

Texts Classification and Sustainability: A Case of Facebook Sub Genres

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rissj.v2i2.216>

| Primrose Hlatshwayo¹ | Lettiah Gumbo² |

^{1,2}Communication Skills
Centre, Midlands State
University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

¹hlatshwayop@staff.msu.ac.zw

²gumbol@staff.msu.ac.zw

ABSTRACT

Facebook is one of the latest genres of internet social networks which have attained widespread popularity, yet its defining characteristics have not been systematically described. It has been labeled by some as a genre of possibilities implying that you can come across, new, interesting, unacceptable and controversial texts on FB. Again, it has been labeled a genre of possibilities since it is dynamic, complex and it uses multiple types of sources. FB has emerged as an effective tool for communicating social ties, keeping family and friends updated on latest issues and events, creating new affiliations and as a stage for political or democratic campaigns. The paper investigated the unique elements inherent in Facebook subgenre. It is an endeavour to understand the defining characteristics of Facebook sub genres. The study identified the most useful criteria for categorizing Facebook texts and also identifying the most typical or unique features of FB genres. The researchers endeavored to answer the question what is it that essentially determines the 'Facebookness' of FB genres? The study investigated the defining mechanism and sustainability of FB subgenres and established that the most common subgenres on FB are comments, news links, democratic campaigns, business interactions, comments, groups, religious texts and visuals images. The concept The study made reference to some genre theorists in order to facilitate understanding on the aspect of genre classification and sustainability on FB. The study will assist Facebook users to understand the Facebook genres and contribute to the existing pool of applied linguistics knowledge

KEYWORDS

genre; facebook; sub genres; classification; sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The word genre comes from French, although it is argued to be an originally Latin word for 'kind' or 'class' (Chandler 2005). The term is widely used in rhetoric, media and literary theory. In linguistics, the term is often used to refer to a distinctive type of a text. Thus, the study of genre seems to bear towards the division of texts types and naming of these types. Because texts occur within particular genres, the features that are specified as distinguishing them may be those of lexis, syntax and discourse. These features are determined by aspects such as participants, members of the discourse community as well as the communicative purpose of the text. Social networks have been defined as web-based services that allow participants to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Social media discourse is complex and dynamic. This implies that the genres in social media discourse are dynamic as well as complex (Bhatia 2002). They are complex in the sense that they incorporate texts of various kinds, serving often overlapping and at the same time conflicting communicative purpose. FB incorporates texts from various platforms like twitter, Myspace, newspapers, television programmes and whatsapp. As SNSs proliferate and evolve, defining what constitutes a social network site becomes increasingly challenging (Ellison and Boyd, 2013). Ellison and Boyd (2013) further point out that scholars face a unique challenge in trying to investigate this rapidly moving phenomenon, as they struggle to understand people's practices while the very systems through which they are enacted shift. Even efforts to describe social network sites themselves are challenged by the ongoing evolution of the phenomenon. On this regard, Ellison and Boyd (2013) further indicate that some of the features that initially distinguished them have faded significantly, while others have been reproduced by other genres of social media. In support of this assertion, Miller et al (2016) posited that genres migrate or move between quite a number of platforms.

Nowadays, there is a new genre of self-recorded live videos where some individuals record themselves delivering speeches or awareness campaigns or democratic campaigns and other interesting topics. For example, a video of a woman speaking about the issue of bond notes and describing the nature of bond notes to people. The video has circulated on whatsapp, FB and other social media platforms. Videos of such nature are now common on social media platforms. There are some well-known individuals who have become celebrities on platforms like Facebook mainly because of their posts, especially the live videos where viewers are given an opportunity to respond.

RESEARCH METHODS

The inquiry was in the form of a survey and this approach was used to probe the determined objective of this paper. This research is predominantly qualitative in nature although the researches used various social media posts to make a thorough and critical analysis of Facebook sub-genres. For instance, various Facebook posts on the internet were consulted as secondary sources. The different posts provided an insight into different types of Facebook sub-genres. Face reviews gave the researchers an advantage in that it was not difficult to get hold of relevant information and we regarded it as the most appropriate research strategy to employ. In addition to Facebook platform analysis, the researchers purposively sampled some research participants who were well versed in the subject under study in order to get the best information to serve the researchers' interests and goals. These were interviewed mainly focusing on generating knowledge on the texts classification and sustainability of Facebook sub genres.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Facebook Sub Genres and their Sustainability

Other discourses which have gained popularity on Facebook are religious videos and messages. Where clips of different prophets circulate on social media platforms, such texts may request people to type amen after reading the text or watching a video. Even clips of prominent people like government officials and business people are also circulated on FB. Prophet Bushiri, Prophet Makandiwa, Prophet Java, Prophet Magaya, to name but a few, are such prophets who are popular on FB posting messages of prosperity and deliverance. Now even Churches services are circulated on social media and these have managed to gain popularity and it looks like the producers have managed to maintain them. The

sustainability of such genres emanates from the economic situation in Zimbabwe, which is in shambles, people are not employed and in poverty and it is difficult to get hold of money if you are not employed. As such, people applaud Facebook genres, advertising their business, hoping for a good living through customer marketing and this is shown by the number of likes and the comments usually in the form of amen that are posted against such texts. One can safely conclude that some Facebook genres transformed how businesses and consumers interact.

Visual messages have also gained some ground on many social media platforms like FB. The introduction of smart phones with a facility where individuals can take pictures or videos of themselves has necessitated the genre. People are more satisfied by posting images of themselves alone or with family members. The genre has been well received as hundreds of people fall to the trend daily. The sustainability is also determined by the quality of the picture and the nature of pictures as well. If the pictures are nice and are of good nature, the person is likely to receive a dozen likes as compared to nude pictures or those of poor quality taken by amateurs. One can conclude that visuals as a genre on FB can be maintained and accepted by people if they are not of provocative nature and are of high quality.

Furthermore, another genre that has been well received is the comic. Before the introduction of social media, the genre was common to the television alone, but it has since migrated to different social media platforms. Examples are Baba Tenson (Zimbabwean) and Anne Kansime (Ugandan) to mention just a few. Comics have become a popular genre on FB and other social networking platforms. Usually the communicative function of such is to entertain and in some cases, they can be political, used as a tool to convey political messages. Again, the genre has been well received and maintained judging on the number of likes and the number of people who watch the videos.

To add on to the points raised above, Swales (1990:58) highlights that a genre comprises of a class of communicative events in which discourse members share some set of communicative purposes. The purposes are recognized by the members of the discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. The author further asserts that apart from the communicative purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style content and intended audience. He further argues that, the genre names produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically needs further validation. This point to the need for further validation, implying that describing a genre basing on the above-mentioned characteristics is not entirely without problems. It hints that there are some problems which can be encountered in trying to categorize genres in to groups basing on their communicative purpose, content, style and intended audience. As such, the researcher endeavours to identify the problems which may be encountered in generic grouping as well as providing possible solutions to the problem.

Facebook Defining Mechanism

Scholars face a unique challenge in trying to investigate this “rapidly moving Facebook (FB) phenomenon, they struggle to understand people’s practices while the very systems through which they are enacted shift. Even efforts to describe social network sites themselves are challenged by the ongoing evolution of the phenomenon. FB has its origin in the University of Harvard (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The private website owned by Facebook Inc. was quickly transformed from a private club within the University of Harvard to a service open to everyone in 2006. On this social site, users create an online profile by listing personal information and interests, link up with other users and share

updates of the information posted on a daily basis. Participants use the platform to interact with people they already know or to meet new people that are called friends who can post comments on each other's profiles. The website includes several features, such as communication through private or public messages, a chat, online forum, photos, videos, links, a personal Wall, and News Feed, where friends or participants can post their messages and comment on topics. FB is constantly modifying and improving the services provided, offering more and more online services.

One of the most interesting feature of this site is that it enables a great variety of online genres to be accessed through the same platform; these genres being both synchronous and asynchronous. They are easily identified and can be organized and customized in the way the user of the site desires, some services can be visible to the whole online community and some cannot. Battner/Fiori (2009) in Perez-Sebater (2012) put forward that it is a tool that goes beyond synchronous and asynchronous technologies; as part of Web 2.0 principles, it is a participatory platform where users can add information or modify the information already online, for example, a user can tag the pictures uploaded by adding the names of the people or a description. Any participant can create a group and this can be open to other users, or restricted to a pre-selected community. Groups on FB can be political, gender based, educational, profession based to mention but a few. Facebook also offers a plethora of services to its users which include recommendations, recent advertisements, memory, weather updates, offers, fundraising platforms, gaming videos, live chats and waving.

On recommendations participants can ask for recommendations on just anything for example reputable schools doctors and mechanics. On this, people with knowledge will then respond giving information. FB also allows its users to receive recent advertisements on services and goods for sell. Again, people are constantly reminded of their past through this memory feature. Individuals are reminded of posts and events which occurred on specific days. Participants can also wave at each other using the wave feature.

Useful Criteria for Grouping FB Texts

Studies carried out on social media are mostly social, failing to give a description of the texts common on such platforms. This is echoed by Lomborg (2011) who argues that social media' tend to lack definitional clarity and basis in theories of media and text. Just because there are no constrains that guide the construction of such genres does not mean that the texts do not have categories. Derida (1981, p.61) argues that; a text cannot belong to no genre; it cannot be without... a genre'. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genre-less text'. This implies that every other text that is posted on FB from the shortest, the dumbest and to the longest of them all is supposed to fall under a specific genre. For example, the dumbest and shortest posts on FB like 'lol' for laugh out loud, 'ok' and kkkkkk'for humour fall under the comments category. Even the emerging genres where people just create some harsh tags for example harsh tag 'my Zimbabwean flag 'have gained popularity and people can categorise them under the harsh tag genre.

Again, another simple way that can be used to categorise such harsh tag texts on FB is by considering the communicative purpose of the text. The emerging genres on FB are largely determined by their communicative purpose. People are now producing their own clips and posting them on various social media platforms, In Zimbabwe, such a genre is identified by a harsh tag symbol. For example, harsh tag *sesijekile*, *tajamuka* (we have rebelled) and # My Zimbabwean flag. They can also be associated with democratic campaigns. The sole communicative purpose of messages is to facilitate change. The messages in most cases are there to make people see that there is need for change in the

country. Furthermore, the genre is associated with the opposition party in Zimbabwe. On the sustainability of such genres, the communicative purpose is the major factor to consider, if the genre addresses what the people want to hear, then the genre will remain and gain popularity. Such genres have gained acceptance more than any other genre on FB simply because of the purpose they serve.

However, it is important to note that the producers of such genres also contribute to the acceptance and the development of such genres. The credibility of the creator of a clip count as well. If people regard the creator of the genre lowly or if the creator is associated with controversy, it will be difficult for people to uphold the texts or share the messages. A good example is that of Evans Mawarire, the originator of the ‘#love my Zimbabwean flag’. When Evans was in Zimbabwe and participating from within, people accepted him and for that moment his posts gained power as compared to other genres. However, the moment he left Zimbabwe to the exile, people started to question his agenda. Media was awash with all forms of assumptions about his identity. From that time onwards, his genre lost its value to the people; some people even posted insulting comments on his page.) The notion of power and media has been explored by Thwaites et al (1940) who argue that some genres are more powerful than others: they differ in the status which is attributed to them by those who produce texts within them and by their audiences. The implication is that genres exhibit the relation between texts and power.

Adding on to that, on the formation of new genres, Fowler (1989) gives an insight which helps us understand the classification of such genres by saying that, a genre can be seen as a shared code between the producers and interpreters of texts included within it. Fowler even suggests that 'communication is impossible without the agreed codes of genre. The harsh tag texts on FB, the lol, kkkkkk, are also agreed codes between the composers of the messages and the consumers of the message. FB users do not have problems in understanding some words or some new genres because as a community, that is what they agreed on.

Facebook Groups

Another popular genre that is common on Social media platforms is the formation of groups. Groups are found on FB as well as whatsapp. In most cases groups are formed according to schools attended, professions, sex, age to mention a few. Thus, embedded within texts are assumptions about the 'ideal reader', including their attitudes towards the subject matter and often their class, age, gender and ethnicity Usually groups have what are called group administrators who are responsible for the running of business for the specific groups. The administrators usually craft some group rules that are pinned on the wall of the group, stating the rules and the type of texts expected by the group. This genre somehow is aligned to the traditional criteria of categorising texts. (Kress 1988, p.183) defines a genre as 'a kind of text that derives its form from the structure of a (frequently repeated) social occasion, with its characteristic participants and their purposes. Examples of such groups on FB are Pahushamwari Hwedu (PH) a group of young women who call themselves cousins, “Pregnancy and health tips”, the name itself is loaded in as far as defining the audience is concerned; the members are mostly females of child bearing age. Other trending groups for young women are “Dandaro remadzimai Anhasi-Today’s Women”, Kugeza neRunako na Ruby Lyn. In most cases, on such groups, people hide their identities when posting some texts, they go through one of the group administrators who will then post the texts for them. The posts become recognizable in the sense that they usually start with the statement, Hi Patie, please post my story as hidey. Usually the participants will be seeking for assistance to do with pregnancy issues, marriage problems, troublesome in-

laws to mention just a few. On that example 'Patie' will be the name of the administrator to post the story or text.

Unique Elements Inherent in Facebook Sub-Genres

On the formation of FB genres, one can also say that, old or existing genres help in the creation of other genres. This is supported by Todorov who argue that 'a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres' (cited in Swales 1990, p.36). Each new work within a genre has the potential to influence changes within the genre or perhaps the emergence of new sub-genres (which may later blossom into fully-fledged genres). However, such a perspective tends to highlight the role of authorial experimentation in changing genres and their conventions, whereas it is important to recognize not only the social nature of text production but especially the role of economic and technological factors as well as changing audience preferences. On the formation of face book genres, one can argue that the harsh tag campaigns on FB resemble the 'Baba Jukwa' genre or campaign which reached its peak towards the Zimbabwe's 2013 Presidential elections, the *tajamuka* campaigns and love the flag campaigns resemble the *Baba Jukwa* campaigns.

Contemporary theorists tend to emphasize the importance of the semiotic notion of intertextuality of seeing individual texts in relation to others. Wales (1989) notes that 'genre is... an intertextual concept' Hartley suggests that 'we need to understand genre as a property of the relations between texts' (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1994, p.128). As Thwaites *et al.* put it, 'each text is influenced by the generic rules in the way it is put together; the generic rules are reinforced by each text' (Thwaites *et al.* 1994, p.100). Barthes (1975) argued that it is in relation. This explains the existence of external news links, videos, pictures and jokes from other social networking sites like my space, twitter and even WhatsApp. There is some form of texts circulation among the common social networking sites. A single joke can appear on whatsapp, twitter and FB. As such, people stay abreast of the news without searching for it. The practice is becoming common among young people and Stelter (2008) referred to the practice as social filter. As such, face book has become a sort of referral to other sites especially media sites (Calderon, 2010) Dynamics or changes in a people's culture, political structures, economic situations and the knowledge level of people can cause changes in genres. This is echoed by Gunnarsson *et al* (1997; p.3) who argue that genres are continuously being renewed due to changes in political ideologies, power structures, knowledge levels and social patterns. Gunnerson *et al* (1997) called for the need to view professional discourse in its historical framework. These historical and situated contemporary construction processes are mutually constructive. It is the repeated social practice that forms the genres. Gunnarsson *et al* (1997), further stated that spoken as well as written genres have been created as answers to cognitive, social and societal needs and they are continuously being renewed and recreated in the professional practice due to the same needs. Gunnarsson *et al* (1997) posited that, the abandoning of genres and the creation of new ones is a social act with a social meaning. This explains why some genres fade away, fail to survive or flourish. The popularity or relevance of a genre makes it survive in a given platform like FB. The implication is that the genres in order to make it on a given platform should be in line with the economic, educational background and societal needs of the people. Anything that is posted today addressing topical issues like 'bond notes' for example will flourish and gain stability in no time, as long as it addresses what people want to hear and relevant matters.

CONCLUSION

The researchers adopt Derrida's stance that there are no 'genreless' texts. The concept of intertextuality was deemed to be the most common criterion for grouping FB subgenre, followed by the communicative purpose and the structure or the formula of the text. On genre sustainability, the study concludes that relevance of the genre, the integrity of the originator of the text and communicative function determines the growth of a particular genre. Again, the readership also counts in as far as maintaining a genre.

This study has also established that the biggest impact of the face book sub genres is on children. Children are growing up in an environment surrounded by social media. Hence, they are turning to various sub genres for entertainment and knowledge seeking. This shows how important social networking can be part of a people's life. However, even if Facebook is a good idea, some people are getting addicted and it becomes very bad for a person. Some of the Facebook genres are bad influence in a people's lives.

Society had reached a point where most are doing their own things on Facebook such that human relationships and interaction are severely affected. Even in the home, relationships are being eroded because of Facebook. Facebook has been adopted by billions of people and its impact on human behaviour is very tremendous. This is because Facebook has allowed creativity, efficiency, effectiveness and convenience hence it has managed to attract such big numbers of people.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I feel greatly indebted to the following colleagues who took their precious time to give helpful comments for this thesis: Doctor Julia Mutamabra, Dr Precious Dube, Ms Tendai Letwin Makaita Njanji and Mrs Maureen Mugomba. You created a stimulating environment, which helped immensely in generating some of the ideas and observations in this study. Your views were very informative to our study and research endeavors. Your imperious guidance and encouragement cannot be forgotten; you have been instrumental!

To those who participated in this study, thank you for affording us the time to interview you. We say thank you so much for sparing your time for our study; answering the interview questions. We are grateful for all the support you gave. You provided for valuable information for this study.

REFERENCES

- Chandler, D. (2005). 'An Introduction to Genre Theory' [WWWdocument] http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/chandler_genre_theory.pdf (Accessed 15/09/20)
- Derrida, J. (1981). The law of genre. In Mitchell, W. J. T. (Ed.) *On narrative*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. Edward Arnold: New York
- Fowler, A. (1989). Genre. In Barnouw, E. (Ed.): *International encyclopedia of communications*. Oxford University: New York.
- Ellison, N. B. & Boyd, D. (2013). Sociality through Social Network Sites. In Dutton, W. H. (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, pp.151-172.
- Gunnarsson, B. L, Linnel, P. & Nordberg, B. (1997). *The construction of professional discourse*. Longman: London.
- Kress, G. (1988). *Communication and culture: An introduction*. New South Wales University Press: Kensington.

- Lomborg, S. (2014). *Social Media. Social Genres: Making Sense of the Ordinary*. Routledge: New York.
- Perez-Sabater, C. (2012). The Linguistics of Social Networking: A Study of Writing Conventions on Facebook, *Linguistik Online*, 6(56) (Accessed: 15/09/2020)
- Swales, M. (1990). *Genre Analysis in English Academic and Research Settings*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Stam, R. (2000). *Film Theory*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Thwaites, T., Davis, L. & Warwick, M. (1994). *Tools for Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. Macmillan: South Melbourne.
- O'Sullivan, T., Hartley, Saunders, D. Montgomery M. & Fiske, J. (1994). *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. Rutledge: London.