

The use of English abbreviations on WhatsApp amongst university students in Zimbabwe

Clemenciana Mukenge

cmukenge@arts.uz.ac.zw

Department of Creative Media and Communication, University of Zimbabwe,
Harare, Zimbabwe.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2306-4755>

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Abstract

This study explores the utilization of WhatsApp abbreviations among university students in Zimbabwe and its implications for English language proficiency. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews with 30 university students in Zimbabwe and Content Analysis of selected WhatsApp messages, this study investigates the nature, purpose, and implications of abbreviation usage on students' language skills. The findings reveal that while abbreviations facilitate efficient communication and social cohesion, they also simplify language, reduce vocabulary development and grammatical accuracy, and blur the distinction between formal and informal communication, potentially eroding formal language skills, particularly for non-native English speakers. The study highlights the need for educators to implement a multifaceted approach, incorporating digital literacy, context-dependent language use, vocabulary and grammar development, linguistic flexibility awareness, and balanced communication practices to reconcile digital communication demands with linguistic efficacy goals. These findings have positive and negative implications on students' overall language proficiency. The study's limitations include using a relatively small sample (30 students) and focusing

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solely on WhatsApp abbreviations, excluding other social media platforms. Future studies should aim to recruit a larger sample and explore a broader range of social media platforms.

Keywords: Abbreviations, English Language Proficiency, Social Media, WhatsApp, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

The global influence of English is undeniable, with its widespread use on social networking sites and the Internet (Almutilibi, 2023; Esteron, 2021; Jassim, 2023; Yuna, et al., 2022). Theoretical efforts increasingly associate English language evolution with social networking communication activities, highlighting the emergence of new linguistic strategies such as abbreviations and acronyms, initialisms, morphological shortenings, phonetic spellings, and omission of punctuation (Almutilibi, 2023; Jassim, 2023). Social networking sites facilitate the free use of language, enabling smooth, easier, and faster communication through contracted word forms (Jassim, 2023). Notable, these linguistic innovations have become integral to WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and other online discourses, particularly among younger generations (Yuna et al., 2022). Thus, social media platforms have developed into incubators for linguistic creativity and experimentation (Almutilibi, 2023).

A growing body of knowledge draws attention to the significant impact of WhatsApp discourses on language teaching, learning, and assessment, fostering a distinct variety of English that merges traditional language norms with digital communication practices (Alghamdy, 2019; Bensalem, 2018; Ahmed et al., 2021). As a prominent social networking platform, the integration of WhatsApp into higher education has facilitated fast-paced communication, transforming the teaching and learning landscape (Perez, et al., 2023). However, studies highlight the complexities of the influence of WhatsApp on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, with both positive and negative effects on language acquisition (Muftah, 2022; Tan & Yunus, 2023). On the one hand, WhatsApp language exposure enhances reading and writing skills, vocabulary, and linguistic creativity (Tan & Yunus, 2023), and shapes learners' discourse structure, favouring concise, simplified communication (Muftah, 2022). On the other hand, excessive reliance on WhatsApp language may compromise linguistic

complexity, and undermine standard English proficiency through decreased attention to linguistic structure, leading to errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar (Ngulube & Nwamaka, 2023; Sarwat et al., 2021). The influencing nature of WhatsApp language on English language use underscores the need for ongoing research. As noted by Aktas and Can (2019), studies should investigate the long-term effects of WhatsApp language on language proficiency, explore its impact on different age groups and proficiency levels, and develop effective teaching strategies to integrate WhatsApp language into EFL or ESL contexts.

This contribution investigates the innovative use of English abbreviation systems for instant messaging on WhatsApp platforms among university students in Zimbabwe. Its primary objective is to determine the nature, purpose, and implications of the utilization of abbreviations on students' English language proficiency. By tackling this topic, the study addresses a significant research gap in this area in the African region. Despite the widespread use of social networking sites in Africa (Naghdipour & Manca, 2023), research on English language use in these platforms is scarce, particularly in ESL contexts such as Zimbabwe. Existing studies focus on European and Asian contexts, leaving a significant knowledge gap in the African region. This study contributes towards filling in the identified gaps in the field by providing empirically-based evidence from student-based WhatsApp interactions. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What is the nature and purpose of English abbreviations employed by Zimbabwean university students on the WhatsApp messaging platform?
2. What are the implications for students' English language proficiency?

By exploring these questions, this study contributes to the limited body of research on language use in social networking sites, particularly the use of English abbreviations on WhatsApp among students in Zimbabwe. Language plays a vital role in shaping students' identities, influencing their cultural, social, and cognitive development (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2015). In addition, effective language skills are crucial for academic success, enabling students to express themselves, navigate complex social dynamics, and engage meaningfully in academia and professional pursuits (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2015). This significance of language underscores the need to investigate the impact of WhatsApp abbreviations on English language skills among university students in Zimbabwe, given that formal education in this context is exclusively English based.

2. Methodology

A rigorous and systematic approach was employed to investigate the use of English abbreviations for instant messaging on WhatsApp by students in Zimbabwe. This section outlines the methods employed, including the research design, participant selection, sampling methods, data collection and analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining semi-structured interviews and Content Analysis to investigate the impact of WhatsApp's abbreviated language on students' language skills. The semi-structured interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into university students' perceptions and attitudes toward the utilization of abbreviated language on WhatsApp. Complementing the interviews, a Content Analysis examined the actual language use and abbreviation patterns in students' WhatsApp conversations and messages. The study achieves data triangulation by integrating these two methods, enhancing validity and reliability.

2.2 Participants

The study's participants consisted of 30 undergraduate university students from diverse Zimbabwean ethnic backgrounds who spoke English as a Second Language. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants. This heterogeneous sample reflects the university population's diversity, enhancing external validity and allowing broader generalizations. University students were targeted due to their digital nativity, ongoing language development, and representation of the youth demographic. As avid WhatsApp users, they provided valuable insights into abbreviation usage and its impact on language skills. Their accessibility and relevance to language education policies make them ideal participants.

Table 1. Respondent’s Demographic Information

Demographic traits	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age	20 years	8	26.7%
	21 years	10	33.3%
	22 years	7	23.3%
	23 years	5	16.7%
Gender	Male	15	50%
	Female	15	50%
Ethnicity	Shona	23	76.7%
	Ndebele	5	16.7%
	Tswana	1	3.3%
	Venda	1	3.3%
Year of Study	First Year	7	23.3%
	Second Year	16	53.3%
	Third Year	4	13.3%
	Fourth Year	3	10%
Study Discipline	Science & Engineering	6	20%
	Health Sciences	2	6.7%
	Humanities & Social Sciences	12	40%
	Commerce	8	26.7%
	Education	2	6.7%

2.3 Sampling Criteria and Procedure

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on four key criteria: undergraduate university enrolment, smartphone ownership, regular WhatsApp use, and willingness to participate, ensuring relevant experience with English abbreviations and informing the study’s objective to explore their impact on students’ English language skills.

To sample participants, the researcher systematically approached undergraduate classes across various faculties in the selected university. Students’ eligibility was verified based on predefined sampling criteria. Eligible students were briefed on the study’s objectives, participation requirements (including anonymous WhatsApp data sharing), and informed consent. Interviews were scheduled to ensure balanced gender distribution and representation across disciplines and educational levels. Ongoing monitoring ensured diversity, with

adjustments made as needed. This purposive sampling procedure yielded a representative sample of 30 students.

2.4 The Instrument

This study employed a semi-structured interview schedule comprising five open-ended questions to explore university students' WhatsApp abbreviation usage. The questions were categorized into five sections: Frequency of Use, Purpose of Abbreviations, Abbreviation Types, Interlocutors and Contexts, and Perceived Impact on Language Skills (see Appendix). These questions investigated the participants' frequency of abbreviation use, motivations, commonly used types, contexts and relationships, and perceived language impacts. The open-ended format elicited detailed responses, providing rich qualitative data and facilitating in-depth insights into the participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions regarding abbreviation usage.

2.5 Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 undergraduate students from January to April 2024. Interviews lasted 10-15 minutes and took place in university settings, where a comfortable and confidential environment was established. Ethical guidelines were strictly observed, ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, and respect for participants' autonomy and dignity. Audio recordings were made with consent, and situation-specific probing questions encouraged elaborate responses. Recordings were transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview to preserve the participants' voices. This rigorous methodology yielded rich, qualitative data, providing valuable insights into the research phenomenon.

To supplement the interview data, 1,500 English-based WhatsApp messages were collected from the study's participants via the QRclip, a secure platform ensuring anonymous data sharing. The participants shared 50 recent messages (25 group chats, 25 one-on-one conversations) using QR codes or file sharing links, maintaining control over shared content. The researcher retrieved files while preserving the participants' anonymity throughout.

2.6 Data Analysis

The interview data was subjected to deductive thematic analysis, guided by the study's objectives. Transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to ensure familiarity. Predefined codes,

derived from the research questions, were manually applied to categorize data into five key themes. These themes included frequency of abbreviation use, motivations for using abbreviations, types of abbreviations used, interlocutors and contexts of use, and perceived impact on English language skills. The findings were presented in narrative summaries, supported by participants' quotes, to provide insights into the nature and function of WhatsApp abbreviations. The themes were then analysed and interpreted in relation to the study objectives, examining the influence of WhatsApp abbreviations on language use and students' linguistic practices. Existing research findings informed and supported the analysis.

WhatsApp data were analysed by formatting it in an Excel spreadsheet, removing images, identifiable information, and non-English texts. Content Analysis was then applied using a comprehensive deductive coding scheme to categorize the data. Codes defined the frequency of abbreviations, types, contexts, functions, and impact on writing skills, aligning with those used for interview data to facilitate synthesis. NVivo software generated frequency counts of identified abbreviations. Analysis of abbreviation types, contexts, functions, and language impact was based on observable trends. Finally, data interpretation involved comparing Content Analysis and semi-structured interview findings to identify patterns, inconsistencies, and convergences between the two datasets, enriching the study's findings and conclusions.

2.7 Ethical Statement

The study received ethical clearance from the university's Research and Ethics Committee (REC) after submitting a comprehensive research proposal outlining measures to safeguard participant rights, maintain confidentiality, and ensure informed consent. This clearance confirmed the study's adherence to established research ethics standards, upholding the principles of anonymity, privacy, and non-maleficence.

3. Results

This section presents the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with university students, shedding light on the use of English abbreviations on WhatsApp platforms. The findings are organized into thematic categories, aligning with the interview questions, to facilitate a clear and concise presentation of the results.

3.1 Frequency of Abbreviation Use

All 30 participants confirmed that they utilized abbreviations on the WhatsApp messaging platform, with 77% (23) acknowledging regular use and 23% (7) reporting moderate usage. Notably, those who claimed *regular utilization* of abbreviations indicated a pronounced reliance on this linguistic style in their WhatsApp conversations. The dominance of abbreviations in the participants' language use underscores the importance of this feature in their online interactions. Examples of striking responses include the following:

[M1]: Yeah, I use abbreviations all the time on WhatsApp! I'd say that 80% of my messages contain abbreviations. It's just so much faster and easier to type.

[F14]: Honestly, abbreviating is the norm; it's convenient, and widely used on WhatsApp.

These responses underscored a regular use of abbreviations among participants, highlighting their preference for concise communication on WhatsApp. They also indicated an enthusiastic use of abbreviations, demonstrating their integral role in the participant's online communication styles.

A content analysis of WhatsApp data from the participants demonstrates a pronounced tendency towards abbreviation usage, aligning with self-reported interview data, which indicated a 77% acknowledgment of reliance on abbreviations. To establish the frequency of abbreviation usage in this data, the results of the NVivo abbreviation search indicated that approximately 81% (1215 out of 1500) of the analysed messages contained at least one abbreviation, with the top 5 most frequently used abbreviations being LOL (laugh out loud), TBH (to be honest), IDK (I don't know), IIRC (if I remember correctly), and BTW (by the way). In distinguished friendship chats, messages were densely populated with abbreviations. Examples include the following:

[F10]: Hey wsup? C U @ 5 pm @ mall? TBH IDK if I cn mk it, m trd.

Translation: Hey, what's up? See you at 5 pm at the mall? To be honest, I don't know if I can make it, I am tired.

[M3]: OMG did u c d latest vid in d grp? LOL SO ht!

Translation: Oh my God, did you see the latest video in the group? Laugh out loud, so hot!

[F8]: Dnt 4gt 2 wish ur mom HBD 2day!

Translation: Don't forget to wish your mom a happy birthday today!

Although one-on-one conversations were expected to contain most abbreviations, the data showed that social group chats had a higher frequency of abbreviations, accounting for approximately 68% (826) of the messages containing abbreviations, compared to 32% (389) in one-on-one conversations.

3.2 Purpose of Abbreviations

The participants in this study cited various linguistic and non-linguistic reasons for using abbreviated language on WhatsApp, primarily associated with the impulsive nature of abbreviation use and the need for efficient communication. The most pronounced functions of WhatsApp abbreviations included linguistic spontaneity, cost-effectiveness, rapid communication, linguistic simplicity, social cohesion, communicative effectiveness, and privacy. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency distribution of participants' perceptions regarding the purposes of using abbreviations in WhatsApp communication.

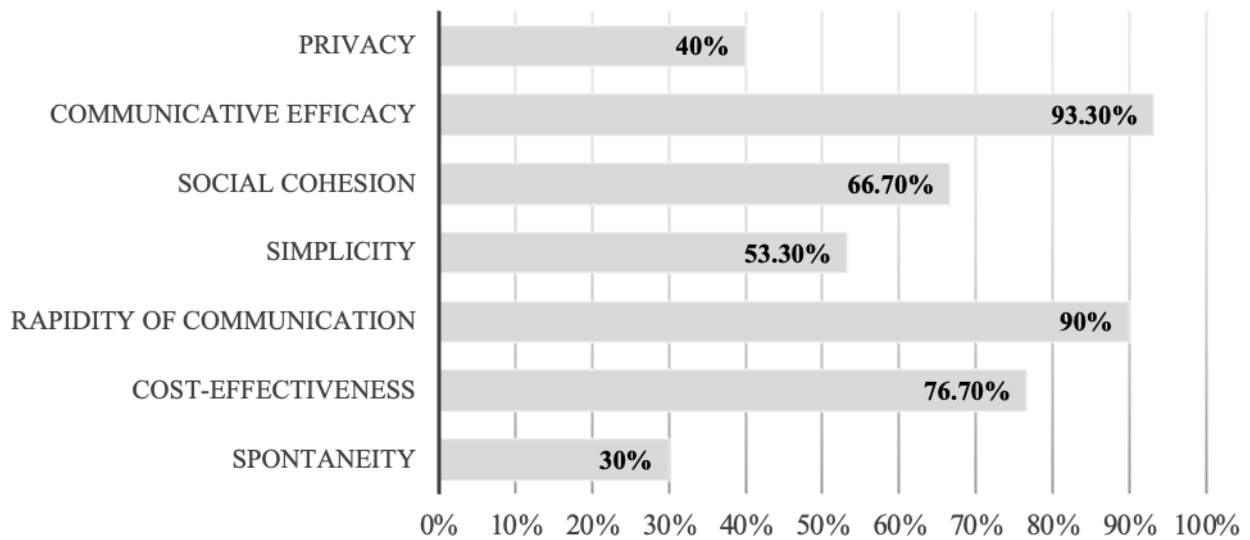


Figure 1. Participants' Perceived Purposes of Abbreviations

3.2.1 Linguistic Spontaneity

Only 9 out of 30 participants reported using abbreviations instinctively, without intentional decision-making. It appears that frequent exposure to abbreviations in digital communication has led to their automatic adoption, bypassing conscious consideration. Examples include:

[M9]: It just happens, I find it easy and natural to use this kind of language.

[F3]: Using abbreviations feels normal, as everyone in my social group uses them.

These responses highlight how using abbreviations on WhatsApp is intuitive as users have little or no control over their choice of language which they perceive to be ‘natural’, ‘usual’, or ‘normal’.

3.2.2 Cost-Effectiveness

The majority of participants (23 out of 30) indicated that abbreviations save time and data, making communication more cost-effective. The general contention was that lengthy text messages require multiple transfers using more data than when dealing with short and precise messages. For instance, the following participants had this to say:

[F12]: I use abbreviations all the time because it’s so much faster than typing out full words. It saves me time and data, and it’s just easier to quickly send a text or email.

[M11]: I’m always on the go, so using abbreviations helps me communicate quickly without_wasting time. Plus, it’s cheaper than sending long messages, so it’s a win-win!

These responses illustrate the common theme of participants perceiving abbreviations as a convenient and practical way to communicate efficiently, saving both time and data.

3.2.3 Rapid Communication

The majority of the participants (27 out of 30) highlighted the rapidity of information exchange as the primary reason for using abbreviations on WhatsApp. According to the participants, this rapid communication facilitates time efficacy by reducing typing time, enabling faster communication, and streamlining information transfer. Additionally, it contributes to mental health preservation by decreasing cognitive load and reducing stress through concise emotional

expression. Furthermore, abbreviations enable prompt problem-solving by disseminating critical information swiftly and accelerating decision-making processes. Using abbreviations, participants claimed that they could achieve efficient communication in a short space of time. Responses, such as the following ones, demonstrate how participants value the speed and efficiency of abbreviations in various contexts, from personal communication to professional collaboration:

[F8]: Abbreviations help me respond quickly to messages, which reduces stress and anxiety. I can get things off my chest faster and move on with my day.

[F4]: When I'm working on a project, every minute counts. Using abbreviations in team chats helps us quickly discuss ideas and solutions, saving us time and mental energy.

3.2.4 Linguistic Simplicity

Just above half of the participants (16 out of 30) highlighted that English abbreviations play a crucial role in simplifying language use, making it more accessible and convenient for communication. By utilizing abbreviations, individuals indicated that they could do the following:

- (i) Convey complex ideas and information concisely and straightforwardly.
- (ii) Avoid cumbersome sentence structures and lengthy explanations.
- (iii) Focus on the essential aspects of the message, eliminating unnecessary details.
- (iv) Share information quickly and efficiently, without sacrificing clarity.
- (v) Facilitate understanding with varying levels of language proficiency.
- (vi) Enhance the overall flow and speed of communication, particularly in fast-paced digital environments.

By simplifying language usage, English abbreviations enable participants to communicate more effectively, saving time and mental effort while promoting clear and accurate information sharing. Examples of such sentiments include the following:

[F3]: I love using abbreviations because they help me get straight to the point. I don't have to worry about using perfect grammar or spelling, and I can just focus on getting my message across.

[F9]: Abbreviations are a lifesaver when I'm trying to explain something complicated. I can use a simple acronym or shortcut and know that the other person will understand what I mean.

3.2.5 Social Cohesion

The majority (20 out of 30) of the participants indicated that group cohesion is one of the important roles of using abbreviations on WhatsApp. They revealed that using abbreviations is a way to signal membership and affiliation with specific social networking groups, where abbreviating has become a shared writing style and cultural norm. By adopting and using these abbreviations, participants indicated that they can: demonstrate their familiarity and connection to the group's culture and values; signal to others that they belong and are part of the in-group; enhance their sense of identity and community with like-minded individuals; participate in a shared language and communication style that fosters a sense of unity and shared understanding; and distinguish themselves from outsiders who may not be familiar with the abbreviations. In essence, using abbreviations is revealed to be a form of social currency, allowing individuals to tap into the collective identity of groups while also reinforcing their sense of belonging and connection. Examples of responses include:

[F8]: I use abbreviations like 'TBH' and 'IDK' because all my friends on Snapchat use them. It's like our own secret language, and it makes me feel like I'm part of the group.

[M6]: In our gaming community, we use abbreviations like 'GL' and 'GG' to communicate quickly and show team spirit. It's a way to bond with other players and feel like we're all on the same team.

3.2.6 Communicative Efficacy

Most participants (28 out of 30) indicated that communicative efficacy is the primary motivation for using abbreviations in WhatsApp, citing reasons such as the ability to: engage in multiple conversations simultaneously without feeling overwhelmed; rapidly respond to messages and

avoid communication delays; convey thoughts and ideas effortlessly, without sacrificing clarity; streamline their communication process, making it more efficient and productive; and navigate complex online interactions with ease, facilitating seamless communication. By abbreviating, participants indicated that they are able to manage multiple conversations in real-time, without sacrificing attention to detail; reduce the time spent typing and responding, enabling faster communication; overcome language barriers and communicate effectively with others, regardless of language proficiency; and enhance their online presence and engagement, feeling more connected and involved. In essence, abbreviations are perceived as empowering participants to communicate more effectively, efficiently, and effortlessly, making them an indispensable tool in today's fast-paced digital landscape. Examples of the participants' views include the following:

[F2] Using abbreviations makes communication fast and helps manage information influx.

[F13]: Thanks to shorthand, I avoid delays in responding to people's messages.

These responses highlight the various ways in which abbreviations facilitate communicative efficacy, enabling participants to navigate complex online interactions with ease, speed, and clarity.

3.2.7 Privacy

A total of 9 out of 30 participants perceived abbreviating as a means to maintain privacy and control over information sharing, by excluding non-group members from understanding the conversation, thereby preserving group exclusivity; protecting sensitive or personal information from being misinterpreted or accessed by outsiders; creating a sense of security and confidentiality within the group, fostering trust and openness among members; limiting the visibility of their conversations to only those who are familiar with the abbreviations, thereby reducing the risk of unwanted attention or scrutiny; and encoding their communication in a way that is only decipherable to those within the group, creating a sense of secrecy and privacy. By using abbreviations, participants can effectively gatekeep their conversations, ensuring that only those who are intended to understand the information can access it. Although minimal, this perceived privacy benefit is considered particularly important in online spaces, where information can easily be shared or misinterpreted. Examples of these perceptions by

participants, demonstrating how they believe abbreviating helps to maintain privacy and control over information sharing and create a sense of security and exclusivity within their groups, include the following:

[F5]: I use abbreviations like ‘PNFO’ (private info) to remind my friends that some conversations are just between us. It’s like a secret code that keeps our personal stuff private.

[M14]: In our group chat, we use abbreviations like ‘EOK’ (eyes only, keepers) to mark sensitive info. It’s a way to keep our conversations secure and ensure only trusted people see it.

Overall, while the interview findings reveal that the functions of abbreviations on WhatsApp are multidimensional; encompassing privacy, simplicity, group cohesion, spontaneity, cost-effectiveness, rapidity of communication, and communicative efficacy, Content Analysis complements these results, highlighting additional linguistic functions of abbreviations, including speech coding (enabling users to create a distinct language style), linguistic creativity (facilitating playful and innovative expressions), and speech reduction (streamlining communication through concise language). These converging findings underscore the profound significance of abbreviations in students’ digital communication on WhatsApp. Examples of Content Analysis results showing additional functions of abbreviations in participants’ WhatsApp conversations include the following examples, which demonstrate how WhatsApp abbreviations enable users to create a distinct language style, facilitate playful expressions, and streamline communication.

Speech Coding:

Wsup fam? (What’s up, family?) (creates a sense of familiarity and group identity).

Linguistic Creativity:

LMAO u r hilarious (laughing my ass off, you are hilarious) (creatively conveys laughter and amusement).

Speech Reduction:

ETA 10 mins (Estimated Time of Arrival) (quickly communicates arrival time).

3.3 Types of Abbreviations Used

In response to the question, “What are the most common types of abbreviations that you use on WhatsApp?”, the participants acknowledged the ubiquity and diversity of abbreviation usage in their WhatsApp communication. They reported utilizing a wide range of WhatsApp-based abbreviations, encompassing various techniques such as:

Acronyms: LOL - Laugh Out Loud, TBH - To Be Honest, IDK - I Don't Know, FYI - For Your Information

Initialisms: ASAP - As Soon As Possible, NP - No Problem, PLZ – Please, THX - Thanks

Symbol-based abbreviations : e.g. – for example, @ - at, *

Graphic abbreviations: GR8 – Great, W8 - Wait, L8 - Late

Phonetic abbreviations: CU - See You, IC - I See

Letter/word omissions: btw - between, pics - pictures

One respondent noted that “abbreviations on WhatsApp are constantly evolving; there's no standard usage. What's trendy today may change tomorrow” (M15). To gain a clearer understanding of the nature of abbreviations used by the participants, the Content Analysis results revealed interesting outcomes. It demonstrated a striking consistency with the interview findings, demonstrating a pervasive use of diversified types of abbreviations. Despite the demographic variations in age and educational background, the analysis reveals a remarkable homogeneity in abbreviation usage across the participants. Abbreviation adoption is universal as the students employ similar forms of abbreviations, transcending individual socio-cultural backgrounds. The Content Analysis data showing the types of abbreviations used by the participants were sorted, categorized, and tabulated, revealing ten distinct categories of abbreviations as shown in Table 2. These categories provide insight into the diverse range of abbreviations employed by the participants on WhatsApp, highlighting the creative and adaptive nature of language use in digital communication.

Table 2. Types of Abbreviations Used on WhatsApp

Forms of Abbreviations	Examples
Acronyms	UBA (University Bachelor Association); NABA (Non-university Bachelor Association); FOMO (fear of missing out); TIA (thanks in advance); MIA (missing in action); IMO (in my opinion); YOLO (you only live once); AMA (ask me anything);
Initialisms	TYVM (thank you very much); NOYB (none of your business); EOM (end of the message); KMP (keep me posted); LOL (laugh out loud); BFF (best friend forever); TBH (to be honest); BTW (by the way); BRB (be right back); GTG (got to go); TL (too long); DR (didn't read); TMI (too much information); IRL (in real life); YW (you're welcome); TBF (to be fair); NBD (no big deal); JK (just kidding); KYP (know your place); FYI (for your information); IDK (I don't know); OMG (Oh my God); SMH (shaking my head); COA (course of action); TTYL (talk to you later); UZ (University of Zimbabwe); BA (Bachelor of Arts); BSC (Bachelor of Science); DIY (do it yourself); ASAP (as soon as possible); AFK (away from keyboard); IDK (I don't know)
Contractions	w'r (we are); u've (you have); y'll (you all); I've (I have); u're/ur (you are); chillax (chill and relax); hwzt (how is it); hud (how are you doing); ruok (are you ok)
Truncations/Clippings	Va (varsity), demo (demonstration); grad (graduate); Vale (valentine's); res (residence); lab (laboratory); Doc (doctor); Prof (Professor); info (information); approx. (approximately); exam (examination); admin (administration); doc (document); rev (review); temp. (temporary); inc (inclusive); obv (obviously)
Graphic Abbreviations	LUV (I love you); Hwau (how are you) ULGr8 (you look great); IFGr8 (I feel great); Gr8 (great); IH8U (I hate you); HBU (how about you); NVM (never mind)
Derivational/Phonetic Abbreviations	plz (please); thru (through); thx (thanks); msg (message); whn (when); ges (guess); gal (girl); yr (year); k (ok); nix (nothing); olla (okay); bc (because); Olk (okay); dept (department); gv (government); CU (see you); IC (I see); OIC (Oh, I see)
Symbols	& (and); # (number); 2 (to); 10 (turn); B4 (before); h8 (height); B2B (business to business); B2C (business to customer); Y2K (year 2000); K (thousand); <3 (heart); \$ (money); @ (at); -> (to); <- (from)
Misspellings	Pliz (please); tym (time); tymz (times); tru (true); xul (school); Wuh (what); gratz/congrats (congratulations); srsly (seriously); boi (boy); gal (girl); dat

Forms of Abbreviations	Examples
Latin Abbreviations	(that); ting (thing); mrng (morning); dis (this); anx (thanks); frenzy/frenz (friend/friends); wht (what); whatevs (whatever); thru (through) etc. (et cetera) (and so forth); i.e. (id est) (that is); e.g. (exempli gratia) (for example); cf. (confer) (compare); N.B. (nota bene) (note well); vs (versus) (against); Q.E.D. (quoderat demonstrandum) (which was to be demonstrated); ibid. (ibidem) (in the same place); op. cit. (opere citato) (in the work cited); et al. (et alii) (and others)
Emoticon-based abbreviations	:) :) (Double smiling face); :-D (Grinning face); :-P (Tongue-out face); > :((Angry face)

3.4 Interlocutors and Contexts

The participants’ responses to the question “In what contexts do you use abbreviated language on WhatsApp?” revealed a predominantly uniform pattern, indicating a widespread acceptance and integration of abbreviated language on WhatsApp. Specifically, 74% of the respondents reported using abbreviated language with all their contacts, regardless of relationship or hierarchy, including peers, friends, colleagues, family members, parents, elders, and lecturers. This liberal language use was further reinforced by participants’ claims that they observe no boundaries in social media platforms. As [M3] highlighted, “Everyone, including lecturers and parents, uses short forms on WhatsApp, so there’s no need to switch to formal language.” [F14] attributed her all-inclusive approach to habit, stating, “I get carried away and chat with lecturers using informal language; it’s become a habit.” These findings suggest that the participants’ use of abbreviations on WhatsApp is largely not bound by the interlocutor’s relationships. In this context, abbreviations seem to apply to all interactions and relationships, as the WhatsApp platform is perceived as a casual messaging application. In contrast, 26% of participants acknowledged exclusive use of abbreviations, reserving them for selected WhatsApp contacts such as friends, colleagues, and family members. A Content Analysis of the participants’ WhatsApp data revealed that abbreviations are a common feature of social groups such as friend groups, church groups, educational groups, and other communities, as well as private one-on-one chats. Interestingly, analyses revealed a significant usage of abbreviations in educational groups that include students and lecturers as participants. These findings further suggest that abbreviated

language has become integral to WhatsApp communication, transcending traditional social boundaries.

3.5 Perceived Impact on Language Skills

Responding to the question “Do you think using abbreviations on WhatsApp has affected your academic writing skills in any way?”, the majority of the participants (83%) (25 out of 30) reported that using abbreviated language on WhatsApp has a minimal impact on their academic language skills. They confidently distinguished between informal abbreviations used on social networking sites and the formal style reserved for academic work, perceiving no negative spill-over effects. In fact, they believed that abbreviation use enhances their language skills, improving typing speed, concision, and creativity. Surprisingly, the respondents from disciplines requiring precise language use, such as law and engineering, were more likely to report minimal impact. These participants saw abbreviations as a valuable tool for rapid information processing and idea generation. In contrast, students from humanities and social sciences disciplines reported slightly higher concerns. Only 17% (5 out of 30) of the respondents expressed high-impact perceptions, acknowledging the infiltration of abbreviations into formal academic contexts, such as note-taking and brainstorming, where efficiency is required. For example; two participants mentioned incorporating abbreviations in written examination scripts due to time constraints:

[F15]: When scribbling quickly, I find myself abbreviating.

[M1]: Abbreviations are useful when time-constrained under exam conditions.

A Content Analysis of participants’ WhatsApp data revealed a striking dichotomy in perceptions regarding the impact of abbreviated language on academic writing. While the majority (83%) downplayed the influence, suggesting that they maintain a clear distinction between informal and formal language use, WhatsApp data revealed a different scenario. A closer examination of WhatsApp conversations, particularly in educational groups (focusing on collaborative learning, discussion, and problem-solving) where the platform was used for learning purposes revealed a notable mixing of formal and informal writing styles. Abbreviations, acronyms, and colloquial expressions frequently appeared alongside formal academic language, blurring the lines between

informal and formal communication. Key features of this blended language style include the following: interchanging formal vocabulary with colloquialisms and slang; combining standard grammar with abbreviated phrases; using emoticons and emojis to convey tone and emotions; and switching between formal and informal address forms.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study that the majority of the participants employ abbreviations for instant messaging on WhatsApp, with 77% acknowledging reliance on this linguistic style aligns with existing research (Ne'matullah & Ne'matullah, 2017; Alazzawie, 2022; Yashvini, 2023). Ne'matullah and Ne'matullah (2017) contend that Malaysian students predominantly use WhatsApp abbreviations and acronyms due to their practicality and convenience. Similarly, Alazzawie (2022) asserts that young people widely adopt "textese" - a concise language form born from extensive mobile phone use. Yashvini (2023) further corroborates that globally; young people utilize abbreviations as a swift and informal means of communication on social media platforms. The prevalence of abbreviating practices among students can be attributed to their convenience in facilitating rapid and concise message transfer (Ne'matullah & Ne'matullah, 2017). Driven by the need for expediency and time-saving, students frequently opt for abbreviations in their busy schedules. Thus, as abbreviating has become increasingly trendy among young people, students have adopted and heavily rely on this concise communication style on various digital platforms, including WhatsApp (Ne'matullah and Ne'matullah, 2017).

The widespread reliance on English abbreviations in WhatsApp communication among Zimbabwean students has significant implications for communication and language skills, particularly for non-native English speakers learning in a formal English environment. Abbreviations facilitate quicker communication but may compromise clarity, potentially leading to misinterpretations or confusion, simplifying language, reducing complexity and nuance of expression, and spelling and grammar accuracy. In agreement, research suggests that using abbreviations may reinforce linguistic errors (Briones et al., 2024), limit vocabulary expansion (Manurung et al., 2022), and compromise academic performance (Achouak, 2023). Moreover, excessive abbreviated language use can compromise students' written English skills, leading to a lack of clarity, precision, and formality in academic writing (De Jonge & Kemp, 2012;

Ne'matullah & Ne'matullah, 2017; Ngulube & Nwamaka, 2023; Sarwat et al., 2021; Shorey et al., 2024).

Further, the finding that 83% of participants perceive WhatsApp abbreviations as having no impact on academic writing quality, coupled with admissions from some participants that abbreviations are infiltrating their formal examination writing, raises concerns about the erosion of formal language norms. Similarly, the acknowledgment of casual usage of abbreviations on WhatsApp by most participants, regardless of the relationship with the interlocutor or their social hierarchy, indicates a flattening of communicative norms and a blurring of boundaries between formal and informal language use. This suggests that digital platforms like WhatsApp are fostering a culture of informality and egalitarianism, where traditional power dynamics and social relationships are redefined. This, alongside the negative impact of digital tools on student writing and literacy (Purcell et al., 2013; Verheijen, 2013), highlights the need for awareness regarding appropriate abbreviation usage to facilitate effective communication and adherence to academic standards (Mohsin et al., 2023), warranting further investigation into the potential hidden impacts of abbreviations on academic writing. The findings showing that abbreviations are multi-functional, enabling students to maintain privacy by using cryptic language, foster group cohesion through shared linguistic practices, and communicate rapidly and efficiently, adapting to the fast-paced nature of digital interaction are significant. By serving multiple social, cognitive, and linguistic purposes, abbreviations have become an indispensable tool for young people navigating the complexities of online interactions. This multifunctionality highlights the adaptability and resourcefulness of youths in leveraging abbreviations to enhance their digital communication experiences. The age of the respondents (20-23 years) is crucial in understanding these findings. As digital natives, young people are accustomed to navigating online environments with ease (Hasmawati et al., 2020). Hence, as Manurung et al. (2022) highlight, abbreviations become a vital tool in youth communicative repertoire, allowing them to manage information density and flow, construct and maintain social relationships, negotiate power dynamics and identity, and develop a sense of belonging and community on WhatsApp.

Moreover, the homogeneity in abbreviation usage among the studied students, despite varying educational backgrounds, has profound implications for understanding youth identity and language universality. The uniform use of abbreviations signifies membership in a digital community, fostering a sense of belonging and collective identity among students. This view is

corroborated by Briones et al. (2024) who argue that abbreviations serve as a unifying factor, bridging gaps between students from diverse backgrounds and reflecting their unique communication styles and preferences. Consequently, abbreviation usage may be a distinctive feature of this generation, marking their digital tribe (Shorey et al., 2024). Furthermore, this linguistic convergence may indicate a universal language code that democratizes language, enabling diverse voices to participate in digital discourse. According to Mohsin et al. (2023), the universality of abbreviation usage among students transcends traditional socio-cultural boundaries, allowing youths to actively shape their linguistic landscape. This dynamic interplay between language creativity and universality reflects the ever-evolving nature of digital communication, where youths forge a shared identity and linguistic practices that defy traditional boundaries (Shilling, 2020). The casual use of abbreviations among participants, regardless of relationship or hierarchy, indicates a shift towards informal language norms in digital spaces.

5. Implications of Abbreviation Use for Language Skills

This study reveals important findings regarding abbreviation usage on WhatsApp by students in Zimbabwe and implications for language skills. This section explores both the positive and negative impacts of these findings on students' language abilities, particularly in the areas of vocabulary, grammar, and overall language proficiency.

5.1 Positive Impacts of Abbreviation Usage

This study's findings suggest that using abbreviations in WhatsApp communication has significant implications for language development and social interaction among students. Notably, abbreviations facilitate efficient information exchange, enabling quicker communication in rapid-paced group settings (Manurung et al., 2022). This condensed language use demonstrates linguistic adaptability, as students balance brevity and clarity. Moreover, abbreviations serve social and cognitive functions, fostering group cohesion through shared linguistic codes and promoting cognitive flexibility as students navigate formal and informal registers (Hasmawati et al., 2020). This adaptability enhances professional communication skills and creative self-expression, with digital natives innovating new abbreviations or repurposing existing ones (Hasmawati et al., 2020; Purcell et al., 2013). Ultimately, these developments contribute to language dynamism, allowing students to explore new linguistic structures and

trends, and underscoring the importance of embracing technological advancements in language evolution.

5.2 Negative Impacts of Abbreviation Usage

This study also raises several concerns regarding the over-reliance on abbreviations in digital communication, particularly in academic settings. The excessive use of abbreviations may lead to linguistic simplification, reducing vocabulary exposure and limiting engagement with formal language structures, potentially affecting students' ability to articulate complex ideas (Achouak, 2023). Furthermore, habitual abbreviation use may compromise grammar skills, as students internalize informal communication practices that deviate from formal grammar rules, posing significant challenges for non-native English speakers, as also noted by Briones et al. (2024). The blurring of formal and informal language boundaries, exacerbated by abbreviations in WhatsApp educational groups (Manurung et al., 2022), risks contaminating academic writing and speaking with informal language, ultimately compromising academic performance and language proficiency. These findings underscore the need for educators to explicitly teach students to distinguish between different language registers and promote language precision and accuracy.

5.3 Effects on Vocabulary, Grammar, and Language Proficiency

The implications of the study's findings for vocabulary development and language proficiency are profound. The study highlights some concerns regarding abbreviation usage in digital communication, noting that excessive abbreviation use reduces students' exposure to diverse vocabulary, potentially inhibiting expansion and compromising academic success, given that, vocabulary is a crucial component of language proficiency (Qian & Lin, 2019). Furthermore, abbreviations often lack grammatical structure, potentially promoting a casual approach to grammar and posing significant proficiency challenges for non-native English speakers, as described by Kamati (2019). While abbreviation usage demonstrates adaptability and linguistic creativity in digital contexts, it also risks eroding formal communication skills. This tension between digital and formal communication highlights the need for educators to address the complex impact of abbreviation usage on language proficiency, ensuring that students develop the necessary skills for both contexts.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small, consisting of only 30 undergraduate university students in Harare, which may not be representative of the entire population of university students in Zimbabwe. Secondly, the study focuses solely on WhatsApp abbreviations, excluding other social media platforms and forms of digital communication. Future studies could aim to recruit a larger and more diverse sample size and explore a broader range of digital communication platforms and modes.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study explored the impact of WhatsApp abbreviation usage among students on language skills. It established that, while abbreviations facilitate efficient communication and social cohesion, they also risk simplifying language, reducing vocabulary development and grammatical accuracy, and blurring the distinction between formal and informal communication. This potentially erodes formal language skills, particularly for non-native English speakers, and highlights the need for strategies to reconcile digital communication demands with linguistic efficacy goals.

To effectively address the impact of abbreviation usage on language skills, educators should implement a multifaceted approach. This includes incorporating digital literacy and communication skills into curricula and teaching students to critically assess their language use in digital contexts. Additionally, promoting context-dependent language use through classroom activities, such as comparing different language registers, helps students develop an understanding of when to use specific linguistic styles. Furthermore, educational programs should emphasize vocabulary and grammar development, focusing on precision and clarity in formal writing and speaking. Raising awareness of linguistic flexibility through workshops or seminars enhances students' ability to adapt their communication styles based on context. Finally, encouraging balanced communication practices, where students balance abbreviation use with extended forms of communication, maintains the quality of formal language use. By implementing these strategies, educators can help students navigate the complex interplay between digital and formal language, ensuring they develop well-rounded communication skills suited for both academic and digital environments.

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Appendix: Interview Instrument

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this study that focuses on the use of abbreviations in WhatsApp communication among university students. Its objective is to explore the frequency, purpose, types, and perceived impact of WhatsApp abbreviations on students' English language proficiency. Your insights will contribute to a better understanding of how the abbreviations used in digital communication shape language use. Please feel free to share your thoughts and experiences.

Section 1: Frequency of Use of Abbreviations

1. How often do you use abbreviations when composing messages on WhatsApp?

Section 2: Purpose of Abbreviations

2. What motivates you to use abbreviations when messaging on WhatsApp?

Section 3: Types of Abbreviations Used

3. What are the most common types of abbreviations that you use on WhatsApp?

Section 4: Interlocutors and Contexts

4. In what contexts do you use abbreviated language on WhatsApp?

Section 5: Perceived Impact on Language Skills

5. Do you think using abbreviations on WhatsApp has affected your academic writing skills in any way?

Conclusion

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences on using abbreviations on WhatsApp. Your input is invaluable to this study. If you have any additional comments or questions, please feel free to ask.