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The Use of Taboo Language in Tshivenḓa: Cultural Restrictions, Social Implications, and Changing Perspective

Mbulaheni Mudau[1] iD

Corresponding Author:

Mbulaheni Mudau
Department of African Languages, University of South Africa, South Africa. Email: mudauml@unisa.ac.za

Abstract: This study examines the use and perception of taboo language in Tshivenḓa-speaking communities, with a focus on how cultural norms, social expectations, and digital communication shape linguistic behaviour. The aim is to explore the social and generational dynamics influencing taboo expressions, particularly in the context of evolving communication norms brought about by modernisation and social media. Rooted in Sociolinguistic Theory, the research investigates how traditional restrictions coexist with emerging language practices that challenge established cultural values. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, and social media discourse analysis. The 19 participants were purposively selected from the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns related to cultural restrictions, generational shifts, and digital influences. Findings reveal that taboo language in Tshivenḓa continues to be regulated by cultural norms, especially in elder-dominated or formal contexts. However, younger and urban participants increasingly engage in the casual use of taboo expressions, driven largely by exposure to digital content and social media platforms. This generational divergence reflects a broader cultural transformation, where language becomes both a site of identity preservation and a tool for challenging traditional authority. The study concludes that taboo language serves a dual function in Tshivenḓa society: it reinforces communal values while simultaneously enabling individual expression. These insights have implications for language policy, cultural education, and digital literacy initiatives. Future research should examine these dynamics across other Bantu language communities to assess regional patterns.

Keywords: Tshivenḓa, Taboo Language, Cultural Restrictions, Social Implications, Changing Perspective, Everyday Speech

1. Introduction

The use of taboo language is a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon deeply rooted in cultural norms and social values. In Tshivenḓa-speaking communities, linguistic taboos have traditionally functioned to reinforce respect, uphold social hierarchies, and promote communal cohesion. By regulating discourse around sensitive topics such as death, sexuality, misfortune, and bodily functions, these taboos serve as verbal boundaries that maintain moral order and cultural dignity. Foundational scholarship has explored how such prohibitions preserve social stability in African societies (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Durkheim, 1915). Within the Tshivenḓa context, studies by Maḓadzhe (2010) and Mudau (2016) have examined euphemistic practices and culturally grounded beliefs, showing how taboo norms are transmitted across generations to safeguard traditional values and community identity.

However, these linguistic and cultural conventions are increasingly being contested due to modernisation, urbanisation, and, most notably, the rise of digital communication. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok have created new discursive spaces where younger generations, in particular, often bypass traditional filters and openly engage in language once deemed inappropriate. This shift challenges inherited norms of politeness and respect, and reflects broader transformations in identity, agency, and cultural expression. For some, the use of taboo language remains a moral and cultural violation; for others, it represents authenticity, freedom of expression, or even a form of resistance to patriarchal or authoritarian structures.

In this context, language operates as a double-edged sword. It simultaneously functions as a vehicle for cultural preservation and behavioural regulation, and as a tool for challenging norms, asserting individuality, and reshaping communal values. This duality lies at the heart of the present study, which investigates how the use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa both reinforces and disrupts cultural expectations amid rapid socio-digital transformation.

Although previous studies have documented traditional restrictions and euphemisms in Tshivenḓa (Maḓadzhe, 2010; Mudau, 2016), they primarily focus on rural or ritualised discourse. What remains underexplored is how digital technologies are redefining the boundaries of linguistic acceptability, and how Tshivenḓa speakers navigate the resulting tension between tradition and innovation. This study addresses that gap by offering a qualitative investigation of how taboo language use is evolving, particularly in semi-urban and digital settings.

1 Department of African Languages, University of South Africa, South Africa

Framed within Sociolinguistic Theory, the study draws on the lived experiences of traditional healers, community leaders, retired scholars, and elderly female participants from the Vhembe District in Limpopo. Using semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations, it examines how social media and contemporary environments influence the use, perception, and regulation of taboo expressions. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of African sociolinguistic research by highlighting how language continues to mediate identity, respect, power, and cultural transformation. Ultimately, this research provides practical insights for cultural preservation, language education, and digital literacy, while deepening our understanding of how language reflects and redefines societal values in a rapidly changing world.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The use of taboo language Heritage

Taboo is traditionally defined as a prohibited act or expression dictated by cultural or societal norms (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Durkheim, 1915). In linguistic terms, taboo language refers to words or expressions considered inappropriate, offensive, or unacceptable in specific contexts, typically involving sensitive topics such as death, sexuality, misfortune, and bodily functions. Within Vhavenḓa culture, such terms are systematically avoided and frequently replaced with euphemisms, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and communal values (Mudau, 2016). For example, direct references to illness, death, or misfortune are commonly shunned, as they are believed to invite negative energies or spiritual harm (Maḓadzhe, 2010).

The use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa is shaped by an interplay of cultural norms, social hierarchies, and historical influences. Hamidi (2024) emphasises that language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a mirror of cultural identity and social values. Consequently, within Tshivenḓa-speaking communities, particularly in the Vhembe District, taboo language occupies a complex and contested space, where cultural prohibitions, social expectations, and shifting generational attitudes intersect. This study builds on that premise by examining how taboo language is situated within this sociolinguistic framework, exploring its culturally prescribed boundaries and the extent to which these are being renegotiated across generations.

The social implications of violating linguistic taboos in Tshivenḓa are significant. Transgressing these verbal boundaries is often perceived as disrespectful, especially within traditional and intergenerational settings (Maḓadzhe, 2010). For instance, public discussions around topics such as sexual health, bodily ailments, or personal tragedy may provoke disapproval from elders and peers alike. As a result, many speakers conform to restrictive norms, suppressing direct expression in favour of socially sanctioned euphemisms. While this reinforces communal cohesion and moral conduct, it may also inhibit open discourse, particularly around critical issues such as mental health and sexuality. In this regard, enforced linguistic restraint can inadvertently perpetuate silence, stigma, and a lack of public dialogue (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Durkheim, 1915).

Nonetheless, contemporary Tshivenḓa society is witnessing a marked shift in attitudes toward taboo language. With the advent of globalisation, urbanisation, and digital communication technologies, younger generations are increasingly questioning traditional speech restrictions (Diko, 2023). The proliferation of social media has played a particularly transformative role, offering platforms where individuals, especially youth, can engage in open discussions on topics previously considered culturally off-limits. Issues such as sexual identity, trauma, and social injustice are now more visible in everyday discourse, prompting a reevaluation of what constitutes taboo (Tomlinson, 2025). This generational shift reflects broader societal trends that favour transparency, individual agency, and open expression over rigid adherence to traditional codes of conduct. However, the evolving perception of taboo language in Tshivenḓa presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it enables greater freedom of expression and promotes inclusive discussions on topics previously repressed. On the other hand, it may alienate older community members who view these changes as a threat to cultural values and moral integrity (Ramantswana, 2024). The tension between preserving tradition and embracing linguistic innovation underscores the broader complexity of language change in a rapidly shifting social landscape.

Taken together, the foregoing discussion illustrates the intricate relationship between language, culture, and communication. Taboo expressions in Tshivenḓa are embedded in belief systems that govern behaviour, reinforce hierarchy, and sustain cultural identity. However, as social attitudes evolve, especially among younger, digitally connected generations, there is a growing potential for these linguistic boundaries to be redefined (Sayi, 2019). This intersection between tradition and modernity necessitates a nuanced understanding of language as both a stabilising force and a vehicle for social transformation. As Tshivenḓa speakers continue to negotiate these tensions, the discourse surrounding taboo language will remain central to the community's ongoing cultural evolution.

2.2. Social and Cultural Implications of Taboo Language in Tshivenḓa

In Tshivenḓa-speaking communities, taboo language carries profound social and cultural meaning. Traditionally, it is governed by norms that promote respect, modesty, and social harmony (Maḓadzhe, 2010; Mudau, 2016). Public discussions about topics such as sexuality, bodily functions, or death are often avoided, particularly in intergenerational or ceremonial contexts, to maintain decorum and uphold communal values (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Durkheim, 1915). Euphemisms and indirect speech serve as important strategies for maintaining respect and avoiding offence. For instance, instead of the direct expression Vha khou runda ("they are urinating"), a more culturally acceptable euphemism would be Vha tshe vho mona murahu ha tshiṱanga ("he is still behind the enclosure"). Similarly, pregnancy might be referred to as vho gonya miri ("she has climbed a tree") rather than the more explicit Vha na thumbu ("she has a big tummy"), a linguistic shift that upholds discretion and minimises embarrassment (Mudau, 2024).

These euphemistic strategies also carry psychological and spiritual weight. Direct references to death, for example, are believed to attract misfortune or invoke spiritual consequences. Such beliefs further embed language within a metaphysical framework, where words are seen not merely as communication tools but as carriers of power and consequence (Maḓadzhe, 2010). Yet, as Vhavenḓa society continues to modernise, these long-held norms are increasingly being questioned. The rise of digital communication, especially among urban youth, has introduced new discursive environments where once-taboo topics are openly discussed. Younger speakers frequently challenge conventional speech codes by addressing subjects such as trauma, sexuality, and mental health in direct and unfiltered ways (Diko, 2023; Sayi, 2019). This shift toward openness and candid communication represents a broader generational realignment toward individual expression and the breaking of cultural silences (Babane & Mushwana, 2022; Mahwasane, 2020).

However, this transformation is not without friction. Many elders and traditional leaders interpret the casual use of taboo language as a sign of moral decline and cultural disrespect (Tomlinson, 2025). This generational tension reveals a deeper contradiction within the literature: while taboo language has historically served to maintain communal integrity, it is increasingly seen by younger generations as a barrier to self-expression and social progress (Xue & Nanjing, 2023). This underscores the dynamic and contested role of language in negotiating both continuity and change. In this light, taboo language in Tshivenḓa functions as a "double-edged sword." On one hand, it safeguards cultural values by promoting discretion and reverence. On the other, it risks silencing critical conversations and marginalising voices that challenge traditional authority. As younger speakers continue to push these boundaries, often through digital platforms, a linguistic and cultural transformation is underway. The boundaries of what is permissible, who may speak, and in which contexts, are being actively renegotiated. This study contributes to this evolving discourse by examining the simultaneous pull of tradition and the push for openness in Tshivenḓa society. Through this lens, taboo language is not only a reflection of deeply held cultural beliefs but also a tool for negotiating identity, resistance, and social change in the 21st century.

2.3. Social hierarchies, power dynamics, and Taboo usage in Tshivenḓa

Social hierarchies within Vhavenḓa communities play a pivotal role in shaping the use of taboo language, as linguistic choices often reflect broader societal structures and power relations. The hierarchical nature of Vhavenḓa society, particularly its emphasis on respect for elders and authority figures, strongly influences language use during social interactions (Sebola, 2021). Younger individuals are expected to exhibit linguistic restraint, especially in the presence of elders, by avoiding direct references to sensitive subjects. Instead, they employ euphemistic expressions to uphold decorum and maintain social harmony. Examples of such euphemisms include:

- Vha tshe vho awela instead of Vha tshe vho eḓela (to be still in bed)

- Vho lingana instead of Vho fura (to eat enough)

- Vho faresa instead of Vho kambiwa (to be drunk)

- Vha khou swaswa instead of Vha khou zwifha (to tell lies)

This linguistic practice reinforces a cultural ethos grounded in deference and self-restraint, illustrating how sociocultural hierarchies inform verbal behaviour (Maḓadzhe, 2010). In this context, the avoidance of direct or explicit language functions as a sign of respect and a mechanism for preserving social order. Thus, taboo language in Tshivenḓa is not merely a matter of restricted vocabulary but a reflection of deeply embedded cultural structures that regulate interpersonal interactions and reproduce traditional power dynamics. Beyond cultural expectations, taboo language is also closely tied to power relations in broader societal contexts. Mocanu (2017) argues that language, particularly taboo expressions, can function as a tool for asserting dominance or reinforcing authority. In hierarchical settings such as workplaces, political institutions, or familial structures, individuals in positions of power may use derogatory or explicit language to intimidate, humiliate, or control subordinates (Maḓadzhe, 2010). For example, a superior might weaponise explicit language to assert authority, thereby creating a toxic environment that disempowers those in lower positions. Such uses of language illustrate how taboo expressions can perpetuate social inequality and maintain hierarchical control.

Conversely, individuals in subordinate or marginalised positions may also employ taboo language as a form of resistance or defiance against authority figures. Bevir (1999) suggests that offensive or subversive language can be strategically used to challenge dominant ideologies and reclaim autonomy. This dynamic is particularly evident in protests, social movements, and activist discourses, where taboo language becomes a vehicle for expressing frustration, dissent, and demands for justice (Wright, 2016). In such contexts, linguistic transgression is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate act of rebellion aimed at disrupting established power relations.

The intersection of taboo language with identity markers such as gender, race, and class further complicates its role within power dynamics. In many societies, marginalised groups may strategically adopt taboo language as a means of asserting voice, challenging stereotypes, or reclaiming agency. For instance, refugee or minority youth may deliberately use language considered offensive by dominant cultural groups as a form of identity assertion and resistance to systemic exclusion (Park, 2017). This linguistic practice can foster solidarity within marginalised communities and disrupt dominant norms that seek to silence or erase them. In sum, the use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa-speaking communities is deeply embedded within complex hierarchies and systems of power. While cultural expectations often promote restraint and politeness, taboo expressions simultaneously function as instruments of authority, resistance, and negotiation. Recognising these dynamics provides valuable insight into the broader relationship between language, power, and social transformation. As Tshivenḓa society continues to evolve, particularly under the influence of globalisation and digital communication, the role of taboo language in shaping power relations and identity remains a critical area for further scholarly exploration.

2.4. Generational Perspectives on Taboo Language: Shifting Attitudes and Social Evolution

The use and perception of taboo language within Tshivenḓa-speaking communities are strongly shaped by generational differences, reflecting broader shifts in cultural values, societal structures, and communicative norms. Language is a dynamic and living entity, continually influenced by historical events, technological innovations, and evolving ideologies (Mahwasane, 2020; Mandende, Mudau & Mushaaṱhoni, 2024). As a result, different generations engage with taboo expressions in distinct ways, leading to contrasting views on what is deemed appropriate, offensive, or acceptable. Older generations generally uphold more conservative linguistic standards. They often perceive the use of taboo language as disrespectful, crude, and symptomatic of a decline in moral values. This perspective is rooted in longstanding cultural beliefs that associate explicit language with irresponsibility, immaturity, or social impropriety. Terms relating to sex, bodily functions, or death are typically avoided in intergenerational interactions and formal discourse. For example, expressions like Vha tshe vho awela ("still in bed") are used to preserve linguistic politeness and modesty, rather than employing more direct or explicit phrasing. Elders also voice concern over the erosion of linguistic sensitivity, as captured in the sentiment: Zwiila zwi tou buletshedzwa na vhukati ha vhathu, vhudzuloni ha u vhuyafhadza ("People are no longer sensitive in their use of taboo language").

By contrast, younger generations are more inclined to use taboo language informally and integrate it into everyday conversations (Mahwasane, 2020). This shift reflects the influence of changing social norms, increased global connectivity, and frequent exposure to unfiltered language through digital and social media (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Durkheim, 1915). Platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook have contributed to the normalisation of informal, humorous, and sometimes provocative language. As a result, many younger individuals no longer regard certain expressions as offensive but rather view them as tools for self-expression, bonding, or satire (Malaṱjie & Lesame, 2022). These generational shifts are also shaped by broader ideological and cultural transformations. As societies become more pluralistic and socially conscious, there is a growing emphasis on linguistic inclusivity and sensitivity. Many younger people reject traditional taboos not necessarily out of disrespect, but as part of a broader critique of outdated norms that limit dialogue around critical issues such as sexuality, gender, mental health, or identity (Bosch, 2017). Paradoxically, while challenging old taboos, younger generations often advocate for new forms of language ethics, aimed at preventing harm, discrimination, or exclusion.

This complex negotiation between freedom of expression and cultural sensitivity illustrates the evolving landscape of linguistic norms. While elders emphasise restraint and traditional respect, youth often champion openness and individual authenticity. Knight (2023) notes that such generational divides in language reflect deeper shifts in worldview and cultural orientation. Still, they need not be antagonistic. Fostering intergenerational dialogue about language use, meaning, and impact can promote mutual understanding and encourage respect across age groups. Ultimately, these generational differences in the use of taboo language reflect the dynamic and contested nature of linguistic change. As Tshivenḓa society continues to modernise and digitise, the boundaries of acceptable speech are being redefined. Recognising and respecting these evolving norms, while maintaining space for cultural continuity, is essential for building bridges between generations and for preserving both linguistic heritage and communicative relevance.

2.5. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Sociolinguistic Theory, which examines the relationship between language and society, with a particular focus on how social structures, norms, and identities shape linguistic practices. Rooted in the foundational work of Hymes (1974), this framework moves beyond structuralist views of language by emphasising that linguistic behaviour is socially constructed and contextually situated. As Cong (2023) defines it, sociolinguistics is the scientific study of language as a social and cultural phenomenon, an approach particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics of taboo language in Tshivenḓa-speaking communities.

Sociolinguistic Theory allows researchers to investigate how language practices, such as the use of euphemisms or avoidance of direct speech, are shaped by cultural restrictions, age-based hierarchies, gender roles, and generational attitudes. Within this framework, language variation is not viewed as random or deviant, but as socially patterned and meaningful. For example, Tshivenḓa speakers adjust their language depending on whether they are addressing elders, peers, or authority figures, thereby reflecting culturally specific expectations of politeness and appropriateness (Sankar, 2022). A critical component of this theory is the distinction between language attitudes and language ideologies, two concepts often conflated in the literature but which serve distinct analytical purposes:

- Language attitudes refer to individual or collective emotional and evaluative responses to particular linguistic forms, varieties, or speakers. These attitudes influence perceptions of politeness, deviance, prestige, or disrespect. For example, euphemistic speech in Tshivenḓa may be regarded as respectful, while explicit language may be disapproved of (Tobbi, 2024).

- Language ideologies, by contrast, are deeper, often implicit belief systems about language and its social functions. These ideologies encompass assumptions about what constitutes "appropriate" language, who is permitted to use it, and how it reflects broader structures of power and identity (Ghounane, 2014). Ideologies are thus more systemic and political, often embedded in institutions and reinforced through socialisation.

Both of these elements are central to the present study. Attitudes toward taboo expressions often reflect broader ideological positions related to tradition, morality, authority, and generational identity. While younger Tshivenḓa speakers may exhibit greater flexibility and openness in their language choices, traditional ideologies, especially those grounded in respect for elders and communal values, continue to exert strong normativepressure. Another foundational tenet of Sociolinguistic Theory is its constructivist view of linguistic taboos. From this perspective, taboos and euphemisms are not universal or biologically determined; rather, they are shaped by specific cultural, historical, and social conditions (Ghounane, 2014).

This approach helps explain why a word may be considered inappropriate in one context but entirely acceptable in another. For instance, while terms related to death or pregnancy are euphemised in traditional Tshivenḓa culture, digital platforms have enabled more direct engagement with these topics, particularly among younger generations who are increasingly questioning inherited norms (Diko, 2023; Sayi, 2019). Sociolinguistic Theory also accounts for language change in response to external influences such as globalisation, urbanisation, and technological development. These forces introduce contact with alternative linguistic norms and cultural perspectives, reshaping what is considered taboo. The increasing openness of social media spaces to discuss formerly prohibited topics illustrates how digital environments can act as catalysts for both linguistic and ideological transformation (Tobbi, 2024).

Despite its relevance, Sociolinguistic Theory is not without limitations, particularly when applied to African linguistic contexts. Developed primarily in Western settings, the theory can sometimes universalise assumptions about language prestige, behaviour, and politeness, which may not align with African communicative norms (Sankar, 2022). In the case of Tshivenḓa, language use is deeply intertwined with indigenous worldviews, communal epistemologies, oral traditions, and spiritual beliefs, dimensions that Western sociolinguistic models often overlook. For example, the metaphysical weight of words related to death or misfortune in Tshivenḓa reflects a worldview in which language is not merely symbolic but spiritually consequential. Analysing such phenomena requires culturally sensitive interpretive tools grounded in local knowledge systems. To address these limitations, this study adopts a contextualised and culturally responsive application of Sociolinguistic Theory. Informed by African scholarship and indigenous linguistic realities, this approach ensures that core concepts, such as taboo, politeness, and respect, are not treated as abstract variables, but as lived cultural practices embedded in the everyday experiences of Vhavenḓa speakers. In sum, while Sociolinguistic Theory has its origins in Western academic traditions, it remains a robust and adaptable framework for analysing how taboo language in Tshivenḓa reflects and negotiates social relationships, cultural norms, and identity. By distinguishing between language attitudes and ideologies, and by acknowledging the theory's limitations and recontextualising it within African realities, this study offers a more grounded analysis of evolving language practices, particularly in the face of digital transformation and generational change.
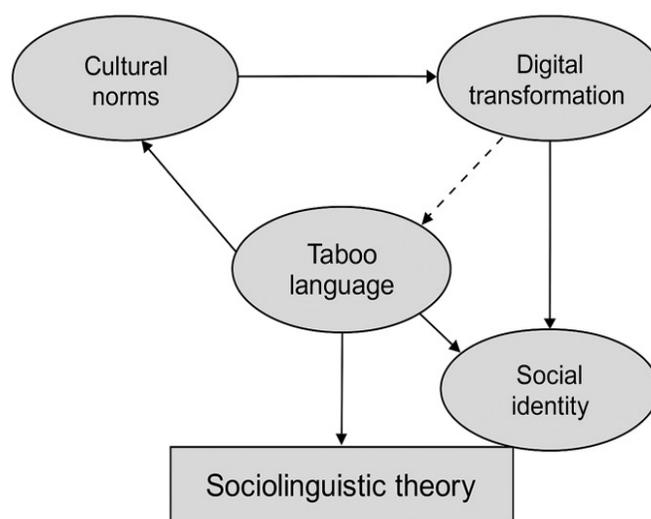
Figure 1: Theoretical Framwork

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is particularly well-suited for exploring complex, culturally embedded phenomena such as the use of taboo language within Tshivenḓa-speaking communities. The qualitative paradigm facilitated a nuanced examination of language as a social practice, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how linguistic behaviour intersects with cultural norms, generational shifts, and the impact of digital transformation. The research was conducted in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, an area rich in Tshivenḓa cultural and linguistic heritage, making it an ideal setting for the investigation.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to recruit participants with in-depth, context-specific knowledge of Tshivenḓa linguistic practices, traditional taboos, and evolving communication norms. Three primary inclusion criteria guided the selection process: participants had to be fluent in Tshivenḓa and culturally knowledgeable, particularly regarding taboo expressions and euphemistic conventions; they needed to represent a range of age groups, especially elders and retired individuals with lived experiences across both pre-digital and digital eras; and they had to occupy socially or culturally significant roles, such as traditional healers and community leaders, who actively participate in the transmission and reinforcement of Tshivenḓa customs.

To ensure diversity of perspectives, the sample included individuals from varied sociocultural backgrounds and gender identities. The final cohort consisted of five traditional healers who were familiar with ceremonial and symbolic language use; four traditional leaders who serve as custodians of Tshivenḓa cultural values and linguistic norms; four retired scholars who offered historical and contemporary insights into language practices; and six elderly female community members who are central to the oral

transmission of cultural knowledge and language etiquette. This distribution intentionally balanced formal, institutional perspectives with grassroots, community-level experiences, thereby capturing both authoritative and lived understandings of taboo language.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation, two methods that complemented one another by eliciting both reflective commentary and naturalistic instances of language use. Participants engaged in in-depth, one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. An interview guide, designed in alignment with the study's objectives, covered themes such as personal experiences with taboo language, the perceived influence of digital platforms on language practices, intergenerational differences in language norms, and gendered dimensions of linguistic taboos and power relations. The guide was pre-tested with two elders not participating in the main study to ensure cultural sensitivity, logical coherence, and clarity. Adjustments were made to accommodate local idiomatic expressions and to avoid unintended offense.

In addition to interviews, ethnographic observations were carried out during community events, traditional ceremonies, and informal social gatherings. The researcher documented patterns of language use in natural settings, focusing on the contexts in which taboo expressions emerged. Field notes were meticulously recorded, capturing not only the content of utterances but also the sociocultural settings in which they were produced, thereby enriching the interpretive depth of the findings. Ethical integrity was a foundational principle of this study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa's Ethics Committee under protocol number CREC Reference #: 8080119_CREC_CHS_2024. Prior to participation, all individuals provided written informed consent and were briefed in Tshivenḓa about the study's aims, potential risks, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of coded identifiers, such as EF (Elderly Female), EM (Elderly Male), TH (Traditional Healer), TL (Traditional Leader), and RS (Retired Scholar). All interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely in password-protected digital files, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

Data saturation was reached after the nineteenth interview, at which point no new themes or perspectives were emerging. This indicated that the core thematic areas, namely digital influence, generational shifts, and cultural resistance, had been adequately represented across the participant pool. To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the study, several validation strategies were employed. Triangulation was achieved by integrating data from both semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation, thereby allowing for cross-verification and a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Member checking was conducted by inviting selected participants to review their interview transcripts and preliminary summaries to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Furthermore, the researcher engaged in continuous reflexivity by maintaining a personal research journal, which documented evolving assumptions, biases, and methodological decisions. This process enhanced analytical transparency and helped mitigate potential subjectivity.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Role	Gender	Age Range	Setting
TH1	Traditional Healer	Male	60‚Äì75	Rural
TH2	Traditional Healer	Male	60‚Äì75	Urban
TH3	Traditional Healer	Male	60‚Äì75	Rural
TH4	Traditional Healer	Male	60‚Äì75	Urban
TH5	Traditional Healer	Male	60‚Äì75	Rural
TL1	Traditional Leader	Male	60‚Äì75	Rural
TL2	Traditional Leader	Male	60‚Äì75	Urban
TL3	Traditional Leader	Male	60‚Äì75	Urban
TL4	Traditional Leader	Male	60‚Äì75	Rural
RS1	Retired Scholar	Male	60‚Äì75	Urban
RS2	Retired Scholar	Male	60‚Äì75	Rural
RS3	Retired Scholar	Male	60‚Äì75	Urban
RS4	Retired Scholar	Male	60‚Äì75	Rural
EF1	Elderly Female	Male	60‚Äì75	Urban
EF2	Elderly Female	Female	60‚Äì75	Rural
EF3	Elderly Female	Female	60‚Äì75	Urban
EF4	Elderly Female	Female	60‚Äì75	Rural
EF5	Elderly Female	Female	60‚Äì75	Urban
EF6	Elderly Female	Female	60‚Äì75	Rural

Source: By the author

The study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1981) four criteria for establishing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged field engagement, data triangulation, and participant validation of key interpretations. Transferability was supported through thick description, which provided detailed contextualisation

of the research setting, participant demographics, and sociocultural dynamics surrounding taboo language. This allows readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other African linguistic communities undergoing similar sociocultural transitions. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail, including field notes, interview protocols, consent forms, transcripts, and thematic coding frameworks. Peer debriefing with academic supervisors further reinforced methodological coherence. Finally, confirmability was established through rigorous reflexivity and the grounding of all interpretive claims in participant quotations and observable social practices, thereby reinforcing the objectivity and reliability of the research outcomes.

4. Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is a systematic and iterative process involving the organisation, coding, and interpretation of textual data to uncover patterns, meanings, and relationships. This study employed thematic analysis as the primary analytical method, enabling a deep exploration of cultural restrictions, social implications, and shifting perspectives on the use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa-speaking communities. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying and interpreting complex social meanings within rich, descriptive data. The analysis followed the six-phase framework developed by Clarke and Braun (2017): familiarisation with the data, initial code generation, theme development, review of themes, theme definition and naming, and final report writing. Data were sourced from semi-structured interviews and ethnographic field observations. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated into English, with careful attention paid to preserving the original cultural and linguistic nuances. Each transcript was read multiple times to ensure immersion in the data and to maintain contextual accuracy.

A hybrid coding strategy, combining deductive and inductive approaches, was employed to maximise analytic depth. Deductive codes were generated based on the study's research questions and the guiding principles of Sociolinguistic Theory. These codes focused on constructs such as cultural restriction, power dynamics, language ideologies, and identity. In parallel, inductive codes emerged organically from participants' narratives, capturing unexpected insights, unique local expressions, and culturally embedded practices that extended beyond the scope of pre-existing frameworks. The data were coded line by line using NVivo software to ensure consistency, traceability, and systematic categorisation. Throughout the process, detailed analytic memos were maintained to document reflections, thematic linkages, and emergent conceptual insights.

Although this was a single-researcher project, peer debriefing and intercoder validation were integrated to enhance analytic rigour. A second independent coder was invited to analyse a subset of the data, and intercoder reliability was evaluated through collaborative dialogue. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and reconciled, ensuring greater consistency in theme construction and interpretation. This collaborative process contributed to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Themes were developed through continuous comparison across different participant groups, including traditional healers, traditional leaders, retired scholars, and elderly female community members. This comparative approach enabled the identification of both shared and divergent perspectives, thereby ensuring that the analysis was not only representative of the broader community but also sensitive to intra-group variation. Moreover, this method safeguarded against overgeneralisation and helped anchor the findings in the authentic lived experiences of participants rather than in the researcher's assumptions.

The analysis resulted in the identification of three major themes, each offering a distinct but interconnected perspective on the sociolinguistic functions of taboo language in Tshivenḓa: The first theme centres on cultural norms and societal expectations that shape the use and restriction of taboo language, highlighting how traditional values regulate verbal expression and delineate what is considered appropriate in various social contexts. This theme illustrates the enduring influence of respect, modesty, and hierarchical relationships in determining language acceptability. The second theme examines the impact of social media on the use of taboo language, focusing on how digital platforms influence interpersonal relationships, community cohesion, and sociolinguistic authority. Here, the analysis reveals that social media spaces are increasingly challenging traditional linguistic taboos, facilitating greater openness and potentially disrupting established norms of respect and propriety. The third theme captures changing perspectives on language and culture in Tshivenḓa, particularly in light of modernisation, generational differences, and exposure to global discourses. Participants expressed a growing tension between preserving linguistic traditions and embracing more liberal, expressive modes of communication, reflecting broader cultural negotiations within a rapidly transforming society.

These themes were derived not only from verbal testimony but also from non-verbal cues, embodied expressions, and the broader sociocultural context in which the data were collected. Therefore, the findings offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how taboo language is interpreted, employed, and contested in contemporary Tshivenḓa society. The thematic insights developed through this analysis provide a critical foundation for interpreting the socio-cultural dynamics of language use and inform the subsequent discussion and implications of the study.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings derived from qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations with purposefully selected participants. The analysis is organised around three primary themes: (1) cultural norms and societal expectations shaping the use and restriction of taboo language in Tshivenḓa; (2) the impact of social media on the use of taboo language and its implications for interpersonal relationships, social cohesion, and power dynamics; and (3) changing perspectives on language and culture in response to modernisation and generational shifts. These themes were guided by the following research questions: How do cultural norms and societal expectations influence the regulation and use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa?

What are the social implications of taboo language in shaping relationships and authority within the community? And how have modernisation, globalisation, and intergenerational change redefined perceptions of linguistic taboo? The participants' responses offer a deeper understanding of how taboo language is governed, negotiated, and transformed within Tshivenḓa-speaking society.

5.1. Cultural Norms and Societal Expectations Shaping the Use and Restriction of Taboo Language in Tshivenḓa

The findings demonstrate that the use and restriction of taboo language in Tshivenḓa remain deeply embedded in cultural norms and communal expectations. Lexical items associated with sexuality, bodily functions, death, and kinship are particularly proscribed in formal or intergenerational settings. These prohibitions are most strongly enforced in the presence of elders or authority figures, where linguistic restraint is both expected and culturally valued. Transgression of these norms is traditionally met with social disapproval or, historically, physical punishment. This reflects Afe's (2013) argument that taboo language has long functioned as a mechanism for regulating interpersonal conduct and preserving communal integrity in pre-colonial African societies. Several participants, including traditional leaders, traditional healers, and elderly women, emphasised the importance of speech discipline. As one elderly male participant (EM) explained:

"Nga mvelele ya Vhavenḓa, muthu a tshi amba kana u fhindula u a tea u kala maipfi awe zwi tshi bva kha u ri u khou amba na nnyi…"

("In Tshivenḓa culture, when a person speaks or responds, they must carefully choose their words based on whom they are addressing.")

This observation illustrates how linguistic behaviour reflects social hierarchy, consistent with Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic theory, which posits that language both expresses and reinforces stratification. Comparable patterns are evident in other Bantu languages. For example, Mbele et al. (2015) found that in isiZulu-speaking communities, children are discouraged from discussing death or sex in front of elders, a form of linguistic discipline grounded in respect and moral sensibility.

Further reinforcing this norm, another participant (EF) remarked:

"Mvelele ya Vhavenḓa yo ḓisendeka nga zwiila zwi thivhelaho vhathu vha mbeu dzoṱhe…"

("Tshivenḓa culture is structured around taboos that prohibit people of all ages and sexes from engaging in forbidden actions.")

These taboos are not limited to language; rather, they extend to a broader behavioural code grounded in ritual, morality, and social harmony. For example, one participant (EM) recalled:

"Vhana vho iledzwa u dzhena he vhabebi vha eẓela hone…"

("Children were forbidden from entering their parents' bedroom while they were in bed.")

Such spatial taboos align with similar cultural rules in Xhosa-speaking communities, where a child's physical proximity to parental spaces is strictly regulated to uphold moral order (Ndlovu, 2020). Discipline in Tshivenḓa society has traditionally been enforced through both moral and physical forms of correction. One retired scholar (RSL) recounted:

"Ṅwana o vha a tshi nga ita zwenezwo zwa u dzhena vhathu vhahulwane mulomoni… o vha a tshi bomodzwa mulomo…"

("A child who interrupted elders was often physically reprimanded as a correction.")

This practice is consistent with Simango and Mafa's (2022) findings that African communities have historically utilised verbal correction and physical punishment to enforce moral and linguistic discipline. Similarly, Kaguda (2012) observes that euphemisms and silences in the Shona language serve to preserve cultural decorum. However, participants also acknowledged the erosion of these values in contemporary society. Many, including traditional leaders and elderly female participants, expressed concern about the perceived decline in communal responsibility and intergenerational respect. As one participant observed:

"Musalauḽa ṅwana wa muṅwe o vha e ṅwana wau… mme a muṅwe e mme au."

("In earlier times, every child was seen as a communal responsibility.")

Another participant lamented:

"Vhana vha ano maḓuvha a vha tsha shavha muthu…"

("Today's youth no longer fear or respect elders.")

These generational concerns mirror findings by Idang (2015) and Baloyi (2020), who argue that rising individualism, coupled with Western media influences, has weakened African moral systems rooted in communalism and restraint. Mudau (2016) similarly reports that in Setswana-speaking regions, traditional speech taboos are increasingly being undermined by global media and education systems. Baloyi (2020) further contends that the erosion of cultural restrictions has resulted in diminished linguistic discipline, leading to more direct and, at times, disrespectful forms of expression. This view is echoed by Babane and Mushwana (2022), who note that youth-dominated digital spaces often frame taboo avoidance as outdated or irrelevant. While Tshivenḓa shares with other Bantu languages a strong tradition of speech regulation, it differs in the mechanisms used. Whereas isiZulu and isiXhosa are known for hlonipha, a complex system of avoidance speech particularly observed by women, Tshivenḓa relies more on contextual appropriateness, silence, and euphemism rather than lexical substitution (Finlayson, 1982; Kaguda, 2012). For instance, in Shona, women avoid using the names or root sounds of their husband's male relatives, substituting them with metaphorical equivalents. In contrast, Tshivenḓa speakers appear to prioritise discretion through silence and non-verbal cues, especially in the presence of authority figures.

These findings confirm that cultural norms and societal expectations have historically governed the use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa. These restrictions have played a critical role in sustaining respect, maintaining social hierarchy, and promoting communal harmony. However, the data also suggest that these traditional constraints are increasingly being challenged, particularly by younger generations whose values are shaped by individualism, digital media, and exposure to global discourses. Therefore, framed within Sociolinguistic Theory, this section demonstrates that language both reflects and shapes cultural identity. As the sociocultural values of Tshivenḓa-speaking communities evolve, so too do the form, function, and perception of taboo language. This dynamic shift signals not only a transformation in communication norms but also a broader redefinition of cultural-linguistic identity in a modernising society.

5.2. The impact of social media on the use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa: implications for interpersonal relationships, social cohesion, and power dynamics

The findings of this study reveal that digital communication platforms, particularly social media, have significantly transformed attitudes toward taboo language in Tshivenḓa-speaking communities. Traditionally, strict cultural norms regulated discourse surrounding sensitive subjects such as sexuality, bodily functions, and death. These restrictions reflected deeply embedded values of respect, hierarchy, and collective harmony. However, the rise of digital platforms has introduced new communicative freedoms, leading to a noticeable relaxation of these linguistic constraints, particularly among the youth. One of the most prominent effects of this digital shift is the increasing normalisation of taboo language among younger generations, who are routinely exposed to unfiltered content on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Unlike traditional oral and communal spaces, typically regulated by elders and guided by institutionalised cultural norms, social media platforms provide unrestricted spaces where explicit and provocative expression is not only tolerated but often rewarded.

This shift has redefined what constitutes acceptable language use within Tshivenḓa society. Participant TL1 remarked:

"Maṱudzi ane a vha a tshi khou ṱalelwa nga kha ṱhingokhwalwa vha a vhona vha ṱhukhuwa muṱoḓo ngeno mbilu I tshi nga rotha malofha."

("If you get access to what they watch on their cell phones, one can be shocked.")

This statement underscores the growing desensitisation to themes and language that were once strictly proscribed. The erosion of traditional cultural mechanisms that previously regulated linguistic expression is consistent with findings by Moffat (2024), as well as Malapane, Chanza, and Musakwa (2024), who argue that digital media has contributed to the mainstreaming of once-taboo lexical items. Similarly, Anggita (2015) suggests that the reduction of public sanctions in digital environments emboldens informal, often transgressive, discourse. Although this loosening of taboos is not unique to Tshivenḓa, its expression remains culturally distinctive. Among Swahili-speaking youth in Tanzania, for example, Tramutoli (2023) observes that digital taboo-breaking occurs primarily through Sheng, a hybrid slang that blends Swahili with English and local dialects. In contrast, Tshivenḓa speakers remain more tethered to metaphor, euphemism, and indirect speech, suggesting a slower cultural shift and more pronounced generational friction. Moreover, while Yoruba speakers often circumvent taboos through English code-switching in conversations about sexuality or anatomy (Wang, 2020), Tshivenḓa speakers are more likely to innovate within their own language. This tendency preserves linguistic identity even as it subverts traditional boundaries, illustrating the sociolinguistic resilience of Tshivenḓa amidst technological transformation. In more traditional Bantu contexts, such as the Bemba of Zambia, Silungwe (2014) notes that taboos are often maintained through non-verbal behaviour and avoidance rather than explicit linguistic regulation. By contrast, Tshivenḓa places strong emphasis on verbal discipline, making the transgression of linguistic taboos particularly impactful. This may explain why digital violations of speech norms feel especially disruptive within Tshivenḓa-speaking communities. Furthermore, social media has disrupted traditional power hierarchies that once governed language use. Elders and community leaders, formerly the custodians of linguistic norms, now face declining authority in digital environments where younger individuals, women, and even children actively participate in discussions that were once off-limits. This decentralisation of linguistic authority has democratized speech, yet it has also introduced new risks and ethical dilemmas.

For instance, Participant TH1 shared a troubling account:

"Vhathu vha khou ḓifoda vhe hodelani murumba u tshi khou ṱambela tshanḓa... zwa phaḓalala na zwileludzi munna a nga a sa a ḓihunga."

("They record themselves in hotels during sex acts... when the man ended the relationship, the woman uploaded the footage to Facebook. He nearly committed suicide after it went viral.")

This incident illustrates how social media can be used not only to challenge taboos but also to inflict psychological harm, breach privacy, and intensify social conflict. Such occurrences reflect a growing rupture between traditional values of discretion and the performative, often volatile, nature of digital expression. Participant RS3 further reflected:

"Aya ndi mafhungo a ofhisaho ane ha pfala vhudzimu ha muthu vhu tshi khou leleḓa kha vhudavhidzani ha nnyi na nnyi."

("These events are disturbing, eroding one's conscience and undermining social relationships.")

The erosion of linguistic restraint in digital contexts has also undermined communal cohesion. Whereas traditional Vhavenḓa society upheld modest speech as a marker of moral order and collective identity, digital platforms now encourage individualistic, provocative, and sometimes confrontational communication. Generational tensions have intensified, as elders frequently express dismay at the loss of reverence for linguistic norms that once embodied cultural and ethical discipline. Nevondo, Madima, and Makhanikhe (2024, p. 41) argue that digitalisation and modernity have introduced "lifestyle changes that disrupt African communicative norms." The present study substantiates this claim and extends it by demonstrating how taboo language no longer merely functions as a moral boundary; it has become a medium of social provocation, protest, humour, and even revenge.

Earlier works by Maḓaḓzhe (2010) and Mudau (2016) primarily examined taboos within formal and rural contexts, often emphasising euphemism and ritual. By contrast, the present study centres on urban, informal, and digitally mediated contexts, where language practices are fluid, negotiated, and constantly in flux. While Idang (2015) asserts that taboo operates as a moral compass within African societies, this research suggests that such a compass is increasingly being recalibrated in light of new technological and sociocultural realities. Indeed, digital affordances such as anonymity, audience reach, and content virality have redefined taboo from a private, culturally guarded boundary into a public arena of identity performance, control, and resistance. Therefore, taboo language in Tshivenḓa is no longer exclusively governed by traditional structures but is now shaped by technology, audience, and communicative intent

Framed within Sociolinguistic Theory, these findings reaffirm that language is both a reflection of and a force for cultural transformation. As younger Tshivenḓa speakers increasingly adopt more liberal linguistic practices, they are not merely discarding traditional values, they are actively reshaping them to suit new communicative needs and social realities. This evolution has profound implications for how respect, cultural continuity, and moral boundaries are conceptualised and negotiated in the digital age. Ultimately, the findings underscore that taboo language in Tshivenḓa is situated at the intersection of tradition and modernity, authority and autonomy, silence and expression. As digital spaces continue to expand, the cultural and sociolinguistic significance of taboo will remain a contested yet revealing site of change across African linguistic communities.

5.3. Changing Perspectives on Language and Culture in Tshivenḓa

One of the foremost cultural constraints governing linguistic expression in Tshivenḓa is the stringent regulation of communication, particularly in interactions involving elders, authority figures, and topics regarded as sacred. Within traditional Vhavenḓa society, linguistic taboos function as essential mechanisms for maintaining social hierarchy and reinforcing respect. It is considered deeply inappropriate, for instance, for a child to accuse a parent of dishonesty or to issue commands to an elder. Instead, indirect speech and euphemistic expressions are culturally mandated to uphold decorum and reinforce established norms. This perspective aligns with the work of Babane and Mushwana (2022) and Mudau (2016), who define linguistic taboo as any word or expression that provokes shock, embarrassment, or offence by transgressing culturally sanctioned values. In line with these restrictions, traditional Tshivenḓa culture provides culturally acceptable linguistic alternatives for expressions considered too explicit or impolite.

Table 2: Taboo Terms and Euphemisms

Taboo word or phrase	Culturally Acceptable Alternative
*Vho fura (*to eat enough food)	*Vho lingana* (to be enough)
Vha a bvafha (to be lazy)	*Vha a teledza* (to be reluctant)
O beba (to give birth)	*O vhofholowa* (to deliver)
Vho fa (to die)	*Vho lovha/ Vho ri sia* (to pass on)

Source: By the author

For example, the taboo phrase Vho fura (to eat enough) is often replaced by the more acceptable Vho lingana (to be enough). Similarly, Vha a bvafha (to be lazy) becomes Vha a teledza (to be reluctant); O beba (to give birth) is substituted with O vhofholowa (to deliver); and Vho fa (to die) is expressed euphemistically as Vho lovha or Vho ri sia (to pass on). These alternatives serve not only to mitigate offence but also to reflect broader social values of modesty, reverence, and collective harmony. These linguistic constraints operate within a broader sociolinguistic framework where language functions as a marker of social order and communal identity (Trudgill, 2000). Adherence to linguistic taboos reinforces intergenerational respect, power dynamics, and social cohesion. However, with the advent of modernisation and globalisation, a significant shift in attitudes towards taboo language in Tshivenḓa has emerged. The widespread use of digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok has exposed younger generations to a variety of linguistic influences, fostering a more relaxed stance toward previously restricted expressions.

Moffat (2024, p. 170) observes that "what is posted on Twitter has changed society profoundly," suggesting that the immediacy and anonymity of online discourse have diminished the deterrent effects of traditional sanctions. Consequently, taboo language is increasingly used without fear of social reprisal, particularly in informal, digital contexts. This concern was echoed by Participant TL1, who described how youth now have unfiltered access to explicit content via mobile devices, material that may be profoundly disturbing to older generations. The participant's account underscores the weakening of cultural safeguards that once regulated linguistic conduct, and illustrates how digital exposure is gradually desensitising individuals to formerly taboo expressions. This transformation reflects a broader decline in the authority of elders and traditional institutions in regulating speech.

Further evidence of this shift emerged in the account of Participant RS2, who described an incident in which intimate footage recorded in a hotel was later disseminated via Facebook following a relationship breakdown. The video's viral spread reportedly led to severe emotional distress and suicidal ideation. Such examples demonstrate how digital technologies have redefined the boundaries of privacy, transformed the status of taboo language, and introduced new risks to interpersonal relationships. Anggita (2015) similarly argues that declining enforcement of public sanctions has led to the normalisation of language that once violated deeply held moral standards. A pronounced generational divide is also evident in attitudes toward taboo expressions. Elders tend to view linguistic taboos as vital for preserving cultural values, while younger individuals increasingly perceive them as outdated or restrictive. Abiodu (2023) notes that while all cultures possess linguistic taboos, their function and interpretation vary significantly across generations. In the Tshivenḓa context, youth, particularly those influenced by Western media and global discourses, often challenge traditional linguistic constraints. This tension was illustrated by Participant RS3, who expressed alarm at the circulation of explicit images involving married individuals, describing the ensuing marital breakdowns and societal disruption.

In line with these findings, Nevondo, Madima, and Makhanikhe (2024, p. 41) argue that modernisation and digital technology have transformed African communicative practices, reshaping perceptions of taboo language. In Tshivenḓa, the increasing disregard for traditional linguistic

boundaries signifies a deeper cultural transition, wherein personal autonomy and self-expression are prioritised over communal norms and restraint. However, the relaxation of linguistic restrictions carries profound social implications. Historically, euphemistic language served to reinforce solidarity, hierarchy, and moral responsibility. As Sankar (2022, p. 212) affirms, "language and society are strongly connected; language reflects cultural values, and culture is witnessed through language." The growing use of explicit expressions in Tshivenḓa, particularly among youth, signals not only a transformation in language use but also a shift in cultural orientation, from collectivism to individualism. Nwobodo (2023) further warns that unregulated use of taboo language may perpetuate harmful stereotypes and foster disrespect, particularly concerning age, gender, and social status. In Tshivenḓa, certain taboo expressions carry inherently derogatory undertones, and their widespread adoption risks undermining traditional institutions, diminishing respect for elders, and eroding shared cultural identity.

Despite these shifts, taboo language in Tshivenḓa remains largely regulated in formal and traditional contexts, where cultural protocols continue to dictate respectful communication. However, its increasing normalisation in digital and urban settings highlights a fundamental transformation in how language mediates social relations and identity. This study, therefore, affirms that taboo language is no longer a fixed or static element of Tshivenḓa culture; rather, it is being actively renegotiated in response to globalisation, technology, and shifting generational values As modernisation expands communicative possibilities and promotes linguistic liberalisation, it raises critical questions about how Tshivenḓa society might balance the need for cultural preservation with the inevitability of linguistic evolution. Future research should investigate strategies for maintaining the integrity of Vhavenḓa's cultural identity while embracing the dynamic nature of language. Such an approach would allow Tshivenḓa to remain a living, adaptive language, responsive to change yet firmly rooted in the values that have long sustained its community.

6. Future research and recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that cultural norms play in shaping and regulating the use of taboo language within Tshivenḓa-speaking communities. These norms, rooted in values such as respect, discipline, and communal identity, have long guided linguistic behaviour, particularly in traditional contexts. However, they are increasingly challenged by evolving communication practices, especially within digital spaces. Therefore, there is an urgent need to re-evaluate how these norms can be adapted to remain relevant while safeguarding the foundational principles of Vhavenḓa cultural identity. To address this, I recommend that cultural custodians, educators, and traditional leaders actively promote intergenerational dialogue. Facilitated discussions between elders and youth can serve as platforms for bridging the divide between tradition and modernity. Such conversations can cultivate mutual understanding, enabling younger generations to appreciate the value of respectful communication without entirely rejecting contemporary modes of expression.

Moreover, formal education has a vital role in language preservation and the reinforcement of cultural values. Schools in Tshivenḓa-speaking regions should integrate the study of linguistic taboos into their language and cultural studies curricula. Lessons should address the historical, ethical, and social dimensions of taboo language, emphasising its function in maintaining moral order and community cohesion. These lessons can be enriched through participatory storytelling sessions led by elders, offering students firsthand accounts of cultural practices and the meanings behind linguistic restrictions. Given the pervasive influence of digital media, I further recommend the development of community-based digital literacy campaigns. These initiatives, implemented through workshops, school outreach programs, and youth centres, should focus on the responsible use of language online. Issues such as the normalisation of explicit language, cyberbullying, and the erosion of linguistic respect in virtual environments must be addressed. By promoting critical awareness of online language practices, such programs can help preserve cultural dignity while fostering ethical digital citizenship. Community forums also represent valuable sites for knowledge exchange. Regularly organised events, whether during cultural festivals, community meetings, or moderated online platforms, should facilitate intergenerational engagement on language, identity, and shifting cultural values. These spaces would not only promote dialogue and mentorship but also contribute to cultural documentation, potentially supporting the development of educational materials, archives, and future research resources.

On a broader policy level, collaboration with institutions such as the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), the Tshivenḓa National Language Body, and the Department of Arts and Culture is crucial. These bodies can play a strategic role in safeguarding Tshivenḓa linguistic heritage while responding to contemporary language challenges. Policymakers should work closely with these institutions to formulate guidelines that promote respectful language use in education, media, and public discourse. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns should aim to balance freedom of expression with the preservation of cultural values and linguistic sensitivity. Finally, I recommend that future research adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches to investigate the evolving use of taboo language across different age groups, geographic locations, and socio-cultural contexts. Such research could explore, for example, how language taboos differ in urban and rural communities, how digital culture is reshaping linguistic attitudes, and how gender and generational dynamics intersect with speech norms. These insights will be instrumental in guiding educational reform, cultural preservation efforts, and policymaking that is responsive to the realities of linguistic change in African societies.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the use of taboo language in Tshivenḓa, focusing on its cultural restrictions, social implications, and changing perceptions in the context of modernisation and digital communication. The findings confirm that traditional norms continue to regulate language use in formal and familial settings, reinforcing respect, social hierarchy, and communal values. However, the growing influence of social media has increasingly undermined these norms, creating new spaces for linguistic expression that often bypass established cultural filters. A significant generational divide has emerged: younger speakers tend to view linguistic taboos as outdated or restrictive, whereas older generations uphold them as essential markers of identity and morality. This tension reflects broader societal shifts, including increased individualism, digital exposure, and cultural globalisation.

Grounded in Sociolinguistic Theory, the study illustrates that language is not only a reflection of cultural values but also a mechanism through which societies negotiate identity, power, and change. The research achieved its objective by critically analysing the intersection of tradition and modernity in Tshivenḓa-speaking communities and by highlighting the evolving role of taboo language within that dynamic.

As linguistic practices continue to evolve, particularly in the face of technological change, future research must continue to explore how digital platforms, global influences, and local cultural systems interact. This line of inquiry is essential for understanding how African languages such as Tshivenḓa can remain resilient and adaptive, retaining their cultural essence while embracing the communicative demands of the 21st century.

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About the Author(s).

Mbulaheni Mudau is a Senior lecturer in the Department of African Languages, Faculty of Arts at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria, South Africa. His research interests are in Sociolinguistics, Cultural and Linguistic studies, and Traditional and Modern literature.