

# Beyond the Posts: Understanding Student Discourse on Social Media through Content Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores students' use of social media platforms, primarily focusing on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Understanding the intricacies of student discourse can inform strategies to enhance digital literacy, foster constructive conversations, and create supportive online environments for academic and personal development. The findings of this study contribute valuable insights into the complex world of student discourse on social media, offering a deeper understanding of the dynamics that influence online interactions. This investigation aimed to understand how students use these platforms, examining engagement patterns and purposes. To achieve this, the researcher employed a qualitative method research approach. The researcher purposefully sampled 90 students from the University of Technology (UoT) in Gauteng, South Africa, to collect data. The participants submitted extracts from Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter texts for analysis. Findings revealed that students could benefit from using Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter for educational purposes since the document analysis indicated education as a prominent topic discussed on all the platforms. Another salient topic that emerged from the data was the topic of social discourse linked with love and relationships.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social networking has become a favorite hobby for South African Internet users and, more specifically, learners at the tertiary level as part of embarking on participating in a new global communication village (Gencer, 2016:361). Tertiary-level lecturers employ these platforms in their learning context since they offer exciting learning experiences (Balcikanli, 2015:86). Cybersocializing helps students share ideas and address personal problems with their friends and family. It encourages a sense of belonging and offers quick information sharing (Akakandelwa & Walubita, 2017).

The increasing use of the Internet platform, even by academics, to assist learners focuses on the importance of discourse analysis and suitable content when using the Internet platforms. The content of their communication is a source of interest in this study. The Internet texts as part of discourse were analyzed. By employing a content analysis approach, the researcher aimed to decode the underlying themes, sentiments, and linguistic nuances prevalent in student conversations.

While existing studies have addressed specific aspects of social media use among students, a comprehensive analysis of the content and context of their interactions remains

elusive. As social media increasingly influences personal relationships and academic and professional spheres, it becomes crucial to discern the implications of student discourse on broader societal constructs. Uncovering the motivations that drive students to engage in particular types of conversations, understanding the impact of peer interactions on academic performance, and exploring the potential influence on mental health are paramount for informed decision-making and policy development.

This study, therefore, was an attempt to provide additional information on cyber socializing discourse to close the knowledge gap on the use of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter discourse. Furthermore, the idea was to gather information from participants on using content and to study 90 Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter extracts. Internet platforms can benefit students and strengthen social development, creativity, and writing skills (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008).

This research paper will contribute to the academic understanding of social media discourse and provide practical insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers. By elucidating the dynamics of student interactions on social media, the study aimed to facilitate informed discussions about the role of these platforms in education, socialization, and the broader digital landscape. Through this study, the researcher aspires to shed light on the complexities and nuances that characterize the digital dialogues of students, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of their engagement in the online realm.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 A Historical Overview of Social Networking Services (SNSs)**

The development of SNSs has rapidly gained popularity in the past few years. SNSs embrace social networking for entertainment to more specific population-centered SNSs like Asian Avenue and Black Planet (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:89). SNS technologies have capitalized on a broader audience and increased contact among individuals. Facebook originated in February 2004, and Mark Zuckerberg is the founder. The Facebook site has developed many features, embracing personal chatting, messaging, applications to inform profiles, and a system to post comments, update profiles, share videos, post adverts, and find friends. Facebook has become a very popular SNS that is prominent in individuals' social lives. Its features and functions have added to the increase in use, and the number of users is increasing (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:89).

### **2.2 The purpose and benefits of using Social Networking Services (SNSs)**

#### **2.2.1 Self-expression and communication**

Through SNSs, students can voice their opinions, share ideas with fellow students, and communicate. Junco, Elavsky, and Heilberger (2013:273) conducted research investigating the use of Twitter and came up with revelations about students' use of social networks. The researchers report that students use SNSs to develop their identities and beliefs and create intimate relationships. They further found that the platform allows users to ask questions and give feedback. Students use SNSs for many reasons, such as making friends, receiving online tuition, and maintaining educational and social connections. SNSs are essential to students because they enhance their learning. A study by Lampe, Wohn,

Vitak, Ellison, and Wash (2011:329) found that students also use SNSs to further their education and to share notes to assist one another in doing assignments.

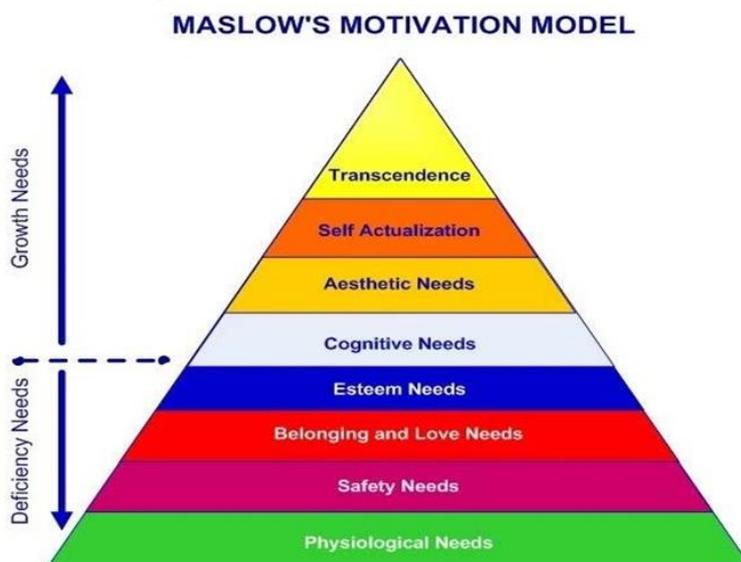
### 2.2.2 Boosting academic performance

SNSs and the impact of such use on their academic performance are significant. Ahn (2010:56) maintains that there are conflicting opinions regarding the use of Facebook for educational purposes. Those who think it can benefit learners because of the motivational factor and those who say they waste much time using it. A conference paper by Karpinski (2009:77) revealed findings that those students who are avid users of Facebook did academically poorer than the ones who abstained. Karpinski (2009:78) also believes that Facebook is a time-consuming activity that diverts students' attention from their work. Supporting this view, Kuppuswamy and Shankar (2010:99) agree as they also see it as a distraction from what is essential.

### 2.2.3 Fulfilment of Personal Needs

Technological platforms have the advantage of allowing users to fulfill their various needs. Maslow's needs analysis is relevant to this study since users fulfill multiple needs when using SNSs.

Figure 2.1 Basic needs (Source: Maslow, 1943)



To understand Internet users' discourse and preferences for content, it is helpful to study their various needs. According to Maslow, the most basic need is physiological. Interesting to note the need for safety, which is also affected by cyberbullying. The need for love is also a theme that crops up in the content of social media users (Bock, 2013). Trolling can be linked with esteem needs to elicit responses from others, have positive self-esteem, and eventually achieve self-actualization and cognitive goals. The next table is a summary of Internet users' needs as identified by Maslow (1943). Karahanna et al. (2018) identify needs regarding physiological needs and self-identity. They include autonomy, relatedness competence, and self-identity as crucial aspects when studying social media platform users' basic needs. When actualized, the researcher merged all these needs as benefits and compiled the table next.

Table 2.1 Fulfilment of users' needs in social networking Services (SNSs)

Needs	Application and benefits
Physiological needs and autonomy	Users need food and money to buy smartphones and computers to learn and communicate.
Safety	Users want to use technology and feel safe and connected.
Relatedness, belonging, and love	Users gain connections with other users and receive likes as a means of communicating love. Users use Emojis to reinforce positive emotions. Users gain friends, new relationships, and popularity.
Esteem needs competence and cognitive needs.	Their self-esteem receives a boost. Users must guard against cyber bullies, slander, and trolling. They must have an opportunity to express themselves but have insight into appropriate or inappropriate content. They can gain knowledge from using these sites.
Self-actualization	By sharing appropriate opiate information on Internet platforms, students experience self-actualization as part of their growth and development.

(Source: Author's compilation)

### 2.3 Comparing Facebook, WhatsApp, And Twitter Communication

The next table summarises the similarities and differences as they surface on students' Internet platforms.

	Facebook	WhatsApp	Twitter
<b>Purpose</b>	Informal communication educational opportunities to develop writing skills.	Informal and formal communication Opportunities to develop writing and spelling WhatsApp groups. Academic study groups	Informal and formal tweet opportunities are fewer to advance discourse because of brevity, and the function of noticing errors features is paramount
<b>Length of texts</b>	Longer texts are found	Medium-length texts but also links to PDF documents are used to serve the WhatsApp groups	Cryptic messages are used
<b>Content</b>	The content varies from Informal communication	The content varies from informal To formal communication	The content is restricted to a few (280) characters and is therefore

	To trolling and educational		Much more summarised and to
	Facebook groups	Bullying can also occur	The point. Followers continue to
	Bullying can occur, but it can		Comment by tweeting
	Be controlled by the privacy functions	The pressure is on the sender to reply immediately	Visuals are not used so much, but
			Emojis are also incorporated.
		Emoji are used mostly at the end	Content covers political tweets
	Platforms can be visited in	The message	And matters about
	The course of time	Pictures can be shared	Prominent people
	Visuals and emoji are	A number of homophones are used	Bullying is also a possibility
	Often used	In addition, emojis are very popular	
Opportunities to	Facebook offers	WhatsApp groups are essential	Tweets also afford
Develop	Opportunities for those who	for sharing information, such as	opportunity to improve
Discourse	Participate to develop	Academic work to be studied in	Grammatical competence but
	Their vocabulary	Book chapters	Opportunities are fewer because
	Sentence structure	Informal grammar is used	Of the restricted number of
	Informal and formal		Characters. Complex grammar is
	Grammar is used.		Used.

(Source: Author's compilation)

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study followed a qualitative approach. When it is necessary to explore the circumstances of the phenomena under investigation and to elaborate, a qualitative approach is appropriate to arrive at an in-depth analysis. Niewenhuis (2013) highlights the most salient characteristics of qualitative research. A qualitative approach focuses on participants' reflections on their lived experiences to generate rich data on the research

topic. Qualitative research attempts to describe phenomena in natural settings. This study used a critical case study and was an attempt to explore the phenomena of students' discourse and content use of technological platforms.

### 3.2 Research Site

The research site is the University of Technology in Gauteng, South Africa. The selected University of Technology has two campuses that participated. The sample population came from the faculty of Humanities. The Soshanguve population from the selected University of Technology was an ideal setting to undertake this study.

### 3.3 Research Participants

The sample population for this study consisted of 90 participants. The participants submitted extracts from Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter texts. The participants included students from one university of technology in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Participants came from the following courses: Public Management, IT, and Correctional Services. The researcher used personal invitations to approach the participants who participated voluntarily. The participants were equal in numbers per level or sub-group. The table below illustrates how the participants of this study were sampled.

Table 3.1 Target population

Course	Number of students
Public management	30
IT	30
Correctional Services	30

### 3.4 Data Collection Method

#### 3.4.1 Document Analysis

Content analysis originated in the 1930s. It was the starting point of qualitative analysis. The idea is to create new knowledge and not make assumptions solely based on past investigations. The meaning of communication is systematically analyzed. Central to content analysis are the themes identified, and the focus is on what participants intend to communicate.

The content analysis focuses on nuances, behaviors, and stakeholder perceptions. Content analysis also embraces discourse analysis and holds that interaction and conversations by people create perceptions (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013). The researcher studied the content of the respondents' Internet texts and narrated the information gathered through data analysis. The Internet texts as part of discourse were analyzed. The 90 participants submitted three (3) extracts each (one from Facebook, one from WhatsApp, and one from Twitter) for analysis. The total number of extracts received is 270.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Bowen (2009) opines that document analysis is useful in arriving at assumptions regarding document interpretation, and researchers give voice to what they find on the assessment topic. Documents can be analyzed by identifying and dissecting prevalent themes within them. Internet communication, such as Facebook extracts, are personal documents and are first-person messages sharing opinions, beliefs, and information of

interest. The researcher analyzed documents to scrutinize the content for dominant themes that cropped up as popular topics for participants' engagement with written discourse. The researcher employed passive analysis involving patterns and themes that emerged in the texts analyzed. Franz et al. (2019) define passive analysis as the scrutiny of patterns emerging on Internet platforms.

### **3.6 Role of Researcher**

The researcher approached the participants and requested their voluntary presentation of three Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter texts. The researcher also informed the participants about the purpose of this survey. Furthermore, the researcher also ensured that participants felt comfortable sharing their Internet content to be analyzed. The researcher also examined the data extracted from the participants embracing Facebook entries, WhatsApp conversation extracts, and tweets.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Topics Identified on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter**

When studying the content of the posts, a number of prominent issues discussed surfaced. They included texts discussing educational aspects, politics, advertising, relationships, and boosting self-esteem. The following section discusses the themes.

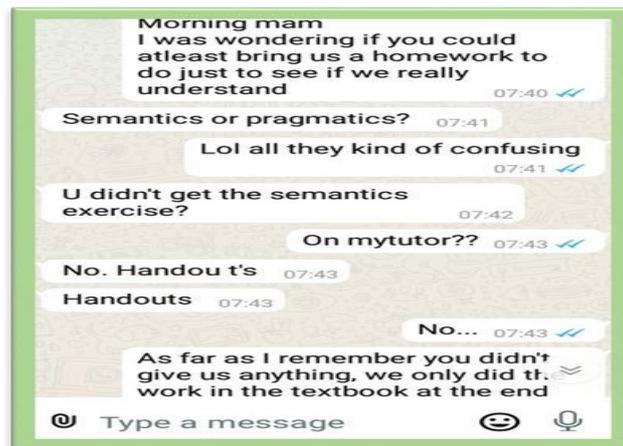
#### **4.1.1 Education**

It emerged from the content of the texts studied that more than half of the SNS users discussed educational matters. They shared work-related information or time to meet. The topic of education was also limited to Facebook and WhatsApp. Educational issues were not prominent on Twitter but for a few tweets on graduation. Since the participants were students enrolled at a UoT, it is understandable that they discussed educational matters regarding their studies and test content.

The background knowledge, therefore, explains the choice of discussing educational issues. Facebook and WhatsApp served as very helpful devices for communicating important information regarding their academic work and administrative matters. Students shared dates for the test. Furthermore, when analyzing the discourse, it came as quite a surprise that there were so few spelling mistakes. The ungrammatical forms were related more to clipping, the use of number homophones, and excessive punctuation or omission of periods. The finding is that these students benefit from the contact on these Internet platforms, and they learn much to spell better using online dictionaries, which reflects favourably on their level of education.

Students had the benefit of collaborating on aspects of their academic work by using these platforms. Hashtags were not prominent. Pinning of academic work using Twitter also surfaced. Users do not prefer Twitter to communicate educational matters. Participants also reported that they had WhatsApp groups to assist them in coping with the sharing of information and knowledge regarding their subjects. The next WhatsApp post provides evidence of communication between the lecturer and students regarding handouts given in class to explain semantics.

Figure 4.1 WhatsApp participant 57



#### 4.1.2 Social and Romantic Communication

Another salient topic that emerged from the data was the topic of social discourse, which relates to love and relationships. It appeared that students were censoring themselves as they discussed romantic aspects very politely, which can also be seen as a limitation of this study. Maybe because they knew they were going to participate in this study. It was clear that Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter are preferred for romantic connections and that posting on these platforms was a popular way to engage and share information. Although Twitter was seldom used for educational purposes (P63, P65, P75), there were also instances of tweets regarding wisdom to share on love and relationships (P15, P16, P26, P27, P77).

Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, and Sprecher (2012) found that couples who shared similar language styles had a higher chance of staying together when compared to those who had dissimilar language styles. When studying the many entries on Facebook linked with romance (P20, P21, 76, P79), it was clear that students, especially at their age, were interested in engaging in romantic relationships. Women using Facebook, especially young women, attempt to maintain social relationships, and they compare themselves with others to build their self-esteem (Bergagna & Tartaglia, 2018). They enjoy communicating and inviting friends socially and romantically. See the next Facebook entry as an example where the female expresses the need for romantic attention.

Figure 4.2 Facebook participant 76



### 4.1.3 Politics

Several political entries were made using Twitter, whereas political topics were not identified in many instances on the Facebook and WhatsApp posts. Van Loon (2019) informs about the use of Twitter and states that Twitter has made the most of its opportunities. Twitter, as a platform is a space where 'organic' can still find expression and important celebrities and politicians can attract much interest affordably. The problem that arises is, however, that political parties can use the platform as an advertising tool. Van Loon (2019) also reports that Zuckerberg is in favor of allowing free expression instead of banning certain information, but his employees requested stricter measures in this regard.

Van Loon (2019) calls for measures to guard against encroaching on each other's terrain of management. Misinformation remains a challenge as information shared on Twitter can reach many users. Van Loon (2019) advises steps to have better control and moderation tools to avoid unnecessary political repercussions. The following post is a good example. This post serves as an advertisement for the ANC and the visual with the colors and symbols of the ANC.

Figure 4.3 Twitter participant 21



### 4.1.4 Self-esteem

Bergagna and Tartaglia (2018) found in their study that individuals with low self-esteem tend to compare themselves to others on Internet platforms such as Facebook. The users endeavor to simulate a different self-image from what is happening in reality. The platform that had the most vivid examples of awareness of self-esteem and even self-esteem linked with gender references was Twitter. Participant 19 on the status provided short tweets to share, e.g., the tweet a Gucci belt can provide. Wearing a Gucci belt is a way of indicating that you have style, taste, and possibly the money to buy it.

Figure 4.4 Twitter participant 19



#### 4.1.5 Advertising

The term "advertising" originated from the Medieval Latin verb "advertere," which means to direct attention. Advertising is a form of discourse that exerts a powerful influence on consumers using specific language that can drive the product and persuade the consumer to act on the plea to buy (McFarlane, 2020). Advertising has a strong materialistic side since it involves marketing and moneymaking. Receivers need to be convinced to consume the product.

It is, therefore, imperative to investigate the topic that surfaced, even though it is not dominant from the findings. McFarlane (2020) identifies presupposition, cohesion, lifestyle behaviors, visual-based info, words, and pictures that involve the senses as crucial in advertising. Aspects such as attention, interest, and memorability are vital. The consumer must be enticed to buy the product, and visuals and the most effective language must pique their interest. Examples of the techniques are emotive language, repetition of words, and logo designs.

McFarlane (2020) focuses on the financial implications of advertising and claims that Facebook and Twitter make money by selling advertising while offering a free service that only requires data. The idea is to match the users' Facebook profiles with WhatsApp and gain access to their phone numbers so they can see the advert on the messaging application. When studying the social media platform from a discourse perspective, the researcher also posts for advertisements. The following adverts were quite prominent.

Figure 4.5 Twitter participant 23



## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the evolving landscape of social networking among South African tertiary-level learners, highlighting the pervasive influence of platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. As emphasized by Gencer (2016), social networking has become a favored pastime among Internet users, facilitating communication on a global scale. The integration of these platforms into the educational context, as noted by Balcikanli (2015), underscores their significance in fostering engaging learning experiences. Cyber socializing, as emphasized by Akakandelwa and Walubitha (2017), not only enables information sharing but also nurtures a sense of belonging and offers avenues for addressing personal issues within the student community.

Educators and policymakers must recognize the importance of discourse analysis in understanding the nuances of student interactions on Internet platforms. As highlighted by Bock (2013), interpreting conventionalized genres from a discourse-analytical perspective is essential for discerning underlying themes and linguistic nuances prevalent in student conversations. This necessitates a comprehensive approach to content analysis aimed at decoding motivations, sentiments, and contextual factors influencing online interactions.

Recommendations stemming from this study include the need for educators to harness the potential of social media platforms for academic purposes while promoting responsible usage among students. Moreover, policymakers should consider the implications of student discourse on broader societal constructs, including academic performance and mental health. By fostering informed discussions and developing appropriate policies, stakeholders can effectively leverage social media as a tool for education, socialization, and personal development, thereby enriching the digital landscape for future generations.

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