proof that individuals indeed select their preferred language when interacting on Facebook. About 18 of the 24 participants employed preferred language which is either formal or informal language (slang, vulgar, impolite words) without taking into consideration societal norms and expectations surrounding linguistic patterns and not paying attention to stereotypes.

Through these language choices, men and women are therefore more expressive of their emotions and feelings in virtual spaces as opposed to physical environments. Technological advancements which bred social media have the capacity to enact culture by granting permission to individuals

to extend their rights as men and as women, in the process redesigning and reconstructing society's meaning of identity and gender expectations which not only involve physical roles and behavioural patterns, but also linguistic patterns assigned to the male and female genders.

Furthermore, Muhanovic et al. (2018) also analysed the gender differences and reasons for the use of profanity on Facebook. Profanity refers to obscene language including taboo and swear words, which are considered inappropriate in social settings; in some situations, they are totally unacceptable (Muhanovic et al., 2018). It also involves the use of sudden unfiltered expressions of emotions. The study concluded that different individuals make use of swear words depending on the situation and context in which they are (engaging). Obscene language was commonly observed in relation to the expression of emotions such as anger, frustration or surprise (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008 as cited in Muhanovic et al., 2018).

The post shown in Figure 1 represents an example of unfiltered language; its use may be regarded as a sign of how strongly one allows himself or herself to feel about a certain situation, in this regard, expressing negative emotions. Hence, the strength of an emotion conveyed corresponds to the strength of the type of language used. In Figure 1, the usage of the acronyms may breed the assumption that identity is volatile and relative; therefore, individuals change their identities to suit the needs of a given moment. This is done through revealing various personalities which represent different layers of the self. Furthermore, their choice of language also contributes to the way people modify themselves when interacting with others on social media platforms as previous scholars affirm (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008 as cited in Muhanovic et al., 2018).

Another study which explored profanity and dishonesty on Facebook found that the language that people use in their daily lives and on Facebook engagements can reveal hidden aspects of their personalities, cognitions and behaviours (Muhanovic et al., 2018). For the present study, it was

observed that about 75% (n=18) of the participants used vulgar language to express themselves and air their opinions whilst engaging on Facebook; this is in accord with the findings from Muhanovic et al. (2018).

The remaining 25% (n=5) participants did not use inappropriate language. They made use of informal language (slang), but they did not use swear words nor vulgar language. The reason for this may be linked to the relationship that each individual has with his or her audience. For example, an individual who befriends or is befriended by his or her employer on Facebook is likely to be thoughtful of the type of language to use online in order to maintain a good reputation. On another note, participants in the present study are adult post-graduate students and are likely to have mostly outgrown the use of slang.

Overall, it was observed that more males than females employ vulgar language to express negative, rather positive sentiments. This indicates an overt display of power of the male gender. Female users of Facebook use vulgar language, but mostly to convey positive opinions which indicates inferiority and insubordination. On the other hand, the fact that women also use vulgar language alongside their male counterparts promotes the aims of the Discourse Linguistics Appraisal Theory which advocates for linguistic approval of either gender without any prejudices.

4.2.2. Netspeak (Webspeak)

The present study has further revealed the use of newly coined words and phrases during their Facebook interactions. Male and female participants use what is known as Webspeak or NetSpeak. According to Dahlstrom, (2012), Netspeak is an illiterate way of typing and a way to massacre a language. With this form of language, individuals use informal language through short forms, acronyms and abbreviations and neologisms when they interact on social networking sites. They thus shorten words, form words with numbers and use the newly coined words and terms most

especially slang. They also refrain from or use less correct punctuation marks (Dahlstrom, 2012). Netspeak is not considered linguistic vandalism of standard language, but rather as a new kind of interaction; a genuine medium which is evolving with its own systematic rules to suit new circumstances (Adeeb, 2016).

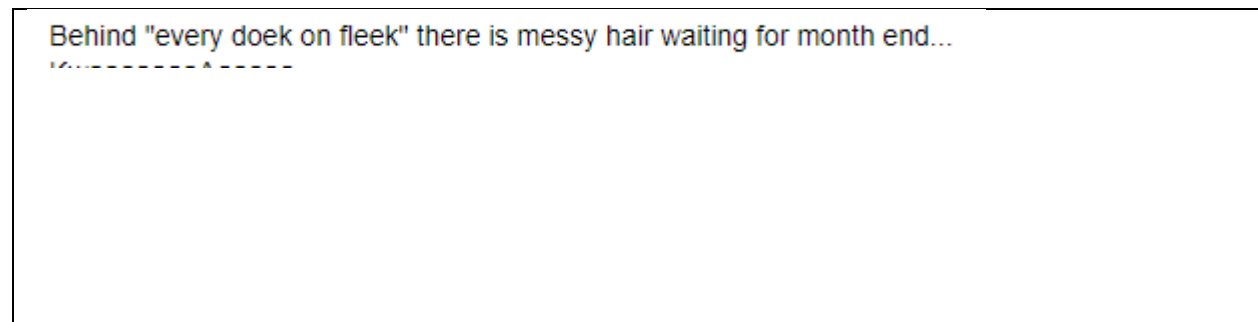


Figure 3. Neologisms

Neologisms were utilised on Facebook posts. Neologism refers to a new word or phrase created for defining a new (unknown before) object or for expressing a new notion (Onyedum, 2012). Neologisms include new meanings of words and collocations which might be conveyed by old and known words. Most neologisms employ a combination of existing elements, and many of these new forms are clear variations of well-known words and phrases. For instance, only six participants used neologisms on their Facebook walls. As shown in Figure 4, the use of newly coined words on social networks may infer linguistic change. Change in societal linguistic patterns means that individuals no longer abide by society's expectations in terms of what language choices to employ. For men, it is more of an extended space and freedom to exercise one's linguistic choice on an even more uncluttered platform; the virtual environment. Whereas for women, the freedom to experience what has been regarded male language disproves the Dominance Approach whose tenets underscore that women and men have been socialised into different classes and that men have always been regarded dominant and thus have more rights than women. Women depended

entirely on social approval with regards to the physical roles as well as patterns of behaviour, including language patterns. In the era of social media, however, women are granted freedom to express themselves via their preferred language choice without being looked down upon and criticised.

In his study, Adeeb (2016) reported that neologisms were mostly used by early teenagers who like to innovate words and perform in their day-to-day conversations. Adeeb asserts that acronyms, abbreviations and short-word forms on cyber spaces are utilised on social networks like Facebook in order to save time, space in writing and effort. On the contrary, the findings of this study do not agree with Adeeb's findings as there was a reported use of neologisms by post-graduate students on social media interactions. The use of neologisms may not necessarily be associated with age, but perhaps with the unfolding changes in today's era. New advancements bring about change in many aspects, including culture, gender performance and language use by young people and adults.

In this study, the researcher observed that Facebook users used newly coined slang words in their Facebook posts. About 92% (n=11) female participants posted on their wall a picture, video or post which includes the abbreviation *WCW (Women Crush Wednesday)*, as presented in Figure 4 below.

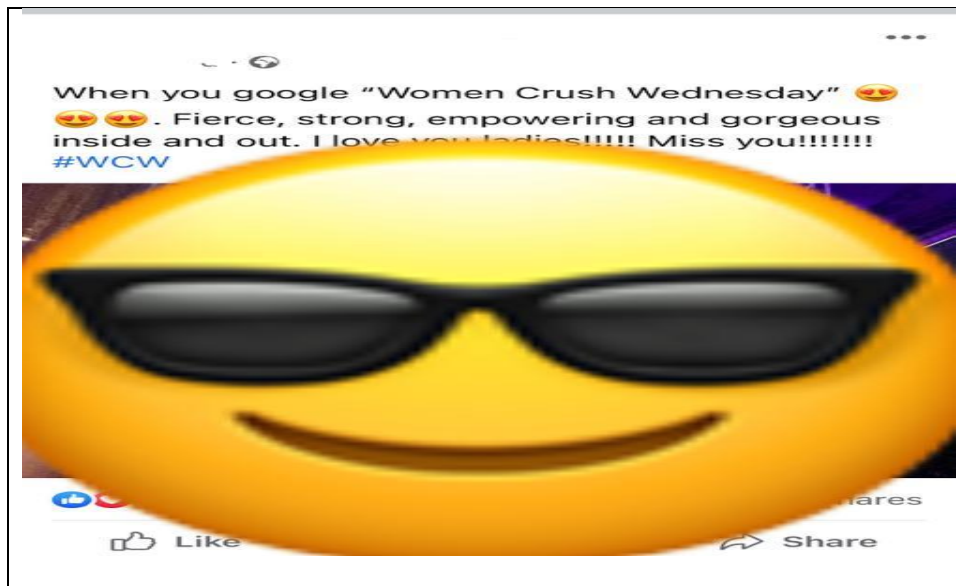


Figure 4. Abbreviations

Based on this, it would be safe to assume that women's choice of language denotes admiration for oneself and of others and can be seen as a form of appreciation. This also shows that women express themselves openly and tend to self-disclose in terms of emotions and feelings, revealing their personalities online. This helps us understand Lakoff's claim that women tend to show emotions during conversations. Furthermore, the idea that women can freely employ any choice of language (even that which was traditionally preferred for males) on virtual spaces as they do in physical spaces without being criticised by society strongly supports the aim of the Difference Theory which is in advocacy for equality between men and women in relation to the societal expectations attributed to each gender. The Difference theory aims at equating women and men, in terms of the socially assigned gender roles as well as the linguistic choices allocated to them.



Figure 5. Abbreviations

Furthermore, approximately seven abbreviations were identified on the Facebook walls of female participants. All the participants incorporated the abbreviation in Figure 5 above, [LOL]. In Figure 5 above, the abbreviation LOL[*laugh out loud*] is originally designed to be used in humorous and hilarious situations. Sometimes, it is also used as '*lots of love*' to show appreciation or affection. This choice of language is ideal for written rather than verbal conversations. The use of abbreviations may also denote what is known as homophily; the relationship formed when socially connected individuals use the same language. Gender is correlated with linguistic resources and the composition of social networks.

Posts by both male and female users included the use of short forms. Only 34% (n=8) of both male and female participants used short forms as shown in Figure 6 below.

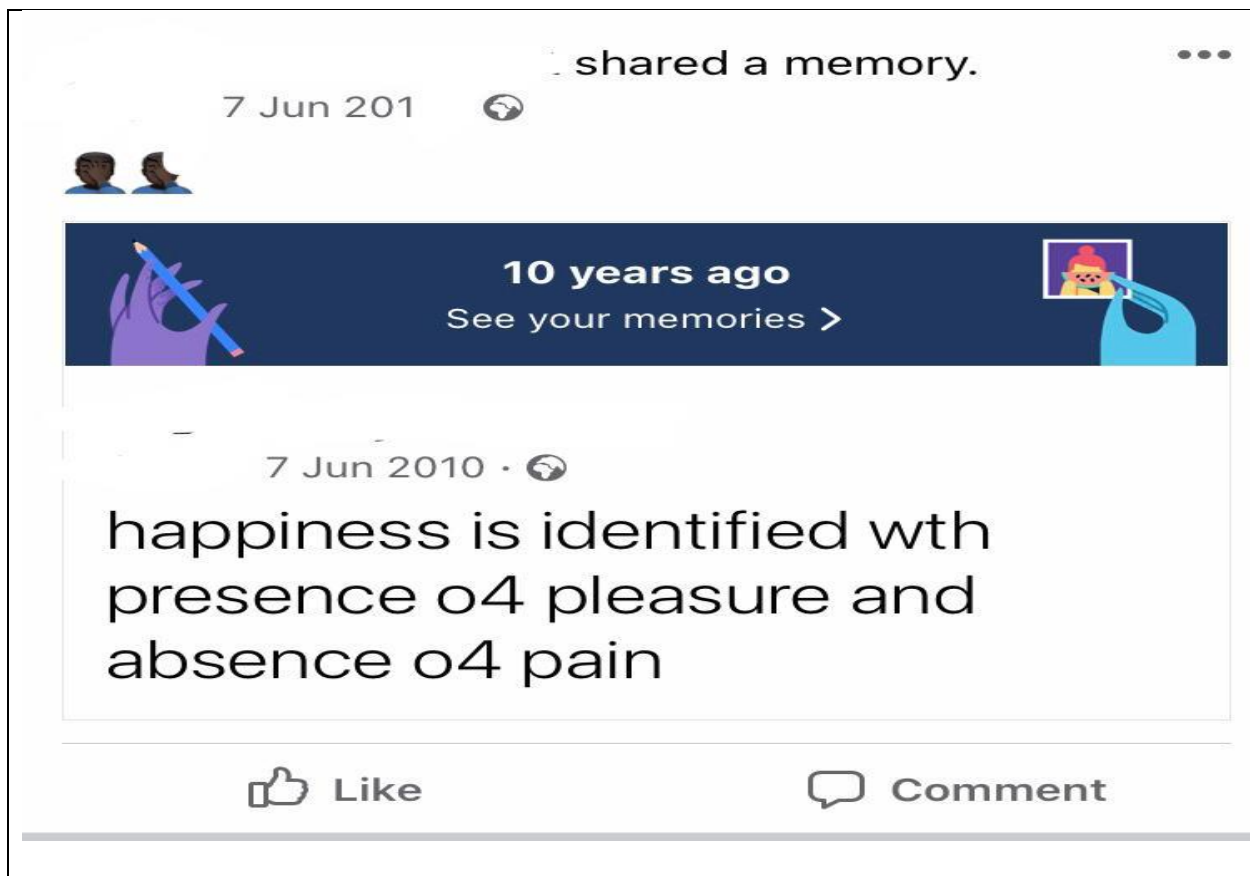


Figure 6. Short forms

Using short forms can symbolise laziness in the use of language, which means that individuals are more inclined to use informal language on Facebook since short forms are inapt in spoken form. Furthermore, shortforms may indicate the freedom granted by social networks to each individual to write, act and criticise any topic without social and legal questions or any gender stereotypes. Acceptance of social media into society has extended men and women's rights to present themselves in different ways as they please, in the process making extensions and modifying the different layers of their identities.

4.2.3. Politeness

Previous research has shown that women can be polite and skilful in their conversations. They compliment or praise a lot and use various communication strategies to establish and maintain relationships (Shaari, 2016). Women are generally more cooperative, more socio-emotional in

orientation and more facilitating in conversational interactions. In their conversations, they aim at building good rapport and affiliation with their interlocutors. The style and choice of language that women employ is a mere result of their upbringing and socialisation process (Van Han, 2014; Shaari, 2016).

Similarly, the present study obtained findings in line with the findings in Shaari (2016). For example,

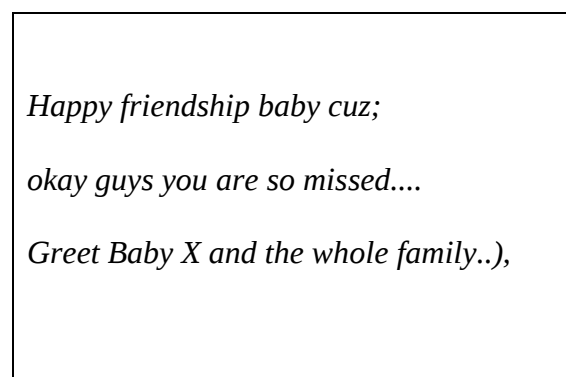


Figure 7. Politeness

According to Thurlow (2003), girls normally prioritised friendships in terms of personal qualities and understanding. Personal relationships involve a lot of emotions which women have possessed since their younger years. In contrast, boys have had instrumental, action-centred relationships (Coleman & Hendry, 1999 as cited in Shaari, 2016; Thurlow, 2003). Similarly, in the figure above, women's posts symbolise the need for affiliation and association. Just like in physical spaces, women's desire to establish relationships is visible in the ways they associate and link with other people. Their sense of politeness makes it easier to approach others and be approachable. Politeness results from verbal realisation of proper behaviour which is developed by societies to facilitate interaction among people. Brown and Levinson (1987) and Lakoff (1973) define it as an attempt to establish, maintain and save face during conversation. Contrary to their male counterparts, female individuals are more eager to take into account the feelings of others. A polite

individual is one who is able to emphasise shared attitudes and values in a way that does not intrude on other individuals.

In the present study, the researcher observed that about 64% (n=7) of the female participants used polite language. This is in the sense that when conversing or posting, they sometimes use intimate language (to show affection), express their feelings and emotions as shown in Figure 7 above and when they offer suggestions during their interactions on Facebook. For male participants, more than 50% of the participants showed the characters stated by Idowu (2018). Male Facebook users employ language with the aim of conveying a message by making an order or simply addressing an issue in a way that does not disrupt their autonomy concerning self-expression as seen in Figure 1. In engaging in conversational debates, men tend to boldly disagree and declare their independence of thought, whilst women are more less likely to disagree and rather attempt to enter into negotiations (Tannen, 2007).

4.2.4. Hiding Behind Nice Words

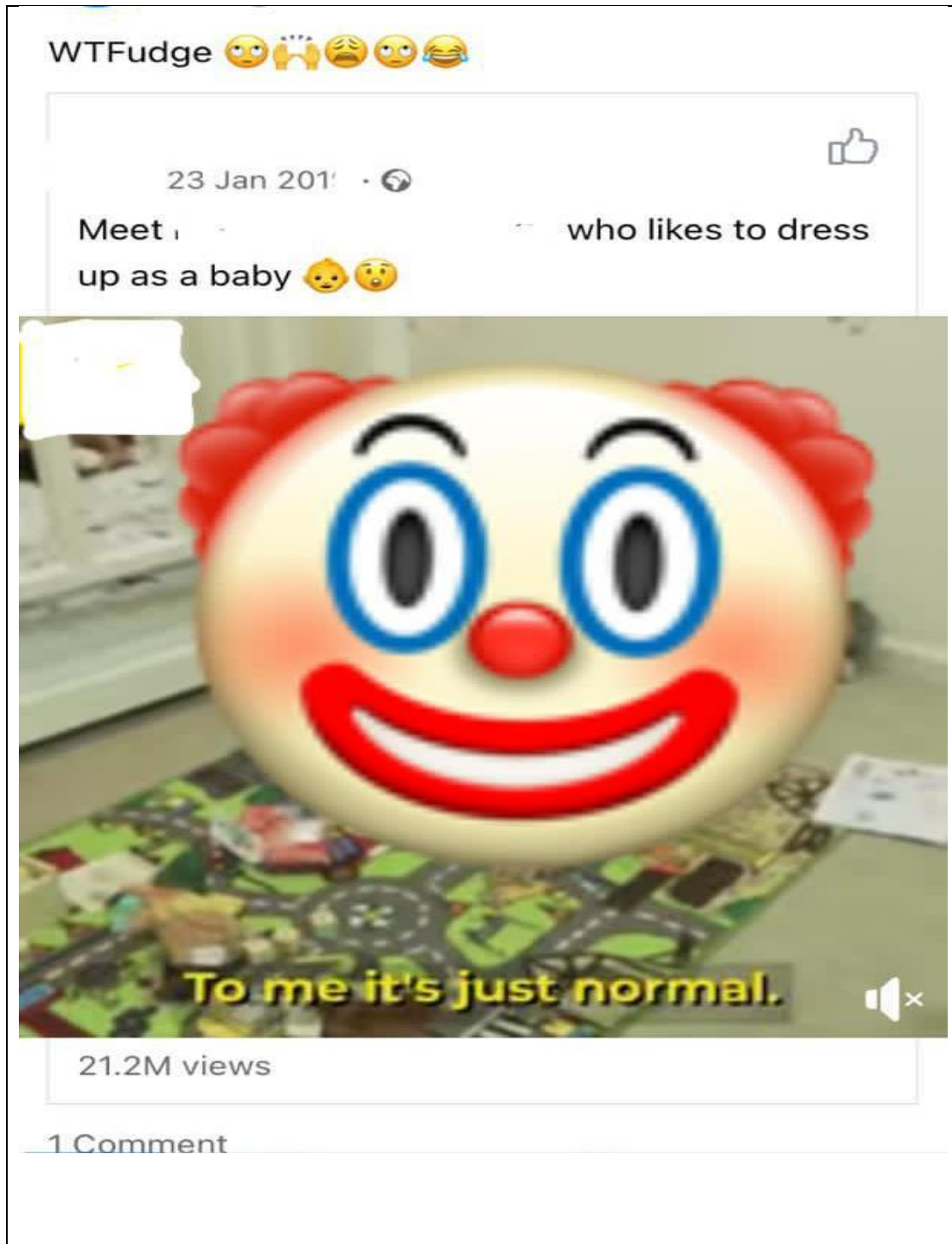


Figure 8. Euphemisms

The use of euphemisms is an effective means of avoiding obscenity and profanity in a society where such is considered taboo. The basic motive for euphemisms is for safe-ground interpersonal interaction (Noor, 2014). Effective use of euphemisms therefore require one to behave politely by hiding factors that may be sensitive or offensive to others, which may cause uncomfortable communication and hence hinder establishment of relationships. People employ politeness strategies because they sometimes feel uncomfortable talking about certain subjects, acting in a certain way or to not offend people they are speaking to. They thus employ positive and negative faces with the former being the desire to appear in a favourable light to others and the latter as the desire to do as one wishes regardless of others' opinions (Jimoh, 2015).

Furthermore, people use modified versions of obscene language, so that it appears less offensive. As shown in Figure 8, the use of '*fudge*' is what Lakoff (1975) refers to as a face-saving strategy. When one makes use of euphemisms and modified vulgar words; it is referred to as positive face. A writer may maintain formality via politeness by employing such words with the aim of effectively maintaining a distance between the speaker and the taboo concept. The present study found that only 8% (n=9) of female participants used modified vulgar concepts. No male participants made use of modified vulgar words; they instead used vulgar words in their original forms as depicted in Figure 1.

One of the reasons for employing face-saving strategies may be that women prefer to always be in a socially positive light. Unlike their male counterparts, women are more willing to remain in good spirit with their online audiences the same way as they do with their offline audiences during interactions (Drabowska, 2013). Since they are naturally caregivers, it is assumed that they could pass on the politeness onto children and instil in them the various politeness strategies (Lakoff, 1975 as cited in Jimoh, 2015).

Usage of euphemisms also provides an impression that women are careful in representing themselves on social networks. This implies that when they express themselves, they are cautious in the choice of language depending also on the audience. Hence, they hold the power to display their desired layer of the self which may be different or similar to their offline personae.

4.2.5 Gendered Language



Figure 9. Gendered language

It is evident that the way men use language differs from the way women use it. Moreover, the choices of language employed by the two genders also differs in many ways. Men post longer messages (Herring & Martison, 2004); men express their opinions strongly, use harsh language and hold an adversarial orientation towards their interlocutors. As for women, they tend to use a massive number of emoticons, symbols and short forms of words to express their emotions and interact on social media (Brunet & Schmidt, 2009 as cited in Shaari, 2016).

Approximately 50% (n=6) of the male participants posted or commented on issues related to women. Figure 9 above presents a Facebook post taken from a male participant's wall. The picture represents a board of directors of a certain company of which all board members are females. The interest of this portion lies in one of the comments, which reads: *'imagine. As if we men don't have families. Things have really gone bad for us'*. Overall, one would conclude that there is inequality in such a company or institution because the board consists of women only. Contrariwise, the assumption that the board consists of females who are heads of different departments which possibly consist of men may be back up for the Difference Theory which advocates for equating of women's rights to those of men.

A post such as the one presented in Figure 9 raises opinions on Facebook. The comments made towards women refer us back to the Dominance Theory. The tradition and culture of female insubordination and male superiority could be derived from these comments. It can be deduced that males are shocked by the fact that society nowadays allows women to hold positions that were initially meant for men. In doing so, their comments convey messages that diminish the value and status of women in society. The use of hate speech towards female cyber users is an indication of gender inequality, proposed by the Dominance Approach which has declared men as dominant than women in society. This is a result of cultural socialisation during childhood. It is evident that some individuals still strongly honor these beliefs and it somehow makes them feel uncomfortable and intimidated or they feel it is wrong for women to take up positions initially intended for men. Furthermore, the idea that men openly express how they feel about women makes a distinction between men and women's linguistic expressions on social networks. The idea of men's inappropriate language hence symbolizes discrimination against the female gender; a subjugation of one's freedom and gender identity.

4.2. Interview Discussions

For the interviews, eight participants (four male and four female post-graduates) of the 24 participants took part in the interviews. Questions pertaining to active and passive participation were posed. Respondents were also asked about the language they used on Facebook, reasons for the choices of language as well as questions pertaining to gender representation and the contradictions between societal expectations when it comes to roles in day-to-day interactions and online engagements. The researcher presents extracts of responses from participants.

Passive participation focused on whether the user participates in scrolling through news feeds, to learn about new happenings, view other people's new posts whilst active participation involved actively posting and updating their Facebook timelines. Most (n=5) participants did not classify themselves as active users; they instead gave reasons to justify why they use Facebook. Some respondents regarded Facebook as a platform for establishing and maintaining friendships with strangers and relatives. Others saw Facebook merely as a platform to stay updated on contemporary events.

However, there were a few who identified as active users of Facebook, and they engaged in conversations to learn about new things, keep themselves updated with contemporary issues, and to '*speak their mind*'. One participant responded by comparing Facebook to Instagram stating that Instagram is just a '*show-off*', nothing really goes on there. He added that Facebook has interesting conversations and great features that one can 'temper with' unlike Instagram which has limited features. Below, participants provide answers to the interview questions:

1. How often do you access or check in on Facebook?

Mrs Ara: *"four to five times a day. It depends on how busy or free I am at the office"* (38 years old)

Mr Nice: *"As often as I can, maybe more than fifty times a day"*. (29 years old).

Excerpt 1.

When asked about how often they accessed their Facebook walls ,75% (n=6)) of individuals reported that they check in between five and seven times a day since they mostly stay logged in on their computers and cellular phones. However, two of the participants responded that they mostly only check in on Facebook during morning hours. Their activity on Facebook was determined by their workload. This implies that Facebook is not very relevant in their lives; they only accessed it during their leisure time.

2. How often do you actively post messages or update your status?

Mr. Cervantes: *"I mostly just share stuff, videos, other people's pictures, adverts and anything I find relatable or informative". But I also post pictures of myself, but that's like once in two or three months.* (38 years old).

Ms Tania: *"at least once or twice a day, on my wall but mostly I upload to my story. Social media is part of my life now; Facebook was one of the first and still prominent cyber spaces; I just can't give up on it now that Twitter and Instagram are trending"*. (34 years old)

Excerpt 2.

On how often they actively post messages or updates on Facebook, one female participant stated that she rarely posts on Facebook. As an employed parent, she spends almost all day at work, and spends the rest of the time at home caring for the family. Despite her busy schedule, the attempt to make time to engage on social media is clear evidence that women try by all means to strike a

balance between their personal and social lives. In that case, it is then clear that they still abide by cultural norms in the manner that they take care of their homes and children while at the same time explore the social aspects of their lives which are evolving with technological advancements and social media. They form friendships on social networks and try to maintain them.

Generally, male participants responded that they hardly post on their timelines. One of them asserted that he has migrated to WhatsApp statuses instead of Facebook stories as WhatsApp is the trending social medium. Another respondent said that he mainly shares political updates, sports news as well as any informative post and motivational posts. Based on the responses given, male participants tend to be passive users of Facebook as WhatsApp which had earned preference from most Facebook users. Additionally, the reasons for being on Facebook prove that most male users of Facebook are particularly interested in being informative as they mostly share information with their audiences instead of being involved with them like female users who are more inclined to forming friendships and engaging with their online friends.

This implies that men are thus more assertive, independent and informative individuals. Women, on the other hand, tend to be more dependent on their audience, expressive and concerned for the welfare of others. These features have been attributed to men and women during cultural socialisation in childhood. Men and women still evidently sustain these characters in virtual environments as well they do in physical spaces.

3. How do you use language on Facebook (what choice do you make, in terms of in/formality, (im)Politeness, slang)?

Mr Rudy: “well, that depends. Some days are good, others are rough. I am not usually mean on Facebook and I use informal language.”(24 years old)

Ms Monica: “I use polite language mostly; I cannot really swear on Facebook. It’s a public platform and I am friends with my older cousins and uncles. I would not want to give out such a bad image”. (24 years old)

Excerpt 3.

Three male interviewees stated that they use more informal and slang language than they use formal language. Excerpt 3 provides evidence that male Facebook users regard Facebook as an informal setup, so it is not necessary to use formal language. The fact that Facebook does not present an academic or professional set up gives an impression to users that it is a social space where any and every individual can freely employ their desired choice of language. Moreover, the response given in Excerpt 3 also suggests that some men use different choices of language depending on their mood or social standing as well as topic of discussion. Participants of the present study provided different justifications for their choices of language. One male participant stated that he chooses to use formal and polite words when it suits his personality; this finding overlaps with Huffaker and Calvert (2006) who also agree that individuals’ identity constructions are rooted in one’s personality traits, values, beliefs, roles and relationships (as cited in Emara, 2017). For example, when one is angry, they may opt for vulgar language, when they address a formal topic or individual who is part of their audience, they will use standard language, whilst for humorous conversation, they may choose aspects such as short forms and swear words used for comical functions. This may be a sign that language plays a major role in gender performance. Through various language choices, individuals are able to present themselves in different ways.

All four female respondents claimed that they use mostly polite but informal language. One of the female interviewees further declared that she also uses a bit of slang sometimes. The use of polite language by female social network users can be linked to the notion of politeness. Women tend to use polite language for different reason. Firstly, one would assume that it is because women are naturally considered as polite beings; they are just extending their politeness features on virtual interactions. Secondly, women could be practicing face-saving strategies (Verdeberer, 1995). Women do their best to avoid problems and stay in society's positive light; hence the use of polite language. Thirdly, they may be using such language because it is what society has ascribed to their gender. Women also attempt to maintain a good image on social media as well as in face-to-face contexts with the hope that they will form good role models to their children. From these findings, we can then deduce that by following the same rules set up in society, identity reconstructions occur when women make extensions of their real lives into virtual spaces.

4. What prompts this choice of language?

Mr. Reese: *““For starters, I am a polite guy. Also, I never want to look like an idiot on Facebook by being rude”. And every time I post in certain groups, I need to maintain formality because I do not know those people. But if I'm chatting with my friends, there's no need to be formal”.*

Ms Tania: *“My choice of language is determined by whether I want to share memes, motivational quotes or important ideas. But also, I keep it mostly formal because I have followers from all walks of life; some of these people could be my future employers and business partners.”*

Excerpt 4.

Facebook is a personal space which allows individuals to freely express themselves with different people. On what informs their chosen language, male participants responded that they use formal language in order to maintain a good digital identity. For professionals, frequently engaging in Facebook interactions requires one to use language appropriate for his personal brand identity. For some, they state that frequently engaging in interactions also boosts their language skills and helps improve their proficiency. One male respondent stated that he used the same language during offline and online conversations; he sees no need for convergence. For the female interviewees, three responded that they mostly used informal language because their audiences mainly consisted of people they already know in person. One female respondent said that she mostly used formal language, in order to accommodate her co-workers and employers as well as to maintain a good reputation. These responses infer that personal and social identity are conveyed through the language that one employs and through the way one interacts with others. Dressler and Dressler's (2016) idea that social networks resemble diaries and journals nowadays implies that social networks provide platforms and some sense of comfortability for individuals to exercise gender performance and gender construction techniques. The construction of identity also refers to the construction of self as one that involves the construction of several public selves which are presented in accordance with cultural and social constraints (Harter, 1998 as cited in Emara, 2017).

5. Does the way you use language online (Facebook) differ from how you use language in face-to-face conversations? How?

Mr Reese: *"Online slang is changing every day and it is hard to keep up. There are words we use online but we can never use when talking offline. I just realised that I cannot really use some of the phrases I use online when chatting up a friend in a face-to-face conversation. These are phrases like ' , LOL, and LOML' "*

and so on. It changes when having a conversation in person. On the other hand, I find myself using terms like 'sliding into DM's' and it does not feel wrong when saying it out loud."

Ms Tania: *"For me, there is not much of a difference because I use just 'normal language' on Facebook. But also, this still depends on the person I interact with because for unknown Facebook friends and when posting on groups, I have to remain formal or at least semi-formal, the same way I am at work and other formal settings. Likewise, for the informal language that I use with close associates and relatives online, I use the exact words or language when talking with my friends and family in daily life.*

Excerpt 5.

As presented above, a male respondent stated that his use of language on virtual environments differs from what he uses in face-to-face interactions. For instance, the use of abbreviations is only ideal in written and not spoken contexts. Another participant stated that using slang in face-to-face conversations has become the new trend, and most people are becoming accustomed to it. It also denotes that modernisation and linguistic change are undoubtedly ubiquitous. People tend to keep up with evolution, and this includes the use of newly coined linguistic terms. The use of these terms allows them to transfer elements of their offline lives to their online lives and vice versa. This way, they construct new identities online which are derived from their original persona, and also, transfer these newly constructed identities into their real lives.

Female participants reported that their language choices in online and offline spaces do not significantly differ. When they converse with co-workers and acquaintances online and offline, they use formal language; likewise, when they interact with friends and relatives, they maintain their formal language. As such, online identities are usually not constructed to completely differ

from the real life identities but are rather an extension of the real-life identities and in most cases are used to enhance the offline identities. We can then assume that female social network users are not ardent on keeping up with linguistic trends; they prefer to use standard social language.

6. Does your gender identity manifest in your engagements on Facebook?

Mr Reese: *““If I post something, someone who does not know me can easily tell a guy posted it. Not because my name isn’t unisex but I use a lot of emoticons and slang and it comes off as a dude”.*

Mrs Ara: *“most people aren’t confused by what I post because I am always polite, not much slang or any manly behaviour.”*

Excerpt 6.

All male and female participants indicated that their gender identities manifest in the ways they engage on Facebook. Female participants state that because their language is not too harsh like that of males, it easier to figure out. In addition, because women try their best to sound polite whenever they post and share sensitive topics, the content posted defines each individual and makes it easier for them to be classified as male or female. Writing online in whatever form provides individuals with the opportunity to author the self-allowing them to sustain a narrative identity. Individuals can also explore a number of different layers of the self.

7. Have you ever been attacked or threatened on social media because of your gender as a result of the choice of language you have used or a conversation that you have perhaps initiated or engaged in?

Ms Monica: *“I try by all means to refrain from posting or engaging in sensitive topics. Or using language that is deemed offensive’.*

Mr Rudy: *“oh yes. I once posted like, “Besides sex, what else do women offer in relationships?” offended one female user to the extent that she confronted me. She claimed that it presents women as less useful in most spheres of life when compared to men, and that men are granted more freedom to post however they please about issues that downgrade women without any societal prejudices. It was my fault, so no worries [giggles]”.*

Excerpt 7.

While six of the participants provided no record of being threatened or attacked on Facebook, two male participants presented different scenarios of how they were confronted and threatened by fellow men and by women too as a result of the way they employed their choice of language. Female participants stated that they always refrained from using offensive language or discussing sensitive matters which may provoke their audience on social networks. One of them further admitted that she tends to be very apologetic when she senses tension during a conversation on Facebook.

Two male participants however, disagreed with the aforementioned narrative citing that they have experienced cases where they were attacked and threatened. One of his attackers claimed that his post was inappropriate; it degraded women, and she felt inferior and less useful, hence the attacks. This finding is contrary to the popular opinion that women are always victims and hardly perpetrators in cases of cyberbullying. Technological advancements and transformations have proven that both males and females can be victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying

8. Do you think social media help you in understanding individual roles of the different genders?

Ms Ndapanda: "I do. I think men use social media to find new partners to date, have fun, and share jokes with friends. Men bully and attack people they have conversations with. Men are also more negative when it comes to sensitive topics and mostly don't keep an open mind when engaging in these topics. On the other hand, women use social media to maintain existing relationships instead of making new ones. Women tend to be warm and positive when it comes to sensitive subjects unlike men. Women use polite language and hardly attack men on social media".

Mr Nice; "Yeah. Facebook teaches us about upcoming trends which are out of the ordinary and some of which pertain to sexual appeals. Societal norms may be greatly valued and practised in daily life, but social media allows individuals to breach these rules or put them on hold so that they extend their freedom of expression".

Excerpt 8.

Social media is an umbrella term that comprises of many internet-based sites and services. These sites promote social interactions between individuals who use them as an important part of interpersonal communication. Social networks are also aimed towards allowing their users to form connections, assisting them in creating social identities and preserving and extending their personal identities. Personal identity is the unique sense of self knowledge and experiences that all of us possess whereas social identity refers to the social groups that we belong to and the commonalities we share with other (Agunbiade, Obiyan & Sogbaike, 2014). Gender relations, group norms and culture are significant components informing both personal and social identities in online social relations. Social identities have a key role in interacting with our personal identities and making us the people that we are.

9. What lessons do social media teach you when it comes to gender roles that are a contradiction to traditional roles?

Mr Cervantes: "Civic behaviours are constantly changed by social media. Negative influences in terms of likes, claim to fame. Positively, individuals are encouraged to work hard when they see others sharing success stories. On the other hand, just like society has taught us, men are expected to behave as men and not these funny skinny jean boys that I see on Facebook. I think for most women, they present themselves quite well because in terms of language, most of them use normal language (no slang or vulgar) and their dress codes are fairly okay".

Mr Nice: "Society expects way too much in these advanced times. Freedom of choice should be granted regardless of age or gender. Women should not be expected to behave online the same way they behave offline. Men also need to let go of that mentality of acting shocked when a girl swears on Facebook. There is a lot of judgement from people who have never been through what the opposite gender goes through on a daily basis. Gender equality is recognised nowadays, and we as men must exercise it on Facebook as well as in real life".

Excerpt 9.

All female and male participants proved that they have an idea about societal expectations and roles. The responses from the interviewees indicate a need for change within society. Due to society's views on gender that have been unconsciously engraved in nearly every individual's mind, the differences between women and men behaviour are quite obvious and they show in the way women and men handle themselves during conversations on virtual and physical spaces. The causative was the initial socialisation of men and women into hunter-gatherers and childcare givers respectively (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014); women turned out to be more oriented towards familiar orientations and are considered as keepers of the family. These characters show not only in the physical roles and presentations of women themselves, but also through their linguistic choices.

Furthermore, a contextual influence on gender differences is males' greater status in society, which makes them more likely to dominate social interactions through the use of self-assertive language, whereas females tend to behave subordinates through using more affiliative language (Emara, 2017; Lakoff, 1975).

Lakoff (1975) stated traditionally, women were always defined through the men they associated themselves with. Because of that, there was a set of expectations with respect to the way they should present themselves physically and linguistically. However, in the modern days where social networking sites are trending, individuals feel the greater need to be granted autonomy in respect to freely shaping and constructing their identities however they may want them. Findings from the study include appeal from individuals to society; society must give way to personal autonomy with no negative consequences, especially towards gender differences.

The need to maintain acceptable personal and social identities is central to most social interactions, especially when positive image building is underlying the purpose of putting on a particular identity (Agunbiade et al., 2014).

4.3. Discussions

The study explored the constructions of gender identities on social networks (Facebook) among post-graduate students at the University of Namibia. Youth participation is either passive or active, and was explored through their pictures, posts and the videos they shared; these indicate reasons for conversing and interacting and how different men and women project their identities on virtual environments. The study was also particularly focused on how male and female youth present themselves online, how they perceive the societally conceived masculine and feminine roles and how they maintain them on social networks with regards to language use and gender performance.

The activities online include, writing posts on one's Facebook wall as well as sharing other people's posts. Online activities are largely influenced by reasons such as peer influence, desire to meet new people and to maintain relationships with friends and relatives and to have fun, pass time as well as learn new things. The differences between the use of social networks by male and female youth have been observed in terms of the type of language they employ and the reasons for conversing and posting on social media- particularly Facebook. The interview findings have also provided a great deal of information and affirmation of the preferences of social networks by male and female youth.

Previous findings have revealed that young people and indeed students recorded a high relevance to the internet which is inseparable from everyday life (Agunbiade et al., 2014). Technological advancements have perfected the art of computer literacy among the youth and have caused unimaginable inclination to gadgets. The youth thus tend to participate more in online social interactions than they do in offline conversations. Studies have shown that in doing so, they then adopt social networks as a means of constructing gender identities for diverse purposes (Amiuchi-Hamburger, 2013 as cited in Agunbiade et al., 2014). The youth tend to maintain whatever identity to conform with the wider yearnings of society.

As Agunbiade et al. (2014) have asserted, gender differences have been observed on online environments. This study also supports this contention; the way men interact on social networks differs from women. The findings have proven that there are different patterns between young men and young women's use of language and self-presentation that reveal masculine as well as feminine roles in their interactions on virtual environments as well as during face-to-face conversations.

Social identity develops from a social constructionism whereby identity is being permanently constructed through limitless contact with people and social experiences which reinforce existing perceptions of identity or enable explorations of new facets of oneself (Abbas and Dervin, 2009 as cited in Young, 2013). It can then be deduced from the given findings that individuals generally sustain and stick to the norm of what they were introduced to or what they have been accustomed to since childhood. However, slight changes occur and differences arise over the years- not only in the physical actions, but also in what and the manners in which they speak.

Identity construction and gender performance are instituted in childhood socialisation (Emara, 2017). Society has always possessed a tendency to attribute roles according to gender. Growing up, the male child was expected to behave and act in a way that is different from how girls behaved. Additionally, during child's play, children were constantly monitored (Verdeberer, 1995). Girls who associated with boys were tolerated but punishment was rendered to boy children who associated with girls or any roles and linguistic choices socially assigned to girls. Gender-appropriate roles can still be observed even in interactions on virtual environments through face-saving strategies. Female users tended to use more face-saving strategies as they are generally considered as problem avoiders.

Being senior users of social media, postgraduate students are more intent on posting content that represents their values and which their audience will like because they are more confident in who their audience is. They lack uncertainty about audiences, and are thus able to balance expectations of authenticity and self-censorship. They thus have no desire to blend in nor be popular.

There is an awareness of online presence in the physical or offline context. Online spaces provide unlimited freedom to individuals to challenge the traditional stereotypes surrounding masculinity and femininity (Martin, 2015). Some individuals have mastered the art of aligning the online and

offline versions of themselves. For others, their comfort allows them to manifest what they exercise in virtual environments in real life conversations. This then qualifies the notion that online and offline lives are intertwined and so are the different layers of one's social identity. From the findings of the present study, it is observable that one can be thought of as a layered self; there is therefore a need for any and each individual to uncover the different layers of the self. There is always a need or given circumstance in which an individual develops an urge or is obliged to exercise other layers of the self, or to simply extend the already existing self into different aspects. What arose from self-presentation online and offline was also the sense of insecurity in some individuals. Some of these insecurities are tied to the end result of cyber harassment and discrimination which occur from self-expression. For most females, in as much as social networks provide them with an opportunity to freely express themselves during online interactions, it is still almost impossible for them to do so considering the fact that cyber spaces provide more freedom than security. Furthermore, female users continue to experience societal pressures, although not as extreme as in daily interactions. Society still imposes cultural expectations on women's virtual spaces. The expectations of society conflict with what the Linguistic Appraisal Theory advocates for the approval of each and every individual's choice of language without attaching any biases or societal prejudices.

For the male cyber users, their insecurities are associated with the expectations related to gender stereotypes surrounding masculinity traits. Men are typically portrayed as active, adventurous and largely uninvolved in human relationships and emotional expression (Wood, 1994). This therefore implies that the same way men are expected to behave in face-to-face conversations should be mirrored on cyber spaces. There is a possibility that the online audience of an individual may impose equal pressure upon a male individual as the audience in real life. This would then mean

that one has to behave, converse and interact in a way that society deems appropriate for a male individual, in a particular environment, such as a virtual space.

It is interesting to notice that as much as individuals are open and willingly unleash parts of their offline selves on cyber spaces, they are equally cautious to not expose their entire beings as this would conflict with their personal security, considering the fact that cyber space is an arena where interactions and dialogues are recorded and observed in recent times (Boulerie, 2015). This means that if not carefully handled or hidden, individuals' identities could be exposed on social media, and this can temper with personal privacy and lead to cyberbullying or gender discrimination.

Identity is not a static characteristic of individuals. The fact that some individuals carefully choose their choices of language depending on the environment of interaction is clear evidence that individuals indeed possess multiple identities or rather layers of their offline identities which can be exposed by the linguistic resources they employ.

These multiple layers seem to fit the dialogical theories of identity and gender which suggest that there are observable linguistic differences between male and female use of language. These differences are influenced by the environments in which linguistic practices are performed. Furthermore, the way in which each gender uses language offline differs from the way they use language during interactions on cyber spaces; hence, there is an opportunity for identity creation and expansion. Using obscene or profane language on social media and using friendly language in day-to-day interactions forms a distinction between online and offline self-presentation and gender performance.

The findings of the present study, alongside those from a study conducted by Bamman et al., (2014) validate the claim that swear words and obscene language are more often associated with

male users of Facebook. Female users, on the other hand, prefer to not use swear words or instead used euphemisms in place of profane language. This difference can thus be classified as an overt gendered distinction between men and women's use of language. In the same vein, Huan et al., (2018) also declare that males tend to flame more than women. Offensive language is detected in many comments and posts of male network users. This indicates that men post harmful information about others, mostly female users; hence, they are more likely to be cyberbullies.

For most female users, they did not necessarily construct new identities, but instead made extensions and modifications of the already existing ones. They do this through face-saving strategies- an aspect of the Politeness Theory, but a great contribution to the Dominance approach, which describes women as soft-spoken and 'problem avoiders', but also as subordinate beings. This is complemented by the view that women are generally seen as young, passive, dependent and often incompetent individuals whose primary energy is devoted to improving their appearances, taking care of homes and people as well as maintaining interpersonal relations (Lakoff, 1975; Wood, 1994).

Descriptions offered by society tend to distort how individuals see themselves. Due to the fact that should one behave in an expected manner offline, they are likely to extend this behaviour on to any virtual environments they are associated with. Though not entirely similar, offline behaviour has been observed on interactions on Facebook. Just like in face-to-face conversations, male participants on Facebook show more self-centred attitudes and independence while female students showed more involvement with others and perpetuated positive face-saving strategies and politeness. It is thus evident that individuals indeed perpetuate societal rules, behavioural patterns and norms on virtual environments just as they do in daily offline engagements.

In view of the above-mentioned, one may suppose that the virtual body is not independent from the physical environment; it is basically just an extension of the real body. Culture is expressed and maintained through language. Identity is volatile; people change their identities to suit their needs of the moment. In the present study, this is represented by the choices of language employed by the various individuals' behaviour on the choice of environment where an interaction takes place. Face-saving strategies can be monitored, saved or lost through language use in social interactions.

Multiple identities can exist in relation to who one defines themselves as and how others define them. The rejection of swear words by female users may seem to indicate a tendency towards use of standard or prestigious language, but this is contradicted by the use of abbreviations such as LOL and LOML. Standardness is thus overpowered by expressiveness. Attitudes constantly shift as we talk to different people about different things, and call up different selves to do the talking. Gender is correlated with linguistic resources and social network composition. Language and social network connections depend only on the author; in fact, they should be conditionally independent. Gender is a powerful force in structuring our social values; it is thus impossible to deny the reality of male and female social categories. The Dominance Approach theorists have often treated gender as a stable binary opposition, and in so doing, have perpetuated a discourse that treasures differences over similarities and reinforces the ideology of the status quo.

The Difference Theory and Linguistics Appraisal Theory, on the other hand, choose to differ. They are more interested in establishing a social equilibrium with regards to gender roles and linguistic choices. Through computer-mediated communication, attempts are being made to blur the differences between offline and online use of language. In other words, advancements brought

about by online communication are advocating for individuals to be allowed to extend their cyber language choices into their physical spaces without any societal predispositions. Plainly stated, social networking advocates are doing the best to diminish gender stereotypes in society.

As observed in the study's findings, most female cyber users decrease their use of gendered stylistic characteristics, for example, hedging (to be on par with their male counterparts). In daily life situations, however, women still use subordinate language, signifying the dominance of their male counterparts. The explanation for these differences in linguistic behaviour is rooted in the Dominance Approach; it theorises about the insubordination of men in society and the submission of women (Young, 2013). Men are generally considered to be above women, and women are therefore expected to seek approval and look up to their male counterparts. Hence, the behaviour of women in the use of language on virtual spaces is rooted in the social upbringings.

Traditional social roles expect women to be expressive and men to be restrained (Huang et al., 2015). As a result, women are taught to be self-expressive, which contributes to establishing closure with their audiences in the physical and virtual environments during interactions. Any individual with a high sense of disclosure is therefore regarded as feminine, whereas one with a high sense of discretion is regarded as masculine (Huang et al., 2015). Men are expected to be restrained in the sense that they do not reveal personal emotions. The findings of the present study are evidence that male users of Facebook are indeed more discreet than the female users; they focus more on sharing general information than expressing emotions of the self. One reason for this could be that cultural socialisation is still part of individuals' lives; individuals have retained the societal rules and hence transferred them onto virtual environments.

Real life meetings limit people because of life and status women, but in the virtual world of Facebook, there is an extended space for discussions and self-expression. Virtual environments

grant people the opportunity to dodge the restrictions of the offline lives. The freedom to write, act and criticise any topic prevents them from social and legal questions and gender stereotypes or prejudice. This is in line with what the Linguistic Appraisal Theory suggests: the idea of accepting, without any prejudices, each and every individual's choice of language on virtual environments or during face-to-face interactions. On the contrary, as much as the theory approves any choice of language, individuals are always cautious in the choice of language they employ. They thus choose which layers of the self to display depending on the language choice and the audience. Every individual therefore has the power to display their desired identity either one that is similar to their offline personae, or one which is an extended or exaggerated version of the original identity; regardless, it has to be one that an individual deems acceptable to their audience.

Another study conducted by Goffman (1956) states that the roles that one performs can be controlled both by the individual and societal expectations of a particular role. Most participants in the present study argued that societal expectations are not exactly sustained on virtual environments. For instance, in terms of language, society initially expect women to employ submissive, polite language in their interactions, whether offline or online (Lakoff, 1975; Rhami, 2015; Biernatowska et al., 2017).

However, in the modern days of freedom of expression, females are granted autonomy by social networks and thus tend to use language freely; they employ their desired choices of language without considering what was initially expected of them as females. Participants view social networks rather as extensions of their real lives which presents greater autonomy and more rights in terms of gender differences and expectations. Therefore, for female Facebook users, the dream to use language similar to that of men has finally come true, except that this is a case of virtual environments and cannot be extended to offline real-life interactions..

Additionally, in terms of gender performance and presentations on social media, research has indicated a balance of reality portrayal between their offline and online lives. Individuals who use social networks attempt to control their online performances by presenting an idealised version of themselves (Pare, 2017) due to societal expectations. They therefore tend to bring forth certain characteristics and present those to their virtual audience in order to communicate a particular identity. Contrary to this, results of this study do not support this contention. Being post-graduate students, (and a bit older), the participants of the present study have been using Facebook for a longer period. They argue that, presenting a modified self-online is mostly only for Facebook novices who feel the need to be accepted and to fit in. As for the old users, they have become familiar and thus comfortable to present their real selves and identities on Facebook. This implies that frequent use of social networks create comfort and security which means that there is no need to present idealised versions of oneself.

With regards to gender differences, although men and women use language to perform almost similar functions, their language patterns differ. Men's language is more direct, straight to the point and harsh whereas women use polite words and phrases that depict protective functions during interactions. Although social media platforms have added value for female users and granted women the freedom to express themselves more openly on virtual environments, most women still sustain and perform the societally roles which were assigned to them during childhood socialisation (Garcia et al., 2017).

As highlighted in the Difference Approach, the notion of 'Sameness' is visible in the efforts that cyber spaces expend in attempts to call for social equilibrium between men and women. As Lakoff (1975 as cited in Gu, 2013) stated, childhood socialisation has brought about differences in men and women's language. It is apparent that male and female users of social networks use different

language choices, with women using submissive, soft and subordinate language and men using direct, harsh and domineering words. In their posts, female students behave subordinately through using affiliative language. This implies that women are more inclined to maintaining social relationships even on virtual environments. Men, on the other hand, being associated with a greater status in society, are likely to dominate social interactions by making use of assertive language. This is indicative of societal stereotypes on gender roles and masculinity. Men exercise their societal roles on cyber spaces.

In comparison to language use in daily offline conversations, women and men's language choices tend to differ. While women may use language that is more submissive and tend to be more soft-spoken in face-to-face interactions, on cyber spaces, there is an extended freedom of expression that allows women to exercise a similar language to men (Gu, 2013). Men on the other hand do not display much of a difference in their offline and online conversations. Cyber spaces allow female users to freely use language which is similar to men, unlike in physical conversations. It is notable that social networks are assisting in diminishing societal gender stereotypes which have always downgraded women.

With social networks becoming important stages for negotiations of gender and sexualities, the continuous endeavour of analysing young people's practices related to self-expression online is necessary for shedding light on how gender norms and stereotypes are reinforced or transgressed. Cyber spaces allow individuals to share photographs, videos as well as ideas with their audiences; in doing so, they construct digital identities. Some individuals regard social networks as just an escape from reality, whereas others consider them as the virtual reality for the contemporary times. In comparison with real life interactions, in the modern times, young individuals tend to be more active on interactions on virtual environments than in face-to-face conversation. They are much

more comfortable with pseudonyms, multiple identities and diversifying attitudes as well as endless efforts to position themselves regarding each piece of news. Social media brings labels, discrimination and inequalities.

Different layers of communication seem to require different layers of the self (identities). This results in a performance of various identities with attempts of matching an audience in a virtual environment. When this happens, diversity is then created in society; reflexive society creates reflexive identities (Gunduz, 2017). Virtual communities are real, but not necessarily physically real; they do not follow the exact interaction and communication patterns followed by physical communities. Social media allow users to establish contact with publicly known and unknown users and share favoured content with them. These processes of social interaction lead to the construction of gender identities. Hence, identities are socially constructed through the involvement with others and the relationships with both people and things in society.

Contemporary computational literature often distinguishes women from men based on pragmatic dimensions of informativeness and involvement (Bamman, Eisenstein & Schnoebelen, 2014). While involvement consists of linguistic resources that create interactions between speakers and their audiences, it also signifies the need for collectiveness and inclusivity, and is associated with female students. Through the posts they share, it can be deduced that female users are more interested in maintaining social relationships and constantly being involved with their audiences. The informational dimension entails linguistic resources that communicate propositional content (Bamman et al., 2014). Most male participants in the present study post and share general information with their audience, with the intention to inform or announce and hardly to initiate relations with their audience. Hence, their use of more formal, less polite language is an indication

that they prefer to be informative rather than getting involved in interpersonal relations with their audiences.

Although the expressions and self-representations on social networks are virtual, they are also affected by real life. The processes of identity creation and gender performance involve negotiation and social battle. Women and men constantly have to negotiate and battle with societal expectations in attempts to shape or re-shape their identities. Because social networks have extended their freedom of expression, individuals are freer to present the desired layers of the self. Unlike the real life identity, the online identity is influenced by an extended freedom from physical constraints and more ability to design and modify one's personae and manipulate their audience. Additionally, offline lives and communication are mirrored by online and computer-mediated communication but to a considerable extent. Real life meetings limit people because of the societal constraints and status of men and women, but in the virtual worlds of Facebook, individuals are offered an extended space for discussions and self-expressions. Virtual environments grant an opportunity for one to dodge societal pressures and expectations that require an individual to behave and act in strict gendered patterns in offline face-to-face interactions.

Male students also tended to display manifestations of power and superiority and overt display of power. Female participants made less or no use of gendered stylistic characteristics in order to be in sync with their male counterparts. Thus, women's behaviour on social networks show some inclusivity, the desire to be on par with their counterparts. Conversely, male cyber space users did not indicate any desire for involvedness, inclusion and exclusion.

The choice of linguistic resources depend crucially on the social setting and linguistic contexts in which they are deployed. As a direct reflection of gender, the choice of language may go on to reflect other aspects of every individual. A linguistic resource is used to create various stances and

personae which are connected to global categories such as gender and race (Bamman, et al., 2014; Emara, 2017). By making use of the different language sources, aspects about an individual are revealed; language can allow the audience to determine whether a particular individual is educated or uneducated, effortful or easy-going, articulate or inarticulate and formal or relaxed. Thus, gender is a social category which is performed differently in various situations; interactions between language, gender and situational contexts (physical space or virtual environment) are demonstrated.

Literature on topics surrounding gender talks about ‘reclaiming language for women’. Women should subvert gender stereotypes by reinventing their language and revisiting their choice of words. This way, they are able to construct their desired layers of identities by freeing themselves from gender stereotypes. Subsequently, there will develop a gender equilibrium whereby society will view and treat gender on equal terms.

Observed use of language by male social network users indicate that men are interested and focus on being resource providers whereby they share information with their audience, pay little attention to relationships and make use of more impolite and harsh language. Female users are labelled as skilled conversationalists because of their use of politeness in interactions and because they make their interlocutors feel admired and important (Dabrowska, 2018). Through their choices of language, individuals are able to consciously or unconsciously modify the different layers of the self; hence, re-constructing their identities so that they are suitable for their online audiences.

4.4. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of obtained for the present study, providing an elaborated discussion of the results. The next chapter will conclude the study and provide recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

This chapter concludes the study that has been carried out to analyse the (re)constructions of gender identities on Facebook through language use among the post-graduate students from the University of Namibia. This chapter presents a brief overview of the entire study, concludes the study and offers recommendations that are critical to the body of linguistics knowledge.

This study aimed to:

- assess the socio-pragmatic competence of the youth on social networking sites;
- examine the link between gender, identity and language and how these are intertwined on social networking sites; and
- explore how female youth and male youth perpetuate the socially conceived feminine and masculine identity and sustain it on social networking sites

5.2. Conclusions

This study was aimed at analysing how Namibian youth (postgraduate students from the University of Namibia) make use of language on social media (Facebook) to make attempts at constructing or reconstructing their identities. The study investigated how the differences in the use of language by male and female Facebook users assist them in making distinctions between their online and offline lives, hence presenting their identities differently or similarly. Furthermore, the study was also aimed at finding out whether the traditionally assigned linguistic behaviour patterns are maintained on social networking sites by the male and female genders in the same manner as during physical conversations.

Discussions and analysis of the study indicate that the established trends for offline behaviour and communication are reproduced in the online environments. The study has also established that language acts as a mediator of social networking and identity constructions as well as gender performance. Language can be good at broadcasting and resisting societally conceived gender-based roles. Social networks significantly assist in loosening societal rules and gender stereotypes by granting individuals room to freely express themselves without any predispositions of and from either gender. For female cyberspace users, the construction and re-construction of gender occurs when they are able to employ similar language choice(s) as their male counterparts, unravelling different aspects of one's self whilst addressing their audiences. Through the use of free language, they have the freedom to display the different layers of the self which they deem appropriate to their virtual audiences. Male Facebook users do not construct new identities on cyber spaces, but they exercise and extend their pre-existing offline identities which do not necessarily require them to readjust due to social expectations and societal behaviour as they do not suffer from societal pressures and constraints the same way women do.

Furthermore, the presence of cultural behaviour is clearly observable on social networks among postgraduate students, and it is an indication that although social networks created platforms that allow individuals to deviate from their societal norms, many individuals have persisted with these norms on social media. This proves therefore that culture is deeply embedded in individuals. Culture shapes their identities which create meaning and commitments, forms coherence and harmony in physical and online spaces, fosters a sense of self control and ability to perform different aspects of one's self strategically in order to manage the impressions that they present to their audiences in real-life interactions or during interactions on virtual spaces.

In essence, the construction of identity is a recurring social process on virtual environments which is greatly shaped by cultural and social constraints and further modified by linguistic choices deployed by individuals within various contexts.

5.3. Recommendations

An individual's identity is consciously or sub-consciously shaped and re-shaped by the surrounding social, cultural and technological environments, which makes it inevitable to continue with the studies across different cultures, different social media and different individuals in various timeframes. Hence, future research focusing on this more fine-grained level of analysis should be extended to other languages and cultural contexts. Particular attention should also be paid to other social networks as well as towards the impacts that social networks may have on students' academic performance and personal lives.

In as much as identity construction is a collective process which requires the involvement of other people in one's life, to some extent, it calls for individualistic action. Identity construction touches on an individual's personality that they wish to portray in the social space (Abrams & Hogg, 2010 as cited in Agubiade, 2014). For this aspect, individuals must therefore be allowed to exercise constructions of the desired identities independently from society. They must engage in social interactions in order to know and define themselves in ways which were not possible during childhood.

Hence, future research focusing on this more fine-grained level of analysis should be extended to other languages and cultural contexts. Particular attention should also be paid to other social networks as well as towards the impacts that social networks may have on students' academic performance and personal lives.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the main conclusion of the study, its limitations and the recommendations of the study.

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