

Review Article

## Social Grooming in Facebook: Linguistic Study of Facebook among a Selected Group of Kenyan Internet Users

Florence Muthoni Mwithi\*

Department of Literary and Communication Studies, Laikipia University, Kenya

**Article History**

Received: 21.01.2021

Accepted: 02.02.2021

Published: 08.02.2021

**Journal homepage:**

<https://www.easpublisher.com>

**Quick Response Code**



**Abstract:** Social Media is consumed for various purposes, and individuals utilise different media channels to achieve other goals. Among the purposes include passing the time, information seeking, convenience, entertainment, self-expression, forming new relationships, education, and marketing. Studies have shown that individuals using Facebook have higher sociability, extraversion and neuroticism than those using other social media platforms. This article examines how Facebook is used for socialising needs like meeting and talking with others and getting peer support and a sense of community. The arguments are that typical Facebook user will directly communicate with a small core group of friends by posting comments or messages, indicating strong ties. It is crucial to explore how Facebook users maintain the motive of the maintenance of friendship. This article is located in Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) frameworks and used questionnaires to obtain data.

**Keywords:** Facebook, social grooming, social media.

**Copyright © 2021 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## INTRODUCTION

Facebook in Kenya has gained a lot of popularity compared to other forms of CMC available to the Kenyan populace. According to Kiribati mobile social media usage statistics, FB is the most used social network in Kenya at 92.44 per cent. This paper seeks to examine Facebook's motives as a social networking site among internet users in Kenya. Facebook use helps to fulfil social grooming needs [1, 2]. In many nonhuman primate species, physical grooming plays a significant role in maintaining social bonds and promoting group stability [1]. In humans, Dunbar suggests that seemingly superfluous acts like gossip and small talk serve a similar social grooming role. The argument is that Facebook is an online space

that helps keep in touch with friends, information sharing, entertainment, social interaction, and relationship maintenance. The paper seeks to examine the purposeful usage of Facebook as social grooming space. This point supports the current research approach of viewing Facebook as a Social Network Site rather than a Social Networking Site. A motives scale was adapted from the Internet Motives Scale (IMS) of Papacharissi and Rubin [3]. The motives include passing the time, information seeking, convenience, entertainment, self-expression, forming new relationships, education, and marketing. This discussion begins with analysing Facebook user demographics in Kenya and then examining how Facebook post acts as socialisation tools.

**Table-1.1: Facebook User Demographics For Kenya November 2014**

FB Age Groups	Total FB Users By Age Group	Total FB Users By Age Group As A Percentage of Total	Total FB Male Users By Age Group	Total FB Female Users By Age Group	Percentage Of FB Male Users By Age Group	Percentage Of FB Female Users By Age Group
13-17	196,000	4.67%	130,000	66,000	66.33%	33.67%
18-24	1,720,000	40.99%	1,100,000	620,000	63.95%	36.05%
25-34	1,360,000	32.41%	880,000	480,000	64.71%	35.29%
35-44	400,000	9.53%	280,000	120,000	70.00%	30.00%
45-54	148,000	3.53%	100,000	46,000	68.49%	31.51%
55-64	52,000	1.24%	32,000	20,000	61.54%	38.46%
65+	320,000	7.63%	182,000	146,000	55.49%	44.51%
Total FB Users	4,196,000		2,704,000	1,498,000		

Source: Kemibaro 2014

As provided in the table, the data is broken down by age groups and then by gender to give an even more illuminating insight of ‘who’ these 4.2 million users in Kenya are. This data was generated using Facebook’s ad campaign planning tool to get a sense of their users in Kenya and then drilling down to specifics. About 41 per cent of Facebook users in Kenya or about 620,000 to be exact are in the 18-24 age group. They are followed closely by users in the 25-34 age group at 32%. This indicates that youth are the majority of users of Facebook. Due to freedom as adults and privacy rules, they can join the site; they are the ones who are comparatively technology savvy and have access to smartphones and computers. This group

is also economically capable of accessing Facebook and need the social site to create, maintain and concretise their relationships, be it academically, socially or financially.

**Categorisation of FB posts using the medium as a factor**

Following Herring’s [4] faceted classification, FB posts were first generally categorised using the two factors that condition Computer-Mediated Discourse; medium and situational. For the current study, posts were conditioned by the medium as a factor in the following ways.

**Table-2.2: Important medium Factors that condition FB**

	Medium factors that condition CMD	As relates to FB in the current study
M1	Synchronicity	FB posts are asynchronous
M2	Message transmission (1-way, vs 2 Way	Posts are transmitted 1-way
M3	Persistence of transcript	Posts have persistence of transcript
M4	Size of message buffer	Users are allowed up to 60,000 characters in their posts
M5	Channels of communication	Texts and visual (graphics), audio-visual (When one shares a video etc.)
M6	Anonymous messaging	Messages are usually posted on one’s wall or a friend’s wall, and the identity of the one posting is generally known
M7	Private messaging	Send a message into a friend’s wall
M8	Filtering	N/A
M9	Quoting	N/A
M10	Message format	Newer posts are appearing at the end of a list containing the posts

Table adapted from Herring [4]: A faceted classification scheme for CMD, Table 2.2, when applied to the current research, yields the following interpretations: Firstly, FB posts are asynchronous meaning that users need not be logged on simultaneously to send or receive messages. The posts under analysis were not made by users simultaneously, and similarly, the researcher did not need to be online when the posts were being made. Secondly, the posts were made at different times and days and because of the persistence of the transcript, they were available for

some time on the user’s walls, which made it easy for the researcher to collect the data. Thirdly, FB posts are also 1-way transmission meaning that there is rarely simultaneous feedback during message exchange. The implication for this is that the receiver does not interrupt or otherwise engage simultaneously with the sender’s message. This differs from conventional speech because of the missing adjacency pairs.

Fourthly, the exchanges are interleaved. If you consider the message format itself, which adds new

messages at the bottom of the list containing the posts, the scenario becomes even more complicated. The researcher has to carefully try to follow the posts' progression and arrange the messages into categories that will be cohesive and meaningful. Fifthly, the FB post allows for up to 60,000 characters. The implication of this is that the users are afforded more linguistic space to interact and are not limited instead of, for example, Short Messaging Services (SMS) or twitter with small buffers. Of interest then is the shortening, abbreviations, and omissions observed on the posts, yet, there is more than enough room for a user to communicate at length just like in conventional language. Finally, FB posts utilise varied channels to

communicate, including text, visual and audio-visual. The track mostly used, and analysed in this study, is writing, which yielded several linguistic features and visuals (photos) discussed in the subsequent chapter. Audio-visuals channels like video uploads were left out of the analysis.

**Categorisation of FB posts using Social and Situational Factors**

Herring [4] also talks of a second factor that conditions CMD and following her categorisation, the following was the categorisation of FB posts using social and situational factors.

**Table-2.3: Social and Situational factors that condition FB**

	Category/factor	Explanation as relates to FB in the current study
S1	Participation Structure	Eight users participated for three months
S2	Participants characteristics	Profile information of the users which is given in table 4.4
S3	Purpose (motivation)	Entertainment, Social grooming, informational
S4	Activities	Salutations, checking in-describing what they are doing, where they are and with whom, sending requests, birthday wishes, setting up meetings, catching up, adding their voice to a cause, contributing to a trending topic,
S5	Topics	Discussion of content, themes are addressed in chapter Four, including Entertainment, social interaction, sports, relationships, trending issues, business
S6	Tone	Civil, informal, abusive, offensive, friendly
S7	Norms	Normal to 'like' someone comments to acknowledge receivership, add your comment and reply to comments
S8	Code	Informal, English, Kiswahili, Vernacular and Sheng

Table adopted from Herring [4]: A faceted classification scheme for CMD. Table 2.3 is self-explanatory in terms of the social factors that condition Facebook posts. The social and situational factors condition FB posts in the manner in which the explanations have been given. It becomes clear easy to understand and appreciate the very nature of FB, its workings and language.

**Facebook Posts**

The first data set for analysis also included FB posts from the eight FB friends. The first procedure that Herring [4] proposes in her theoretical framework involves articulating research questions. This was done, and consequently, the following research questions guided the current study: What are the linguistic features used on Facebook in Kenya and what

interpretations can be made of them? How do Kenyan Facebook users present their identities on Facebook? And what are the motivations for using the linguistic features by users of Facebook in Kenya? Several linguistic features were chosen following the procedure laid out by Herring [4] faceted data classification scheme. By examining the data, the researcher was able to pick out several recurrent major linguistic features that after that led to the coding and counting, tabulating and subsequent analysis. The linguistic features chosen included: Non-standard orthography, code-switching and emoticons. A detailed discussion of these features is offered in Chapter Four. A summary of the data for analysis is given in this section, although the full, detailed discussion of the data is provided in the subsequent chapter.

**Table-2.4: Summary of data set for analysis of the eight respondents for three months.**

Linguistic Features FB posts that were analysed			
	Marked Linguistic feature	Frequency unit/word	Percentage frequency %
1.	Non-standard orthography	301	72.88
2	Code-switching	93	22.51
3	Emoticons	19	4.6
	Total	413	100

Source: Author's research (2015)

1. Total number of words used 413
2. Total number of photos used 30

### Transcriptions and Presentation of Data

Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn, Cumming and Danao [5] cited in Ndambuki [6] define discourse transcription as creating a written representation of a speech event it accessible to discourse research. Ndambuki [6] mentions two distinct forms of transcription; broad and narrow transcription. According to these authors, general transcription includes the most basic transcription information: the words and who they were spoken by, the division of the stream of speech into turns and intonation units (and contours) medium and long pauses, laughter and uncertain hearings or indecipherable words. On the other hand, narrow transcription is more detailed as the transcriber also includes notation of things like accent, tone, breathing, and other vocal noises. I use broad transcription for the FB posts. (See transcription conventions in 3.5.4). Puchta and Porter 2004; 3 cited in Ndambuki [6] observe that transcribed talk looks messy ‘, but that is what real talk is all about, speakers hesitate, pause, repeat themselves and correct themselves’. To make sense of transcripts, Du Bois *et al.* [1] propose the construction of a coding system for language research, for example, use capital letters A, B, C, and so on to identify the speaker in a given turn. The selection or development of a guiding theory on coding is not easy. For them, whatever approach the researcher chooses is likely to influence the possible results. The most popular transcription system is that which Gail Jefferson developed for Conversation Analysis in the 1960s. Jeffersonian Transcription is a term used for a scheme for annotating traces; speech, performance, acts, texts, and even observed enacted events comprise vocal utterances, movement, and the interaction between actors, content and context. The current research borrows from the transcription system of Atkinson and Heritage [7] with appropriate modifications. What is coded includes the names of the FB users and the order of stretches of texts produced by a single user. The transcriptions conventions were used for the actual posts by the users and the translations by the researcher. In the current study, the turn is defined as ‘a string of utterances produced by a single speaker and bounded by other participants’ moves equivalent to FB post is used as the basic unit of analysis Gumperz Berenz, [8].

### Transcription conventions

The research used the following transcription notation of Atkinson and Heritage [7] adapted from Cameron [9] with appropriate modifications by the researcher.

1. Alphabets in the upper case followed by a numeral indicate individual participants thus:  
M1 Means the first male participant, F1 means the first female participant and so on.
2. When a numerical figure was put in front of the code for participants, in a post, it refers to the order of the post in the same stretch of posts on the participants’ wall made on the same day. For instance:
  2. F2: Means that this is the second post made by the second female participant in that particular day.
  - 3: after a code for participant signals that what follows is a post, for instance F2:
  4. < > after a code like **2. F2: <.....>** indicates the beginning and end of the actual post written by a participant.
5. The use of italics indicate actual post written by a participant.
6. ..... After a numerical number indicates a post that was made by a Facebook user is not part of the sample either before or after a post made by a participant who is part of the study sample.
7. ( ) indicates that this is information by the researcher, like translation.

### Translation

As already mentioned, the participants’ languages in their FB posts include; English, Kiswahili, Vernacular and Sheng. As such, the researcher provided an English translation whenever any part of the post that was not written in English. Hatim and Mason identify the essential principles of translation as communicative, pragmatic and semiotic, all a set of procedures which place the translator at the centre of the communicative process (1990:3 in Ndambuki 2010: 100) [6]. In creating a new act of communication out of a previously existing one, translators are inevitably acting under the pressure of their social conditioning while at the same time trying to assist in the negotiation of meaning between the producer of the source language text (SL) and the reader of the target language text (TL) both of whom exist within their social frameworks. The concept of equivalence’ is critical to translation studies because the quality of a translated text is assessed in its correspondence to the original text. Relevance is a term used in a relative sense to refer to the closest possible approximation to source language text (SL) meaning, as there is no such thing as a formally and dynamically equivalent target language version of a source language (SL) text ([8, 10] Hatim and Mason, 1990 in Ndambuki, (2010: 100) [6]. However, these scholars agree that the demand that a translation be equivalent to a certain original is void without reference to context.

Context of the utterance, that is, the environment or setting in which a statement occurs is crucial. This includes the linguistic context (textual), the situational context (social context which is achieved through situated observation), and the pragmatic

context which consists of the time, place and culture in which the utterance is made. These different contexts are useful in the interpretation of Facebook posts. In cases where the culture of the source language has a distinctively different cultural value from the same thing in the culture of the target language, the translator kept the original meaning by adjusting the form of the cultural symbol or adding enough background information to indicate to the target language users what the initial value was. In this way, the users of the translation will get the intended meaning. This preservation of the original meaning is essential about code-switching. The general view is that the switches cannot be translated literally because the original author's intended meaning is lost if they are symbolic. Therefore, the researcher did all the transcription, keeping as close with the source language as possible, with native speakers of the source language used.

### Facebook posts as tools of Social Grooming.

Individuals who participate in Facebook to satisfy socialising needs are generally interested in meeting and talking with others and getting peer support and a sense of community. Social grooming here is taken as an umbrella term to include the following factors: maintenance of relationships, staying in touch and getting through to each other through FB, notification of a new message through e-mail prompts a user to log on to FB to check the recent news that a friend had sent. The need to stay in touch with friends is a strong motive to keep FB interactions. Similarly, if one realises that they cannot reach a friend by phone or any other means, FB becomes an easy way of getting the said friend. The assumption is that the friend will check on his/her FB wall from time to time and, therefore, respond to you or might receive a notification by e-mail to check his FB wall. This motive of maintaining friendship speaks to Sheldon [11], who found relationship maintenance to be the most salient factor in her research. People get motivated to log on to FB to maintain relationships and not so much to create new ones. If there are friend's requests, one could accept or decline depending on what they are interested in. Consider the following posts about social interactions.

#### Text 1

**1 F2:** <Goodmorning friends, do have a lovely day and a blessed week ahead.....>

**5M3:** <What a fresh morning, thank u lord.>

**1 MI:** <Leo imekuwa cku weird tu sana>

(today has been a very weird day)

**2 MI:** <Wah!enyewe kuna madem ukula...nimekaa next na dem hapa kwa mat,kiti ya nyuma...amekula queencake SITA, TUNGUMU T UWILI na coke sasaametoa sausage roll na coke.....wawawawah! ngoja nione atatoa nini nxt.....ngojeni tu ntawashow>

(Expression of surprise- wah! there are ladies who eat....i am sitting next to a lady here in the matatu-public transport, at the back seat....she has eaten

SIX QUEENCAKES, (diminutive) HALF CAKES TWO OF THEM and coke, now she has removed a sausage roll and

coke.....expression of surprise-wawawawah! Wait I see what else she will remove.....just you wait I will show you)

**IM3:** <confirm uko locals?? niko nrb bro>

(Confirm if you are in the neighbourhood??(- locals is a sheng word for being in the neighbourhood)I am in (nrb bro) Nairobi brother)

People join Facebook to be able to connect with friends. People update their status and comment on Facebook about mundane activities with much gusto for whoever is willing to read. It is not uncommon for one to post what they are feeling, eating, where they are, who they are with and what they are doing, going, etc. This assertion is true even in the current study. Observations from the eight respondents show that Facebook is at the most, the connection point for most of them where they just engage in social interaction. The status updates have been made for interaction. In addition to increasing social capital, status updates in the current study help fulfil social grooming needs [1, 2]. Participants of FB want to interact like they would do in face to face interaction and therefore find themselves updating their status with greetings, where they are, what they are doing or thinking about. **M1** for instance posts as if he was talking to people he can see, he writes that people should wait for his update in case the lady eats any other thing. This kind of behaviour on FB is reminiscent of what Dunbar [1] suggests of humans. Dunbar has suggested that seemingly superfluous acts like gossip and small talk serve a similar social grooming role.

Other examples of posts made just for social interaction include:

#### Text 2

**1 M4:** <Be kind, don't judge and criticise, forgive quickly, and be merciful n most of all a fab FURAHIDAY 2 U ALL!>

(Be kind, don't judge and criticise, forgive quickly, and be merciful and most of all a fabulous FURAHIDAY-happy Friday to you all!)

No human life is capable without relationships. The FB posts of the eight show that the individuals interacted through updating their status and commenting on what others posted. This motive factor of interaction has a high gratification and seems to agree with Gosling's [2] speculation that Facebook's

popularity may be due, in part, to the ease with which it allows individuals to satisfy a similar basic desire to monitor other network members and maintain social bonds, even in networks that are geographically dispersed. Anything happening in the life of the FB participants that pertain to their relationships end up in their posts as can be seen in the following posts:

**Text 3**

**I F1** <Medicine that makes you wish you did not go to hospital in the first place... yaaackk! Na injections places hazitajiki! This was a very difficult day for me!>

(Medicine that makes you wish you did not go to hospital in the first place... (Expression of disgust, exclamation mark) and injections in places that cannot be uttered (exclamation mark) this was a very difficult day for me (exclamation mark))

2-5 .....

**6 F1**: <Thanks y'all :-)>

(Thank you all happy smiley)

Text 51 is a post that F1 makes concerning her visit to hospital and the unpleasant injections she received. She mentions in her post that she had a very difficult day. Her other FB friends who are not part of the study encourage her and in response, she thanks all who have commented to her update. By including a smiley emoticon she seems to suggest that she feels better. Another post that exemplifies the social interaction motive in FB is Text 52 that follows.

**Text 4**

**I F1**:<About to write my last paper in my final exam in University today! Yaaaaayyyy! When I started, I wasn't sure I was going to make it through, BUT GOD... God turned my challenges into stepping stones, and now here we are! This one is for my whole village!>

(About to write my last paper in my final exam in University today (exclamation mark) expression of excitement (exclamation mark). When I started, I was not sure I was going to make it through, BUT GOD... God turned my challenges into stepping stones, and now here we are! This one is for my whole village (exclamation mark))

.....

**I F1**:<to everyone I may not be able to mention all of you, thanks very much! Some things that seem small are actually quite big to some of us! >

F1 posts about her final examination in university. She expresses her enthusiasm as she comes close to finalising her studies which she adds has not been easy for her. She also thanks everyone who played a part in making her studies a success. This is an example of using FB for social grooming purposes where a user informs others in her network what is

happening in their lives. Another illustration of this social grooming is found in the following text:

**Text 4**

**I F1**:< a FUNNY thing happen today. In 1 of my all female classes, ALL the singles phones (including mine, ahem) kept ringing endlessly, while the married gals phones were extremely silent. Whats your take on this? DOES MARRIAGE KILL ROMANCE?>

(a FUNNY thing happened today. In one of my all-female classes, ALL the singles phones (including mine, (word for clearing of throat) )kept ringing endlessly, while the married gals phones were too silent. What is your take on this? DOES MARRIAGE KILL ROMANCE?>

F1 posts on the difference between relationships of single people and married couples. F1 is single as per her profile information, and therefore, her comments on relationship are made from that background. Although she posts a question for people to comment on, already she has given a scenario that shows single people enjoy more romance and attention than their married counterparts. By capitalising 'funny' and 'does marriage kill romance', she foregrounds them and makes them the theme of her post. In the following post **M4** describes his dilemma on his relationship status.

**Text 5**

**I M4**: <do I consider myself single: NO am I in a relationship:NO have I ever been in a serious relationship for more than two weeks:

NO WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ME?

:- ( >

2 .....

**3 M4**: <yeah you are right....needs more help at least mimi I have been in a relationship.....wewe bro acha maneno ya Vaseline!>

(Yeah you are right...needs more help, at least I have been in a relationship, you brother, stop this vaseline issue).

**M4** posts to lament about how erratic his relationships have been. In a dramatic gesture, he poses a rhetorical question to himself and to show how unhappy he is with the situation, he uses a sad emoticon. Apart from this uninspiring post, M4 shares other messages like the one below to inspire his FB friends.

### Text 6 M4: Visual 1



**IM3:** <Ooooh yeah....true bro> (Expression of agreement, yes....true brother)

## CONCLUSION

Social interaction is an important motive for using FB and the interaction goes on for people who already have a relationship as opposed to forming new ones. The communication is to further concretise existing relationships. Certainly, users of FB engage in status updates that detail their activities which can be conceptualised as social grooming. The desire to socialise is a motivating factor. Social interaction is an important motive for using FB and the interaction goes on for people who already have a relationship as opposed to forming new ones. For instance **MI** had ten people commenting and liking it. It therefore generated interaction. Updates like this make others comment on them and in so doing, cause interaction. Status updates emerged as a significant motive for Facebook use. This suggests that this feature remains one of the most important aspects on the site, despite the continuous inclusion of new functionality, the shift in the demographics of users and the general evolving ecosystem of Facebook.

## REFERENCES

1. Dunbar, R., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (1998). *Grooming, gossip, and the evolution of language*. Harvard University Press.
2. Gosling, S. N., Lowe, J. A., McGregor, G. R., Pelling, M., & Malamud, B. D. (2009). Associations between elevated atmospheric temperature and human mortality: a critical review of the literature. *Climatic change*, 92(3), 299-341.
3. Papacharissi, Z., & Rubin, A. M. (2000). Predictors of Internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(2), 175-196.
4. Parks, M. R., & Floyd, K. (1996). Making friends in cyberspace. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 46(1), 80-97.
5. Anis, J. (2007). Neography: *Unconventional Spelling in French SMS Text Messages*. In B. Danet and S.C. Herring (Eds.). 87-115.
6. AREBA, I. M. (2017). *Uchanganuzi wa lugha ya wanawake katika mabaraza ya chifu: mifano kutoka kata ya kegati, kaunti ya kisii* (Doctoral dissertation, Kisii University).
7. Ndambuki, J. (2010). Discursive Representation of Women's Interest and Needs in Makueni District-Kenya. Unpublished PhD. Thesis, Johannesburg: University of Witwaterstrand.
8. Atkinson, J.M., & Heritage, J. (1999). 'Jefferson's Transcript Notation', in A. Jaworski and N. Coupland (eds) *The Discourse Reader*, pp. 158-66. London /New York: Routledge.
9. Gumperz, J. J., & Berenz, N. (1993). Transcribing conversational exchanges. *Talking data: Transcription and coding in discourse research*, 91122.
10. Cameron, D. (2001). *Working with spoken discourse*. Sage.
11. Hatim, B. (1990). A model of argumentation from Arabic rhetoric: Insights for a theory of text types. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 17(1), 47-54.
12. Sheldon, P. (2008a). Student favorite: Facebook and Motives for Its Use. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 23(2), 39-55.
13. Biber, D. (1998). Methodological issues regarding corpus-based analyses of linguistic variation. *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 5.257-269.
14. Blattner, G., & Fiori, M. (2009). "Facebook in the Language Classroom: Promises and Possibilities". *Instructional Technology and Distance Learning (ITDL)*, vol. 6, n° pp. 17-28. [http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan\\_09/article02.htm](http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan_09/article02.htm)
15. Kiribati. (2015). *Mobile Social Media Usage Statistics – 2015* (<https://www.statsmonkey.com/27/2/2016>).

**Cite This Article:** Florence Muthoni Mwithi., (2021). Social Grooming in Facebook: Linguistic Study of Facebook among a Selected Group of Kenyan Internet Users. *East African Scholars J Edu Humanit Lit*, 4(2), 59-65.