Young people being literate in a digital space: What can textspeak tell us?

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Recognising the challenge facing many young South Africans in accessing affordable, appropriate reading material and content, the FunDza Literacy Trust produces texts, including novels, short stories, poetry, and non-fiction written for a young adult audience. The focus in this article is on the short stories which are made available via a cellular telephone-based social networking platform called Mxit. Users of the FunDza Mxit platform are able to read short stories and can also comment on what they have read on interactive discussion boards. In their comments on these discussion boards, users make extensive use of a form of written English to which I will refer as textspeak. The discussion boards create a digital space in which users can engage in literate activities that encompass both the traditional aspects of literacy (the mechanics of reading and writing), and the social aspects of literacy (the ideologies and power relations present and represented in a text). Using critical literacy as a framework, and a qualitative textual analysis approach, I analyse one short story and the user comments from the interactive discussion board on that story. My analysis of the user comments suggests three themes: 1) using textspeak, young people are engaging in literate activities; 2) this engagement demonstrates a promising level of literacy among the users; and 3) the users are engaging critically with texts and their social messaging and functions, and, therefore, are displaying a level of critical literacy. From this analysis, I conclude that there is potential in using digital platforms like the FunDza Mxit platform, and forms of language like textspeak, to encourage young people in South Africa to develop critical literacy about important issues that affect their lives, such as gender and sexuality, agency, and risk and vulnerability.

Keywords: agency, critical literacy, FunDza Literacy Trust, literate activities, Mxit

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Introduction

For many learners in under-resourced contexts, access to written material in school libraries, and the opportunity to regularly read, write, and engage in discussions of texts, particularly in English, is challenging. To address this, the FunDza Literacy Trust[1] produces texts for young adults. FunDza content is made available in three formats: in hard copy, on the internet, and via a cellular telephone-based social networking platform called Mxit.[2] In this article, I focus on a FunDza short story available on the FunDza Mxit platform. According to its website, Mxit is a "South African-created mobile social network"[3] that is free to download, and inexpensive to use. In recent years, Mxit has lost some of its popularity as a social networking platform in certain sectors, having been replaced for many users by platforms designed for smartphones, such as WhatsApp.[4] However, smart phone technology is still relatively expensive in South Africa and is, as a result, beyond the reach of many South Africans, particularly young people. FunDza does not charge for their content so users of the digital platforms pay only for the airtime or data that they use to access content. Via FunDza's Mxit platform young people for whom it is difficult to access hard copies of reading material, and/or the internet are able to access FunDza content on cellular telephones affordably. In 2014, FunDza recorded 249 641 users of their Mxit platform in contrast to just 56 670 users of their mobisite (accessed via the internet) (FunDza Annual Report, 2014).

FunDza short stories on the Mxit platform are accessed chapter by chapter. At the end of each chapter of the short story, a question or prompt is presented to the user to stimulate critical engagement with the story. Users can respond anonymously to these prompts, comment on the story or chapter, and engage with other users via the interactive discussion board function of the platform. In this way the discussion boards become digital spaces in which users can engage in more traditional literate activities[5] as well as with literacy as social practice. A striking feature of the user comments on the discussion boards is the use of textspeak, a non-standard form of written language that makes use of a number of linguistic processes including acronyms, abbreviations, and non-standard orthography.

Using critical literacy as a framework, I focus in this article on the short story, *The Good Girl*, by Lauri Kubuitsile, and on the user comments on the story on the interactive discussion board as the main units of a directed analysis. I chose this short story for two reasons. First, in the bigger study from which this article draws, I used *The Good Girl* as a prompt to stimulate discussion about gender roles, femininities, and masculinities, with adolescent girls in a high school in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Among other things, the story offers the opportunity to engage critically with and problematise the idea of a 'good' girl—what it means to do femininity in socially sanctioned ways. Second, the story generated a large number of user comments on the FunDza Mxit discussion board, suggesting that the content was popular and interesting to users, and that it stimulated them to engage with the material.

Textspeak

Crystal defines textspeak as "[a]n informal name for the kind of abbreviated language used in text messaging and sometimes for any kind of text message, whether abbreviated or not" (2008: 187). He argues that textspeak is a variety of language that evolved in response to a particular technology, specifically short message service (SMS) and instant messaging (IM). According to Crystal, textspeak shares linguistic properties with a number of other varieties of language that have arisen in similar circumstances. Textspeak, as mentioned above, includes abbreviations, and non-standard orthography, spelling, and grammar. It also includes ellipsis, acronyms, contractions, shortenings, and initialisms, among other linguistic processes. Common examples of textspeak include:

> *Lol*   *[laugh out loud]*
>
> *2 c u*   *[to see you]*
>
> *B4*   *[before]*

Textspeak, and the implications of textspeak for literacy, has raised no small amount of alarm from various sectors who see it as evidence of a lamentable decline in literacy, and as demonstrating a poor grasp of the standard rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Vosloo observes that "[f]or a number of years teachers and parents have blamed texting for two ills: the corruption of language and the degradation of spelling in youth writing" (2009: 2). However, with regard to textspeak, Crystal makes the compelling argument that

> *[c]hildren could not be good at texting if they had not already developed considerable literacy awareness. Before you can write abbreviated forms effectively and play with them, you need to have a sense of how the sounds of your language relate to the letters. You need to know that there are such things as alternative spellings. You need to have good visual memory and good motor skills. If you are aware that your texting behaviour is different, you must have already intuited that there is such a thing as a standard. (2008: 187)*

While Crystal's analysis of textspeak is based on data largely from the United Kingdom, this argument holds in a South African context even for second or third language speakers of English. The argument is valid at the level of human language rather than at the level of a specific language or variety thereof.

It is clear from the examples provided of users' textspeak below that they spontaneously, frequently, and predictably use specific forms of textspeak that conform to a pattern of systematic manipulation of the rules of written English. Further evidence in support of this argument is the fact that certain critical linguistic features of a language will remain unchanged in order to preserve intelligibility. Word order, for example, is not affected in textspeak or in other linguistic processes such as code-switching. This demonstration of the systematic manipulation of linguistic rules, structures, and systems illustrates that in terms of text-based literacy, these users have a grasp of the rules and structures of written English that allows them to

engage in the manipulation of this form of language. That they have achieved a level of text-based literacy that allows them to manipulate written English is a promising indicator of levels of literacy.

In response to the outcry over the negative effect that textspeak is thought to have on literacy among youth, Crystal remarks that "[c]omplaints are made about children's poor literacy, and then, when a technology arrives that provides fresh and motivating opportunities to read and write, such as email, chat, blogging and texting, complaints are made about that" (2008: 157). Mxit is just such a technology, with the FunDza content providing ample opportunity for young people, particularly second language (L2) learners, with access to a digital space in which they can improve their literacy. Given concerns about levels of literacy in South Africa, this evidence that young people are familiar enough with written English to engage in new varieties of its use, is promising.

I selected user comments for their use of textspeak and for their content. I excluded comments expressing appreciation of the story or the desire to know what would happen next. User comments are an exercise in comprehension and the production of written English although users often write in textspeak. Many of the user comments are written in English, with a few written in African languages, or in two or more languages. Users can remain anonymous on the discussion board by using a username. As a result, the impossibility of identifying the sex of a user prevents any sex-based analysis of the users' use of textspeak or the content of their comments. To protect users' anonymity, I avoid using any user names and refer to all commenters as *User*.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy encompasses both the more traditional approach to literacy that focuses on the mechanics of reading and writing (i.e. text- or language-based literacy), and an approach to literacy that is mindful of the social nature of literacy. The narrow focus in the traditional approach to literacy fails to acknowledge literacy as a social practice, and the many different types and modes of texts through which meaning is made and with which individuals and groups interact in their daily lives. Sheridan-Rabideau argues that there has been a call in recent years to understand literacy as more than just something acquired in and for the classroom, but also as something that people use in their everyday lives. This shift, according to Sheridan-Rabideau, has led to a definition of literacy that "diminishes individual, decontextualized skills and foregrounds literacy as a social activity embedded in situated, cultural-historical contexts". This expanded definition of literacy has given rise to the need for new methods to analyse literacy which "attend to local practices and to broader socio-economic dynamics that both make texts meaningful and authorise particular individuals to be creators of texts" (2008: 3–4).

Citing the work of Mission, South African scholars, Prinsloo and Janks, define critical literacy as "an approach to textuality that acknowledges all language practices as socially grounded and so inherently ideological, and thus concerned with issues of power and social justice" (1996: 3). For them, as they point out elsewhere, critical literacy refers to

> *a social-cultural critique of the production, reception and circulation of language and image in text that is concerned with the cultural and ideological assumptions that underwrite texts with the politics of representation. It proposes a particular lens through which to receive and produce texts that necessitates shifts in both theory and practice away from established ways of teaching literacy. (2002: 30–31)*

This broader definition of literacy creates a space in which literate activities, such as the use of textspeak, which do not conform to the traditional standards of written language, can be analysed as legitimate forms of literacy which, rather than displaying a deficit of comprehension or knowledge, instead illustrate the ways in which literacy in both its narrow and broad sense are both understood and used as social activities. To be critically literate enables consumers of texts to recognise, understand, and question the cultural and ideological assumptions related to issues of power, inequality, and injustice that are embedded in a text. For the users contributing to the interactive discussion boards being critically literate in the use of textspeak means that they are able to read, understand, analyse, and question the messages and assumptions in this short story relating to unequal gendered power relations.

The Text

Below, I summarise The Good Girl, by Lauri Kubuitsile,[6] to provide a context for the discussion of user comments offered in response to a particular event in the story, and to a particular reader question/discussion prompt.

Kagiso, for whom school is a refuge from a difficult home life, discovers that her classmate, Pearl, is having transactional sex with Mr Phaladi, a teacher. So, when Mr Phaladi makes Kagiso an offer of extra help after school to improve her marks, she is extremely uncomfortable. However, with exams looming Kagiso is troubled by the loss of her calculator, and the fact that she has no money to replace it.

Kagiso is torn. She "knew what he [Mr Phaladi] wanted." But, the fact that she "was the one he chose from all the other girls" made her feel special. Considering the choice she has to make, Kagiso reasons thus:

> *... if I could get a bit of money I could sort out a lot of things. I could replace my lost calculator. Without it I had no way of passing maths. I had to do something. And this was easier than asking my parents or Reena. What could be wrong with giving Mr Phaladi a chance? (Chapter 3)*

Confident that, unlike Pearl, she can handle herself with Mr Phaladi, Kagiso arranges to meet with him after school. It soon becomes clear that his intentions are entirely

unrelated to assisting Kagiso with her school work. Trying to coerce Kagiso into a relationship, Mr Phaladi tells her "I don't want to hurt you. I want to help you. I know about your family. I know you're struggling. We can help … we can help … each other." (Chapter 4)

Mr Phaladi gives Kagiso R200, and lets her leave after telling her to consider his offer. Kagiso learns that Pearl has been taken out of school because she is pregnant. This news prompts her friend, Fiona, to confront Kagiso who explains that "I was just trying to find some way. And he made me feel … different … special … and it was nice, okay?" Kagiso subsequently refuses Mr Phaladi and remains steadfast in her decision although he says, "You'll regret this" (Chapter 6). After Mr Phaladi fails Kagiso and attempts to humiliate her in front of the entire class, she gets in touch with Pearl so that they can report Mr Phaladi to the principal of the school. The story ends with Mr Phaladi being fired, and the principal assisting Pearl to get maintenance from him for her baby.

Using Textspeak

Users of the FunDza Mxit discussion boards make fairly extensive use of a number of linguistic strategies in manipulating written English that are characteristic of textspeak as described by Crystal (2008). For example, non-standard orthography might include: *u [you], dat [that], lyf [life]. A second form, contraction, includes examples like: bt its nt her flt [but it's not her fault], evn nw [even now], mst jst [must just], n m k [and am ok]. A third example, phonetic spelling, is also a fairly common strategy employed by users. Examples include skul [school], hil [he'll], neva sed [never said]. Bcz [because] and sumthng [something] are also examples of a combination of the process of contraction and phonetic spelling. Examples of rebus which involves words being spelled as a combination of letters, numbers and/or pictures are no 1 [no one], 4 [for], and 2 [to].*

Below I provide examples of user comments using textspeak from the interactive discussion board on *The Good Girl* on the FunDza Mxit platform along with versions of the textspeak comments in a more standard form of written English below each original comment.

Literacy as social practice

User comments not only reveal a promising level of knowledge about written English, they are also revealing of the ways in which users engage with what we might call the social in the story—in this case power relations specifically relating to gender, age, and money. User comments reflect attitudes towards, and beliefs about, gender roles, agency, vulnerability and risk, and socially acceptable ways of doing femininity.

The user comments quoted below are in response to the prompt question for Chapter 1: *What do you think Pearl is doing?* Pearl is situated in the centre of a contradictory discourse around masculinity and femininity wherein, on the one

hand, as part of their dominance over women, boys and men are considered to be legitimate sexual aggressors. On the other hand, women who are expected to be passive and to acquiesce to male dominance must simultaneously fiercely guard their physical and sexual integrity by resisting the sexual advances of men for fear of losing their virtue and reputation, often symbolised by virginity, and thereby their worth and value. Consider the user comments below.

Shz a prostitude in the making tryna pass by slpn wth a teacher

[She's a prostitute in the making trying to pass by sleeping with a teacher]

User 1: 9 November 2012

So wrong she is more like a hore nxaaa8o

*[So wrong, she is more like a whore *phonetic spelling of a sound]*

User 2: 4 July 2014

Pearl sound so dirty nd its not gud to sleep with a teacher

[Pearl sounds so dirty and it's not good to sleep with a teacher]

User 3: 1 July 2014

Wat she's dng is wrng al th pupil wl knw nd embaras hr infrnt of th hle skul

[What she's doing is wrong all the pupils will know and embarrass her in front of the whole school]

User 4: 9 November 2012

Girls are expected to obey the dominant male and also to be virginal. Pearl is acquiescent to the demands of the powerful male but this necessarily means that she cannot protect her virtue and reputation; she is caught up in the contradictory requirements of what it is to be an obedient girl and a good girl. These contradictory requirements of women and girls clearly create uncertainty about Pearl's positioning, but users appear to resolve this uncertainty by condemning her acquiescence to the sexual advances of an older, more powerful man, and remaining largely silent about Mr Phaladi's role in the situation. The idea of women's bodies and their sexuality being shameful is a powerful tool often used to police the expression of female sexuality. The virgin/whore discourse about women's bodies and their sexuality suggests that there is no middle road—girls and women are either sexually active and bad, or sexually inactive and good. When a girl or a woman does not conform to the virgin ideal in the eyes of the observers, she is considered immoral, unclean, and of little or no worth regardless of the circumstances of this failure or inability to conform. The user comments in the examples above demonstrate that for users, the virgin/whore binary is salient and therefore one that they make use of. This discourse is one that can exist only in highly unequal contexts in which male dominance over women, often expressed through the policing of their sexuality, is the norm. As

Gbalojobi (2010) reminds us, sexuality is informed by gender and operates within its broader framework so the silence around Mr Phaladi's behaviour allows users to avoid challenging established gender norms in which the sexual advances of men as an expression of male power are condoned.

There were a few users who acknowledged and commented on Mr Phaladi's role and responsibility in his relationship with Pearl. These users appear to be aware that not only is Mr Phaladi more powerful than Pearl, but that he is abusing this power by taking advantage of her. The comment below is an example of this awareness of the unequal power relations between Pearl and Mr Phaladi.

> *Wht peari is wrng…bt its nt her flt, bcz da tcher tok advntge of her….we all knw dt no1 cn rsist gd thngs in lyf*
>
> *[What Pearl is wrong…but it's not her fault, because the teacher took advantage of her…. We all know that no one can resist good things in life]*
>
> **User 6: 3 December 2012**

Note, however, that rather than attributing her vulnerability to unequal power relations, another user attributes Pearl's acquiescence to material motives.

> *Pearl is paper loving (materialistic) by so doing that,her ignorance is gonna ruin her life either pregnancy or hiv*
>
> *[Pearl is paper loving (materialistic) by so doing that, her ignorance is going to ruin her life either pregnancy or HIV]*
>
> **User 8: 12 December 2012**

The story appears to invite this kind of response by implying that Pearl's motivation for her involvement with Mr Phaladi is purely materialistic so that she can be seen in opposition to Kagiso who is clearly positioned as the good girl. It is important to note, however, that there are a number of ways in which Pearl, and girls in a similar position, are vulnerable. More than just materialism, economic vulnerability can be a strong motive for girls and women to engage in a transactional sexual relationship. Pearl and girls like her may also be vulnerable socially. For example, the desire to obtain good results at school in an effort to create better opportunities for upward social mobility in the future can be a powerful motive for becoming involved in a transactional relationship with a teacher. A noteworthy exception to the general trend is User 9's comment below, which speaks to vulnerability as a potential motivator of Pearl's behaviour.

> *I thnk she wants to be loved by ppl bt she's nt realising da effects of wt she's doin*
>
> *[I think she wants to be loved by people but she's not realising the effects of what she's doing]*
>
> **User 9: 3 December 2012**

In sharp contrast to the sentiments of many of the comments quoted above, User 10 appears to be celebrating Pearl's relationship with someone who can provide for her,

despite the risk involved. This user expresses reassurance that the outcome of such relationships is not always negative.

> *Go pearl u daddy is prvidng whch meanz u rock gal ws lyk da at skul n m k evn nw*
>
> *[Go Pearl your Daddy is providing which means you rock girl was like that at school and I'm okay even now]*
>
> ***User 10: 9 November 2012***

This comment can be seen as an example of an expression of the modern femininity described by Jewkes and Morrell (2012). It is a clear rejection of the conservatism and acquiescence expected of girls and women by other users. However, the inherent risk involved in this kind of approach is minimised by User 10. It is noteworthy that, as indicated in the preceding discussion of user comments, the behaviours associated with the performance of this kind of femininity are rejected by the majority of users, indicating that among them such modern femininity is not sanctioned.

Importantly, users have not recognised that the sexual relationship between Pearl and Mr Phaladi constitutes statutory rape and, given that all forms of rape are an expression of male power rather than sexual desire, it is interesting that in the story the Principal's support of Pearl and Kagiso, after they have reported Mr Phaladi, does not extend to pursuing criminal charges against Mr Phaladi for this statutory rape. It seems to me that the failure of users to recognise the behaviour as rape is part of the continuum of behaviour that ranges from victim-blaming to silence about what has happened to refusing to challenge the underlying power imbalances that allow this to happen in the first place.

There appears to be some recognition among users of the risks involved in engaging in a sexual relationship, particularly with a teacher. User 8, for example, mentions pregnancy and HIV, and User 9 alludes to the effects or consequences of Pearl's situation. In their evaluation of Pearl's agency, vulnerability, and risk, many of the users do not seem to be cognisant of the fact that, as Abdool Karim, et al, observe "[m]any young girls are often unable to remain abstinent, or negotiate mutually monogamous relationships, or rely on consistent condom use…." (2012: 1871).

Indeed, user comments in response to Pearl appear to point towards a particular misunderstanding of the kind of agency that girls like Pearl have, and the extent to which they can exercise that agency within the broader context of gender inequality. Women and girls, it seems, are thought to have more agency, and the ability to exercise that agency more freely than they actually do; in reality agency is often highly constrained. For example, it may seem that in performing a more modern femininity, Pearl is exercising agency in deciding to have a transactional relationship with Mr Phaladi. However, the extreme power disparities between the two in terms of gender, age, financial standing, and social position constrain Pearl's agency in relation to Mr Phaladi. This understanding of girls' agency in coercive situations is reinforced by Kagiso's actions at the end of the story and the positive response

of the Principal to this. The understanding of agency that user comments seem to reveal puts undue responsibility on Pearl, the individual with less power, for failing to exercise the agency that she is assumed to have, rather than on Mr Phaladi for abusing his power.

There was a lack of consensus among users in response to the prompt for Chapter 4 of this story: *Since Kagiso took the R200, does she now owe Mr Phaladi something?* A number of users felt that Kagiso, despite having taken the R200 from Mr Phaladi and using it to buy a calculator she did not, in fact, owe him anything.

> *She doesn't owe him any thng. Bt 2 hm thts not how hil take it*
>
> *[She doesn't owe him anything. But to him that's not how he'll take it]*
>
> **User 11: 12 Nov 2012**
>
> *No MR PHALADI IS ABUSING KAGISO AG*
>
> *[No. Mr Phaladi is abusing Kagiso. *phonetic spelling of a non-lexical utterance*]*
>
> **User 12: 7 December 2012**
>
> *No she doesnt owe him anythng. Its acutually mr philadi who owes her sumthng. An apology fr his unethical behavior*
>
> *[No she doesn't owe him anything. It's actually Mr Phaladi who owes her something – an apology for his unethical behaviour]*
>
> **User 13: 28 December 2012**

What is striking about these comments is the strong reaction to Mr Phaladi's behaviour. In stark contrast to user responses to his behaviour in relation to Pearl which is largely ignored or minimised, users condemn his behaviour towards Kagiso as unethical and abusive. This raises the question: Why do users react so differently to the same behaviour directed towards two different girls? Since the behaviour and the perpetrator are the same it is plausible that the different reactions are to the girl towards whom this behaviour is directed. Despite the fact that Kagiso is aware of Mr Phaladi's intentions, and considers acquiescing to his advances, she is not judged by the majority of users to be materialistic and dirty in the same way that Pearl is. There are a number of possible reasons for this. First, Kagiso has been set up from the beginning of the story as the good girl, displaying favourable feminine characteristics such as a lack of interest in boys, a focus on school work, and a quiet, discreet disposition. Second, users may find Kagiso's motivations for considering a relationship with Mr Phaladi more acceptable and legitimate because she needs a calculator in order to pass her mathematics exam. In contrast, Pearl, it appears, was interested only in material gain in itself. For users, a transactional relationship based on material consumption is judged more harshly than transactional relationships motivated by need. Further, at this point in the story, users are unaware of Kagiso's decision regarding accepting or rejecting Mr Phaladi's offer; she cannot yet be judged as virgin or whore.

I turn now to the comments of users who felt that given that Kagiso took the money and did not intend to return it, she did owe Mr Phaladi something—specifically, sex. Consider the comments below.

> *Ai this gal!!!If you take someone's money,it means you agree with his terms and conditions.She owes Mr Phaladi big time indeed.He'll blackmail her about this. Hhmmm…naïve gals!*
>
> *[*Phonetic spelling of a non-lexical utterance* this girl! If you take someone's money, it means you agree with his terms and conditions. She owes Mr Phaladi big time indeed. He'll blackmail her about this. *phonetic spelling of a non-lexical utterance*…naïve girls!]*
>
> **User 14: 12 November 2012**
>
> *Ja nw she owes him smthng. She mst jst play it safe n smart*
>
> *[Ja now she owes him something. She must just play it safe and smart.]*
>
> **User 15: 12 November 2012**
>
> *She(Kg) now has to sleep with mr Phaladi since she took that 200rand and the new book so yeap she owes him bigtime,but there is still time to backdown the only thing she needs to do is to return the money…..LV cant be bought,it something that happens naturally and u have to feel it.*
>
> *[She (Kagiso) now has to sleep with Mr Phaladi since she took that R 200 and the new book, so yeap she owes him bigtime. But, there is still time to back down the only thing she needs to do is return the money…..Love can't be bought; it's something that happens naturally and you have to feel it.]*
>
> **User 16: 12 November 2012**

For users 14 to 16, the exchange is an obvious one—R200 and a book for access to her body. User 15 considers Kagiso to be naïve, as though at her age she should know better. Recognising the risk involved, User 16 feels that Kagiso should play it safe and smart, not by refusing to have sex with Mr Phaladi, but presumably by using condoms. However, as noted above, in such unequal relationships, negotiating condom use is often not possible for girls. For User 17, the return of the money is a seemingly simple solution to a seemingly simple situation. It is in the context of poverty that this dynamic can play out; both men and women can view girls' and women's bodies as commodities to be used in fair exchange. Kagiso and Pearl's economic vulnerability exacerbate their lack of power because of their age and the rampant gender inequality of a patriarchal society. The immediacy of a need or a want in a context of poverty can lead to a decision-making process in which finding a solution to the problem of the moment is prioritised over the long term, potentially harmful, consequences of that short-term solution.

User 17, mindful of Kagiso's social and financial vulnerabilities, does not blame her for considering becoming involved with Mr Phaladi. It is noteworthy how different this response is to many of the responses to Pearl. For User 17, the exchange appears to be fair and s/he is casual about encouraging Kagiso to 'give the guy some loving'

because he 'will be there for her'. Also of note in this comment is the fact that whether or not Kagiso is a virgin is pertinent to User 17.

> *I dont blame kagiso 4 wat she,s doin her lyf iz dificult financialy n socialy and mr phaladi wl b there 4him she mst gv d guy sm lovng an move on,besides d story neva sed she was stl a virgin*

> *[I don't blame Kagiso for what she's doing her life is difficult financially and socially and Mr Phaladi will be there for her she must give the guy some loving and move on. Besides the story never said she was still a virgin]*

> **User 16: 12 November 2012**

In an illustration of Foucault's argument that sexuality is not an entity that is being repressed by power, but rather an "especially dense transfer point for relations of power" (1979: 103), User 17's comment shows how a girl or woman's value can be reduced to little more than her body and that the value of a woman or girl's body drops when she is no longer a virgin. In a patriarchal context, a woman or girl's worth is determined exclusively in terms of the contradictory requirements of being both subject to male power and the protectors of their virtue against male sexual desire.

Conclusion

So, what can textspeak tell us? In this article I have argued, following Crystal (2008), that the use of textspeak, or the spontaneous, frequent, and predictable manipulation of the rules and structures of written English, is evidence of a promising level of knowledge of those rules and structures, and of literacy among the users. Further, using textspeak in the way that the users discussed in this article have, is another way in which young people can engage in literate activities. In resource-poor settings, FunDza's innovative use of the Mxit platform provides young people with access to written materials and the opportunity to engage in literate activities. The large number of users of the FunDza Mxit platform in 2014 alone suggests that young people are making use of available resources to improve their literacy. Finally, the analysis of user comments presented in this article demonstrates that the users engage in literate activities beyond just text- or language-based literacy, but also as a social practice using their knowledge and context to mediate their understanding of, and response to, texts. User comments made in the anonymous digital space of the discussion boards reveal much about the gendered social relations that shape the users' readings of the text. The discussion boards provide users with the opportunity to reveal and discuss their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to unequal gendered power relations. Janks argues that critical literacy in education is "concerned with teaching learners to understand and manage the relationship between language and power" (2000: 175). It is here, particularly given the interactive nature of the discussion boards, that the potential lies for teachers and others who work with young people to use literate activities to develop critical literacy among young South Africans that, for example, challenges established gender norms that contribute to gender inequality, vulnerability, and risk. One way to harness this

potential would be for teachers and/or academics to become users of the FunDza Mxit platform, enabling them to engage with other users in this anonymous digital space in order to prompt more critical debate about the issues raised in the short stories and on the discussion board so that users are offered alternative analyses of the stories, and can, perhaps, begin to identify and question the power relations represented in the story. While the discussion in this article draws attention to textspeak as an indicator of a certain level of literacy and the potential of critical literacy to encourage young people to challenge and question the gender norms that underpin gender inequality, more research is required in this area in South Africa. There are a number of areas that such research should investigate, including how digital spaces can most effectively be used to engage young people in literate activities such that both their traditional literacy and their critical literacy are developed further. Questions about if and how critical literacy in relation to gender and sexuality, agency, and vulnerability and risk might enable young people to both recognise and challenge harmful gender norms could be asked and explored. The relationship between textspeak and literacy in South Africa could be investigated.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. http://www.fundza.co.za/

2. http://get.mxit.com/

3. http://get.mxit.com/

4. https://www.whatsapp.com/

5. Following Sheridan-Rabideau (2008), I use the term "literate activities" in this article instead of "literacy activities" to describe what literate people are able to do in terms of reading and writing, understanding and responding to texts in particular social contexts. For Sheridan-Rabideau (2008), the term reflects an important shift in the definition of literacy from just the ability to read and write, and incorporates "literacy as a social activity embedded in situated, cultural-historical contexts. This shift emerges, in part, from literacy research informed by anthropological/ethnographic traditions that focus on the diverse and interrelated activities surrounding the ways people use textual practices in particular settings." Like Sheridan-Rabideau, I, too, "use 'literate activities' instead of 'writing' or 'literacy' to emphasize literacy's complexity" (3).

6. http://live.fundza.mobi/home/library/fiction-short-stories/the-good-girl/