

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2022.57.09.2>

How to Cite:

Munir, T. (2022). Standardization of English language spellings used in textism: A viewpoint of undergraduate learners in Pakistan. *Amazonia Investiga*, 11(57), 18-29. <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2022.57.09.2>

Standardization of English language spellings used in textism: A viewpoint of undergraduate learners in Pakistan

ٹیکسٹیزم میں استعمال ہونے والی انگریزی زبان کی املاء کی معیار کاری: پاکستان میں انٹرگریجویٹ طلبہ کا ایک نقطہ نظر

Received: September 1, 2022

Accepted: October 18, 2022

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Abstract

خلاصہ

The purpose of this quantitative research is to explore the perspective of students in Pakistan if they prefer the English language standard spellings to be changed in accordance with the texting spelling structures for properly matching pronunciation with spellings. A sample size of 100 students was randomly selected from among the undergraduates of colleges in Lahore; 50 male students and 50 females. Using a questionnaire, students were asked about their opinion if a particular set of spellings used in texting becomes formally accepted; which spellings they would prefer if given a choice; if learning and mastering the English language be improved with this advancement; and if they find the same spelling and pronunciation mismatch in their own language too. The texting word forms included words from the category of short forms and vowel deletion. Using SPSS, the responses were evaluated and the hypotheses were tested. The results show that students hold the same firmness as the other language trainers and researchers i.e. the preservation and correct practice of standard English language, and that SMS slang does not interfere with the standard norms of English language.

اس فوئنڈیشنو تحقیق کا مقصد پاکستان میں طالب علموں کے نقطہ نظر کو تلاش کرنا ہے اگر وہ انگریزی زبان کے معیاری ہجے کو متن کے ہجے کے ڈھانچے کے مطابق تبدیل کرنے کو ترجیح دیتے ہیں تاکہ ہجے کے ساتھ تلفظ کو درست طریقے سے ملا یا جاسکے۔ لاہور کے کالجوں کے انٹرگریجویٹس میں سے ایک سو طلباء کے نمونے کا سائز ریٹڈم طریقہ کار پر منتخب کیا گیا تھا؛ پچاس مرد طلباء اور پچاس خواتین۔ سوالنامے کا استعمال کرتے ہوئے، طلباء سے ان کی رائے کے بارے میں پوچھا گیا کہ آیا ٹیکسٹنگ میں استعمال ہونے والے ہجے کا ایک مخصوص مجموعہ رسمی طور پر قبول ہو جاتا ہے، اگر کوئی انتخاب دیا جائے تو وہ کون سے ہجے کو ترجیح دیں گے، اگر اس پیشرفت کے ساتھ انگریزی زبان سیکھنا اور اس پر عبور حاصل کرنا بہتر بنایا جائے؛ اور اگر انہیں اپنی زبان میں بھی ایک ہی ہجے اور تلفظ کی مماثلت ملتی ہے۔ متن بھینچنے والے لفظ کی اقسام میں مخفف اور حرف حذف کے زمرے کے الفاظ شامل تھے۔ ایس پی ایس کا استعمال کرتے ہوئے، جوابات کا جائزہ لیا گیا اور مفروضوں کی جانچ کی گئی۔ نتائج سے ظاہر ہوتا ہے کہ طلباء ویسی ہی مضبوط رائے رکھتے ہیں جو کہ دوسرے تربیت دہندگان اور محققین رکھتے ہیں، یعنی معیاری انگریزی زبان کا تحفظ اور درست استعمال، اور یہ کہ ایس ایم ایس کی بول چال انگریزی زبان کے معیاری اصولوں میں مداخلت نہیں کرتی۔

کی ورڈ: کمیونیکیشن، مورفولوجی، سوشل میڈیا سلیگ، ہجے کی ساخت، ٹیکسٹنگ۔

Keywords: Communication, Morphology, Social media slang, Spelling structure, Texting.

Introduction

The world is changing very fast and it is no surprise if language is also changing its norms. In 1828, Webster published a comprehensive dictionary changing many spellings. Some of them became the standard spellings in America like 'color', 'center' and 'traveler' (Webster, 1806). In 1828, Webster published two volumes

of "An American Dictionary of the English Language"; alone in U.S., 2500 copies were sold and 3000 copies were purchased in England (McDavid, 2022). The reformation, change and amendment in the spelling structure of English language is not a new phenomenon. There have been many English language spelling reforms.

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The previous researches on the language in social media and textism focus majorly on the negative effects on English language whereas the current study initiates a new outlook.

Textism, also known as Text Message Slang (TMS) does not include text only, it has the addition of symbols, special character keys, digits, emoticons and smileys. According to the present time, social media applications like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook have added too much depth and expanse to communication like memes, videos, audio clips, and images. Being a second language speaking nation of English, Pakistanis are very much conscious about language use. All the researches done on SMS languages encompass areas of English Language Teaching (ELT) and survival of language reforms from the perspective of training and education. The focus of these studies is to preserve the standard language, and limit (or stop) the influence of TMS on teenagers, school goers and youth. It is because this group of users usually get more influenced while passing through the phase of learning a language. The gap lies in knowing the perspective of students how they interpret these effects, if they support the change in standard spellings that teachers and researchers view negatively, or if they have the same viewpoint the language trainers and researchers have regarding the preservation and sustenance of formal use of English language. So, a selected group of words, which does not include any digits or other symbols, was presented to the participants so as to see if they accept the slightest of change in letters. Other elements of communication like emoticons were excluded because those are not related to reformation of spelling structure or ease of pronunciation.

There is a case study from Sindh, Pakistan that focuses on the negative effects of SMS text language upon students (Khatoun, Abidin, Abdullah, & Shah, 2018). The researchers have very clearly analyzed the five categories of SMS expressions (vowel deletion, alphanumeric homophony, graphones, short forms, and emoticons) habitually used by students in their formal assessments. Vowel deletion in words causes one or more vowels in a word to be omitted, like *cn* for *can*, or *gv* for *give*. Second category, alphanumeric homophony, is an interesting combination of alphabets and numbers which approximately matches the actual pronunciation, like *f9* for *fine*, or *g8* for *gate*. Another category is graphones which replaces the entire word with a single letter, like *r* for *are*. Short forms include abbreviations and acronyms

like *LOL*, *BRB*. Last one is a group of emoticons and smileys which are facial expressions made with keyboard characters and facilitated small images, like *:-)* for a happy face. The current study also followed the same division of textism as categorized in this research.

Linguistics, unlike language teachers, does not marginalize language variety from the perspective of prescriptivism. Its role is to objectively observe and identify how language evolution and its practice takes place throughout human history. There are many ELT researches which have presented the deficiencies, drawbacks, and after effects of getting accustomed to textism. For instance, "SMS Texting and Its Potential Impacts on Students' Written Communication Skills" (Dansieh, 2011), "Effects of SMS on Writing Skills of the University Students in Pakistan" (Yousaf, 2013), "The Effects of Text Messaging and Instant Messaging on Literacy" (Verheijen, 2013), "Mobile Phone: Calling and Texting Patterns of College Students in Pakistan" (Kamran, 2010), and "A Study on the Negative Effects of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) on Students Language in Pakistan" (Hina & Kouser, 2018). These researches are not within the scope of current research because the study does not set any bar to approve or disprove any kind of language use. Rather, objective observation has been the key to explore the research questions.

There have been many English language spelling reforms including "De Recta et Emendata Linguae Angliæ Scriptione" (Smith, 1568), "An Orthographie" (Hart, 1569), "Booke at Large for the Amendment of English Orthographie" (Bullock, 1580), "Logonomia Anglica" (Gill, 1903), "English Grammar" (Butler, 1634), "The New English Grammar" (Howell, 1662), "Spelling Progress Summer Bulletin" (Tune & Bisgard, 1977) and so on. The proposals given previously were implemented to a small extent as either some were applied on a limited population or due to parliamentary rejection, the process of spelling reforms was stopped, or some were not accepted. Webster, in 1828, succeeded in reforming English spelling structure to some extent but with much criticism.

The objectives for conducting the research include exploring the reasons for a different English text slang, finding out the perspective of students about the effects of textism on language, exploring the positive side of SMS language from the viewpoint of SL speakers, and lastly, determining if text talk provides better matches for pronunciation than the Standard English (SE).

However, the research does not aim to explore how to remove the influence of textism. It does not aim at providing any learning model for correcting student's habit of using short forms of words because the primary goal is to objectively learn the students' perspective about language change. Furthermore, the literature that focuses on improving or removing the traces or effects of textism has not been included as the study encourages language evolution and development.

The study tested the following hypotheses about the general opinion of students in Lahore regarding texting spelling structures:

H1: There is a positive relation between the confidence of communicating in English and use of texting language.

H2: Second language speakers of English support standardizing texting language.

H3: The spelling structure of texting language is more adaptable than Standard English.

Literature Review

The previous studies in literature focus on either the perspective of language trainers, or the ones who strive to maintain the standard language unharmed like language puritans. Furthermore, there has been much emphasis on making the students of English language realize the negative impact textism has on their writing and typing skills. This study aims to explore the perspective of students in Pakistan if they prefer the English language standard spellings to change in accordance with the texting spelling structures to facilitate proper matching pronunciation with the spellings of words.

In the research article, "The Impact of TMS or Chatroom Slang on Students' Academic Performance", researchers conclude that both positive and negative effects of textism exist. The positive effects are not linguistic but social like, saving money by texting and not calling, whereas negative effects hinder a better performance in continuous assessment and examination (Ochonogor, Alakpodia, & Achugbue, 2012). In another study, Al-Qomoul explored the impact of English Short Message Service (SMS) usage on the verbal communication skills of first year students from Tafila Technical University (2011, as cited in Mahmoud, 2013). The conclusion of the study was that communication using SMS in English with friends as well as family improves oral and written skills.

A Saudi researcher mentions the use of SMS language in classroom allowed by the teachers for writing first drafts or rough outlines before writing the formal composition. It is because of the everyday unrestricted use of SMS (Mahmoud, 2013). Some researchers do find SMS language as a learner-friendly way to promote and improve English. For instance, an article mentions that a language teacher, Michael Nilson (who owns a language learning company), teaches through SMS due to ease of access and use (Hashemi & Azizinezhad, 2012). The following quote elaborates how different teachers perceive use of SMS in class:

In their response to the effect of SMS on writing, educators fall in three groups: On one hand, some teachers believe that abbreviations used in SMS are assaulting written English; students' papers are full of punctuation mistakes, bad grammar and inappropriate abbreviations. On the other hand, some claim positive effect of SMS as students are exposed to writing in a more relaxing and less stressful atmosphere. A third party says that SMS, like slang, has its own language that has no effect on Standard English. (Russel, 2012 as cited in Mahmoud, 2013)

Many researches have been done in Pakistan regarding the social media slang and SMS language but all cover a variety of angles from the perspective of preserving Standard English. One such research presents the effects of using social network on the university student's academic performance of Lahore, Pakistan. Using cross sectional survey technique, a questionnaire was distributed among 260 students. The results confirmed the negative effects of textism (Waqas, Afzal, Zaman, & Sabir, 2016). The researchers confirm that the university students get negative influence from social media, and so their academic performance is badly affected. This is a thoroughly researched study, but its focus is on effects of SNS (Social Networking Service), not on SMS (Short Message Service). Another research explores the presence of SMS language in academic writing. The results of the study show a different view as compared to most of the ELT pedagogic researches. The absence of punctuation and grammatical features are due to carelessness or lack of knowledge which the students admitted nullifying any effect of SMS slang. Also, many participants easily switched to a particular register whether SE or SMS according to the contextual situation of communication (Aziz, Shamim, Aziz, & Avais, 2013).

The most recent published researches conducted in Pakistan also concentrate significantly on the negative effects of textism and social media communication tools and channels by observing its influence on academic performance, behavior, and interpersonal communication. In a comprehensive study, the effect of smart phones on academic performance and learning behavior is tested. The focus of this study is not on the usage of spelling and sentence structures, but on the addiction and excess of use for the purpose of information access. However, the study concludes that there are positives results of this usage at university level, after quantitatively assessing 150 students in Islamabad (Shakoor, Fakhar, & Abbas, 2021). There is another study which also examines the impact of social media on university students in terms of their academic performance. The study concludes that social media has some positive uses like access of data and removal of communication barriers. The study further encourages to investigate the true mechanism between the variables; academic performance and social media usage) in the light of students' goals and university policies (Hasnain, Nasreen, & Ijaz, 2015). Furthermore, a study gives emphasis to the morphological and syntactic alteration and suggests for students to be essentially careful about unconscious slips in writing (Khatoon, Abidin, Abdullah, & Shah, 2018). This shows the perspective of language trainers and professionals, not the viewpoint of students who are major users of textism.

So, the above mentioned researches present the perspective of teachers and language reformers who aim to maintain the prescriptive rules and regulations of English language in writing. The students in these studies are passive receivers of amendments and urgency of improvement in meeting the language standards. However, there is no research that explores the viewpoint of Pakistani learners. Thus, the current study aims to explore their perspective. Further research can be done in the areas of Phonetics and Phonology, lexicography and second language learning issues.

Methodology

It is a quantitative study which falls under the Positivist paradigm. Objectivist approach has been applied to validate the results of the study. Stratified Random Sampling, with two strata of girls and boys enrolled in undergraduate programmes, was used. The study was applied to the undergraduate students of Lahore from various disciplines as SMS language is used by every person now. The colleges include Concordia College, SKANS School of Accountancy, CAPS College, and RISE School of Accountancy in Lahore. The reason for selecting undergraduate student body was that they use English as a standard language in formal communication, and also, as an informal language in SMS slang more actively than the others. Additionally, the data collection from undergraduate students was more accessible. Primary data was collected from 100 participants in the research, 50 in each group. The study focused on vowel deletion and graphemes as identified in the study mentioned earlier (Khatoon, et. al, 2018). The reason for not selecting the other three categories is that those do not pertain to alphabets only, and also acronyms and abbreviations are not full spellings. After the questionnaires were collected from the participants, the data was entered in SPSS and hypotheses were tested quantitatively.

Results and Discussion

The data was analyzed using statistical tools. There were randomly chosen candidates to fit in the strata of male and female groups so the division of age group has been unequal. The table and graph show that in both gender groups, the percentage of students 20 and above was more as compared to the teenagers.

Cross-Tabulation of Genders and Age Groups along with a Bar Graph

GENDER * AGE_GROUP Cross-tabulation

Count		AGE_GROUP		Total
		UNDER 20	20 AND ABOVE	
GENDER	MALE	19	31	50
	FEMALE	24	26	50
Total		43	57	100

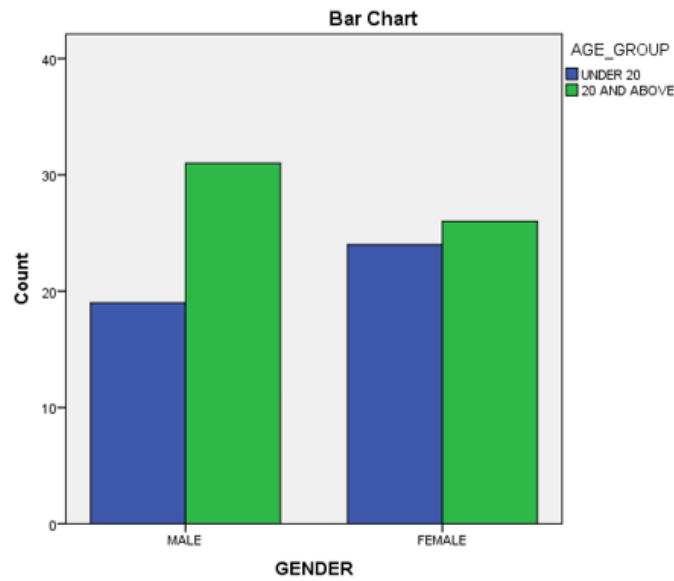


Figure 1.1. showing the number of participants according to age groups

The question, do you think that SMS language helps less educated people to communicate, was asked to determine if the population finds it easier to communicate as a second language as well as if they think it is more understandable for

less educated people. So both variables given below show an agreement by the majority of participants that it does help the less educated.

Bar Graphs about Students' Opinion on Textism

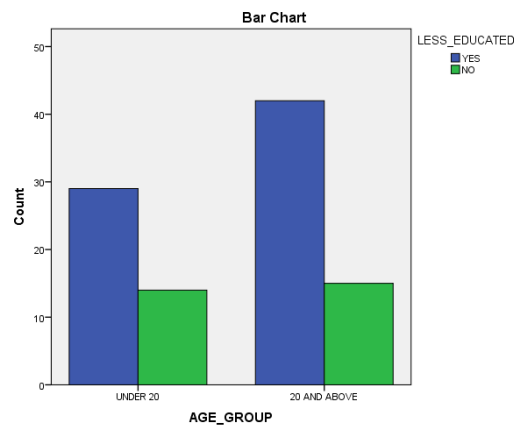
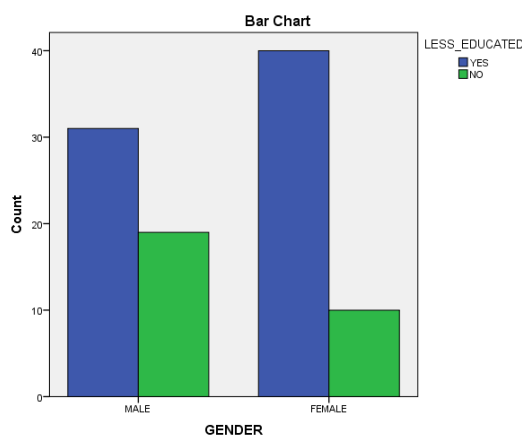


Figure 1.2. Showing percentage of students regarding the opinion if textism helps less educated people in communication

Two questions were specifically asked to verify the claims of the previous researches about the negative effects of textism. These were; first, while writing the examination paper, do you ever use the short form of words, and second, do you think that SMS language negatively affects the spellings used by students? The first variable is labelled as 'examination' and the second as 'negative'. The observation of the results show that researchers' perspective from a teaching

point of view is not different from the students. Contrary to the expectation of the present research, majority of the students claim to have used the short forms in examination and also they accept it to affect their language skills of Standard English. Following are the results:

Cross-Tabulation of Examination and Negative Effects along with a Bar Graph

EXAMINATION * NEGATIVE_EFFECT Cross tabulation

Count		NEGATIVE_EFFECT		Total
		YES	NO	
EXAMINATION	YES	28	12	40
	NO	45	15	60
Total		73	27	100

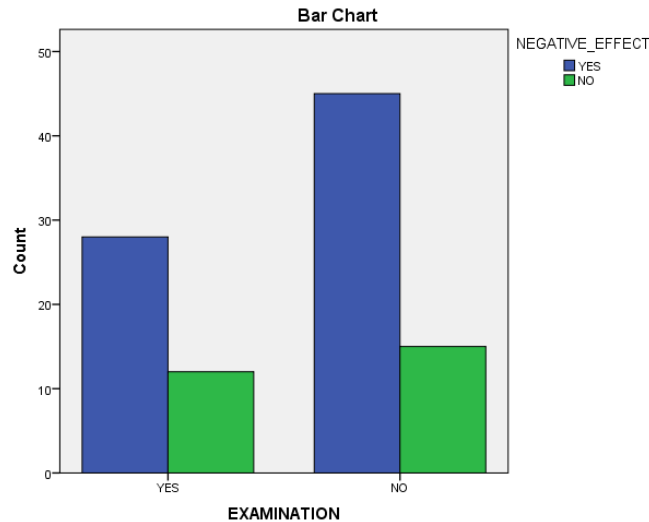


Figure 1.3. Showing clustered bar graph and cross-tabulation about the negative effects of Textism and its use in examination

On a given scale from ‘always’ to ‘never’, some most common SMS words were given. The student had to choose how much they use those words.

A Frequency Table Showing the Number of Occurrences of Usage According to the Participants.

Table 1.1

Showing the frequency of using SMS word forms according to the scale

Use of Words	u	r	hve	wao	Thnx	frend	bcoz	Gud	n	plz
Always	52	32	31	33	44	30	40	41	44	56
Mostly	12	25	11	28	21	22	14	18	18	17
Sometimes	11	17	21	8	18	20	17	19	9	15
A Few Times	10	8	6	12	6	9	12	9	8	7
Never	15	18	31	19	11	19	17	13	21	5

Hypothesis Tests in SPSS

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relation between the confidence of communicating in English and use of texting language.

Do you think, SMS language improves the confidence of writing in English? (Variable 1: Confidence)

Do you use SMS language? (Variable 2: More_Use)

To find out the relation between the confidence of communicating in English and the use of texting language, Correlations test was applied. The responses for the following questions were used:

A Table Showing Correlation Between Confidence and Usage of SMS Language

Table 1.2.
Showing Pearson Correlation for testing hypothesis 1

Correlations			
		CONFIDENCE	MORE_USE
	Pearson Correlation	1	.260**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.009
CONFIDENCE	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	22.440	5.180
	Covariance	.227	.052
	N	100	100
	Pearson Correlation	.260**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	
MORE_USE	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	5.180	17.710
	Covariance	.052	.179
	N	100	100

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, it shows that since 0.26 is greater than 0.01 yet much distanced from 1, there is a positive relation but student find it to be weak.

Hypothesis 2: SL2 users of English support standardizing texting language.

Here, variable, Correct_Spelling, represents the question; do you think, the most used texting

forms of words should be accepted as correct spellings? The responses have been analyzed age-wise and also gender-wise for a better understanding that would also answer the question if females are more inclined towards language purity than males.

Cross-Tabulation of Correct Spelling and Age Groups along with a Bar Graph

CORRECT_SPELLING * AGE_GROUP Cross tabulation				
Count		AGE_GROUP		
		UNDER 20	20 AND ABOVE	Total
CORRECT_SPELLING	YES	31	30	61
	NO	12	27	39
Total		43	57	100

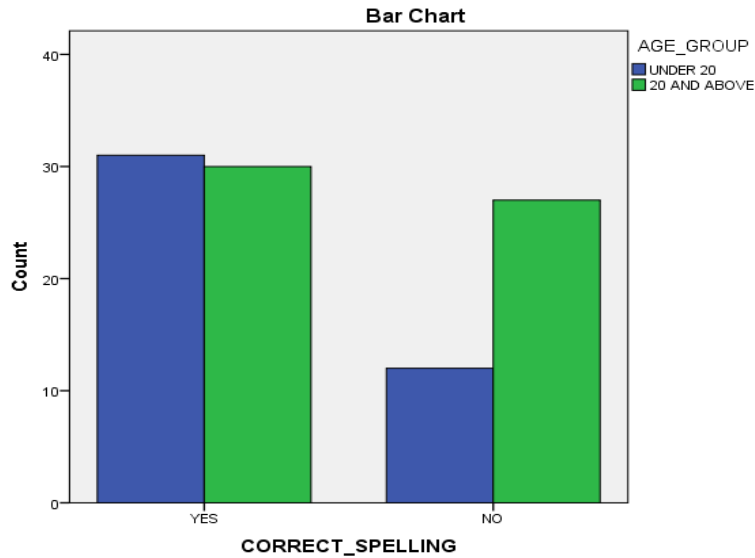


Figure 1.4. Showing comparison between the age groups in acceptance of short forms as Standard English
Cross-Tabulation of Correct Spelling and Genders along with a Bar Graph

CORRECT_SPELLING * GENDER Cross tabulation				
Count		GENDER		GENDER
		MALE	MALE	
CORRECT_SPELLING	YES	34	27	61
	NO	16	23	39
Total		50	50	100

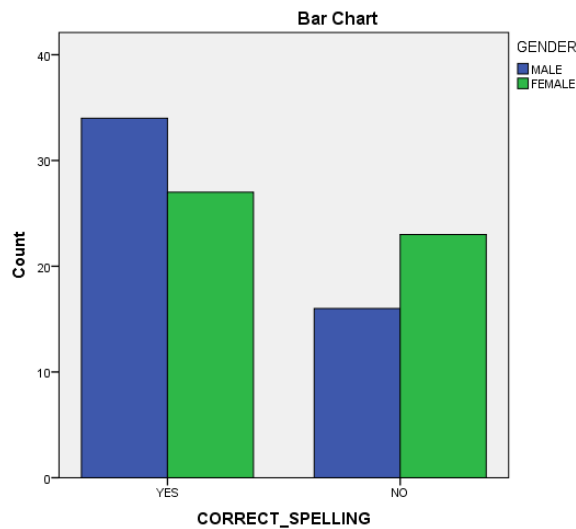


Figure 1.5. Showing comparison between the gender groups in acceptance of short forms as Standard English

Another question for testing the hypothesis was; will it be right, if the confusing spellings of English are replaced with texting spellings? It was included so as to reach the closest accuracy. The variable is labeled as Confusing_Words.

Following are the responses age-wise and gender-wise:

Cross-Tabulation of Confusing Words and Age Groups along with a Bar Graph

CONFUSING_WORDS * AGE_GROUP Cross tabulation

Count		AGE_GROUP		
		UNDER 20	20 AND ABOVE	GENDER
CONFUSING_WORDS	YES	33	40	73
	NO	10	17	27
Total		43	57	100

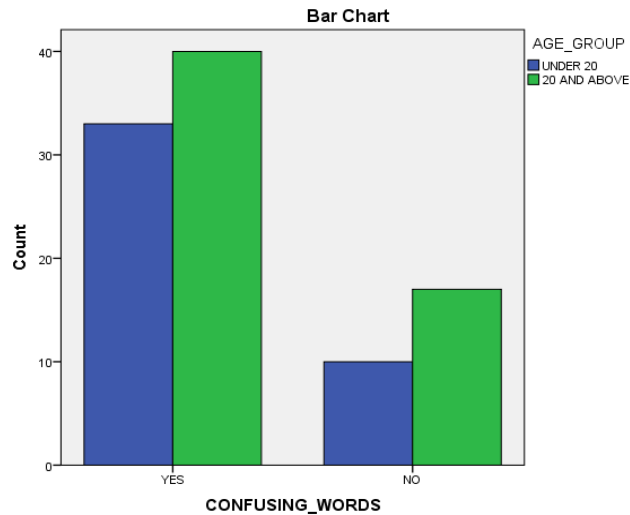


Figure 1.6. Showing comparison between the age group in replacing confusing words with SMS short forms

Cross-Tabulation of Confusing Words and Genders along with a Bar Graph

CONFUSING_WORDS * GENDER Cross tabulation

Count		GENDER		GENDER
		MALE	FEMALE	
CONFUSING_WORDS	YES	37	36	73
	NO	13	14	27
Total		50	50	100

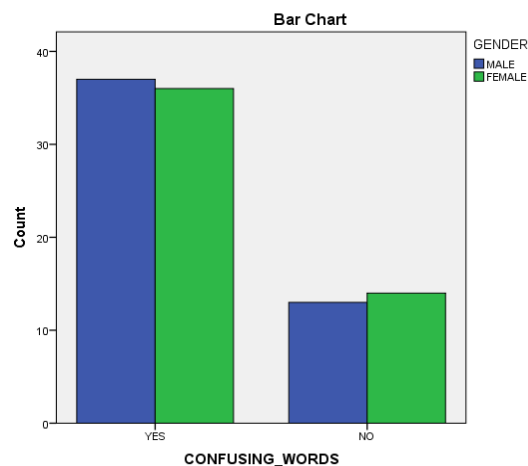


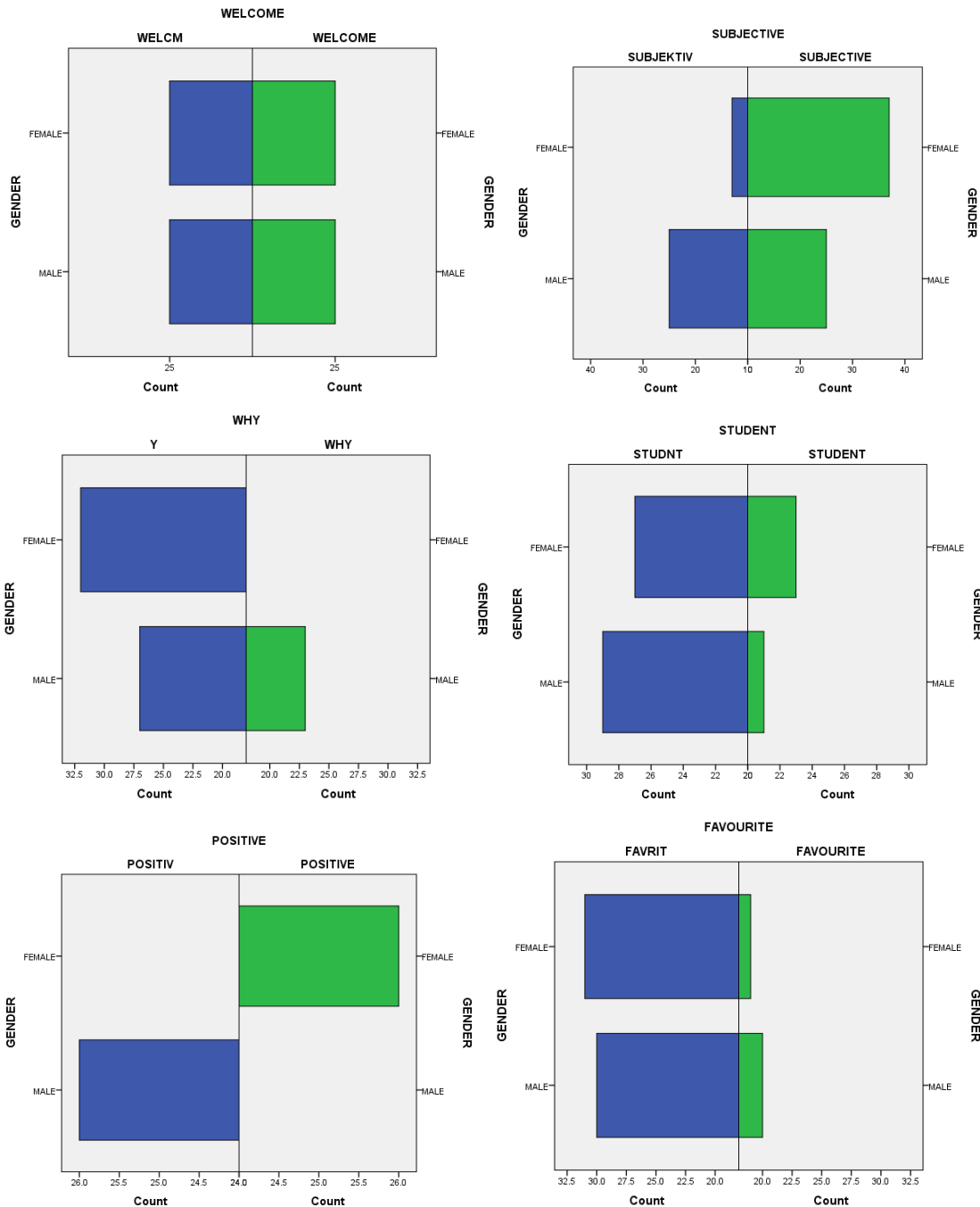
Figure 1.7. Showing a grouped bar chart as a comparison between the gender groups in replacing confusing words with SMS short forms

Hypothesis 3: The spelling structure of texting language is more adaptable than Standard English.

Here, students were given a list of words to choose in each which form they would like to become permanently used if given a chance to modify Standard English, one being the short

form and the other being the correct spelling. The division has been done gender-wise. The data is presented below for each word in a Population Pyramid graph (Histogram).

Histograms Showing Gender-wise Choice of Spellings about Nine Given Words.



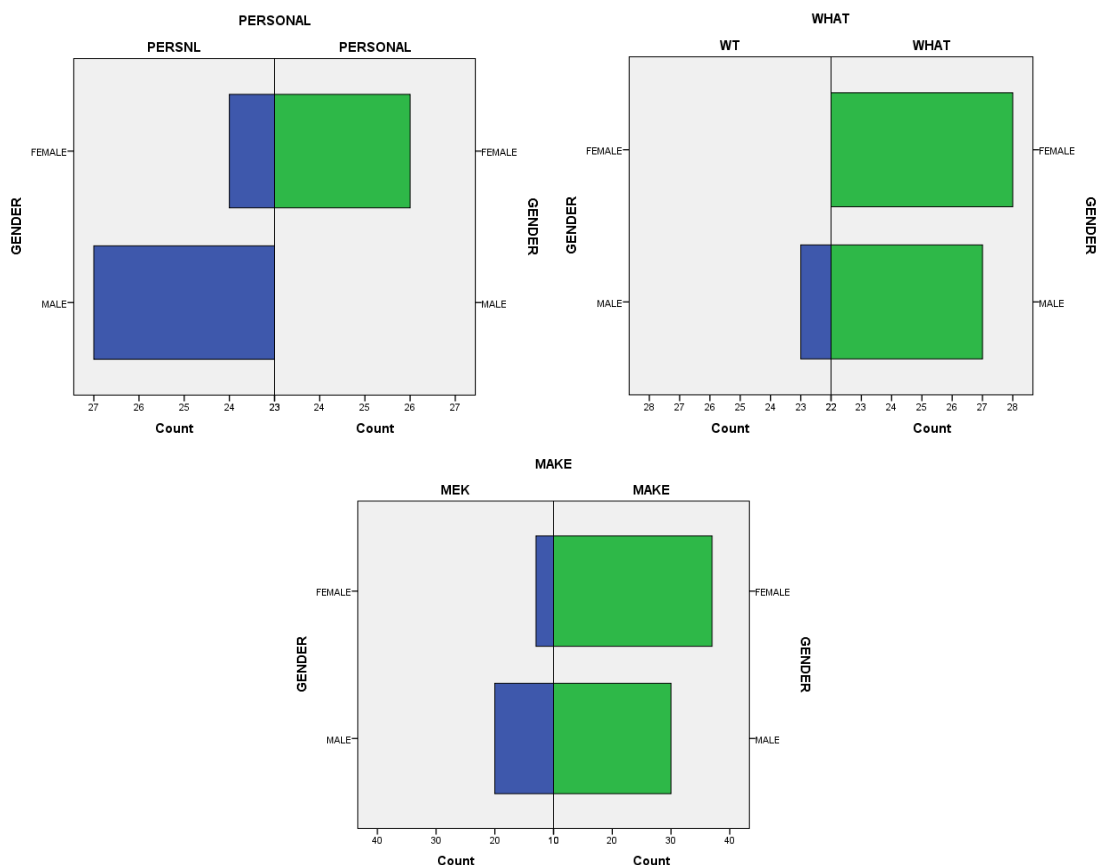


Figure 1.8. Showing gender-wise the choice of given words each in a Population Pyramid graphs (Histograms)

The data shows that where the letters have been changed (like the c of 'subjective' has been replaced by 'k'), the population rejects the short form but where the spelling is very different from its pronunciation, students opt for short version which is easy to read like 'favourite'. Also, make is shortened as 'mek' and what as 'wt' by very few showing the most used easy short words which the people are in a habit of using almost daily, need no change.

Conclusions

The results show that students are very well conscious about the demands of Standard English as a second language. Most of the statistical results show that even though majority of participants use SMS language in texting and social media, they exclude and disallow its use in place of SE even if given a choice. They do not mix various forms of communication and are as judgmental about the decisiveness of correct English as the teachers and other researchers are. Using SMS and social media slang, however, does bring a change in communication level of shifting from rigid rules to comfort zone which is comparatively easy and accessible in learning, improving, and communicating. So, just like

speakers easily shift from informal to formal use of language, SMS also does not pose any threat since the learning body of our society is quite well aware of its importance and shows a responsible attitude towards its pros and cons.

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