Promoting Peace Through Our Fingertips: Exploring Social Media as a Space for Peace Education in South African Schools

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Abstract

Peace is a precious goal of humanity and should be accomplished and sustained in all ways. Peace education is a powerful means to create a peaceful and harmonious learning environment in schools. The use of social media, particularly among youth, has grown exponentially in the contemporary world of communication and revolutionised the speed and success of information sharing. If harnessed effectively, social media is a vehicle for delivering peace education to transform the schooling environment and empower learners with peace values. However, the role of social media as tool for peace is still in its infancy. This theoretical paper aims at adding to knowledge by exploring the feasibility of using social media as space for dispensing and promoting peace education as strategy to combat school violence. Informed by the integrative theory of peace, a critical qualitative review of literature guided by the interpretive paradigm addressed the question: What is the feasibility of using social media as educational space for peace education? Findings suggest that social media platforms can be used as channels to dispense and promote messages of peace, conflict management and tolerant behaviour among learners to combat school violence. Social media can be used effectively to promote peace education globally and foster peace values and behaviour that promote the culture of peace and non-violence among individuals. This paper makes a valuable contribution to literature by proposing an analytical framework that outlines how social media could be used as educational tool for peace education to combat violence in schools.

Keywords: *Peace; Peace Education; School Violence; Social Media; South Africa*

Introduction

The use of social media has grown exponentially in the contemporary world of communication and revolutionised the speed and success of information sharing, also in the field of peace education (Nemer, 2016; Manyerere, 2021; Bashir & Raveendran, 2022). There has been noticeable increase of

people using social media platforms and, in some countries, this has reached about 90% of the total population. Globally, it is estimated that 58% of the world population is currently using social media and this percentage is expected to increase to 74% by 2026 (Ishak, 2022). From 2021, over 25 million people in South Africa, almost half of South African adults, were found to be using social media as means of communication. Worldwide, Twitter is estimated to have nine million users, of which 80% are between the ages of 15 and 44 (Van Der Heyde & Bengu, 2022). Asongu and Othiambo (2020) point out that the flow of information through social media networks such Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram have enabled a considerable number of people to interact in various ways. Conversely, the misuse of social media platforms have triggered social and political conflicts, due to easy spread of fake and hateful news (Manyerere, 2021). Thus, social media possesses both the power to promote peace or cause conflict depending on the users' intentions. Youth are most affected by drawbacks of technology which entail cybercrime, mental harassment, persecution, cyber bullying, threats, and lures from organised crime (Bashir and Raveendran, 2022). As result, some governments have attempted to silently oppose and demonise social media as a theatre for hate speeches, rumour mongering and fueling violence. As remedy, the United Nation launched its Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech on 18 June 2019 as strategy to eliminate this problem holistically by collaborating with relevant stakeholders, including civil society Organization, various media outlets, technology companies and social media platforms (Ishak, 2022)

Notwithstanding, social media when used correctly holds the power to mitigate risk and be used as a powerful tool to spread peace, promote tranquility, build social cohesion and deliver messages of peace (Manyerere, 2021; Bhat & Jamatia, 2022). This article focuses on the positive side of social media and its role as an educational tool for peace education. Sharma (2019) affirms that the current generation of school-going young people are at ease with the rapidly changing technology as all is possible with their smartphone in their pockets. Cavus and Ibrahim (2009) point out how the use of mobile devices and social media can provide ample futuristic learning opportunities to learners in schools by providing space for them to access peace course contents as well encourage participation with their peers and peace educators. Furthermore, Naseem et al. (2017) affirm that social media can serve as space for communities of different backgrounds, affiliations, and allegiances to transcend time and space and mobilise for peace in a participatory and inclusive manner. Social media has the capacity of coverage of large numbers of learners and can reach and educate them about peace values (Achi, 2021). Unfortunately, studies that explore the role of social media as educational tool for peace education are lacking. Previous studies in South Africa (Dlamini & Johnson, 2018; Budree et al., 2019) focused on general use of social media in education as well as the use of various other kinds of platforms. A recent study conducted by Sundani, Mangaka and Mamokhere (2022) explored the correlation between social media as campaign tool against online gender-based violence in South Africa.

Notably, peace education programmes have been implemented globally over the past decades. To date, peace education remains a highly favoured strategy to furnish children with and cultivate in them various skills, attitudes, and values such as listening, empathy, tolerance, non-violence, and respect for other humans. Although peace education is not offered as part of the South African curriculum, research indicates that traces of peace education are starting to be noticed in South African schools due to rising number of cases of school violence, (Ndwandwe, 2021). Peace education involves the process of acquiring the skills, values and knowledge that enable individuals to live harmony with each other in the society (Okolie-Osemene, 2012).

The need for peace education is motivated by the increase in violent incidents in schools which is a global phenomenon and a daily occurrence in South African schools in particular (Mabasa & Mafuno, 2017). Violence in schools impedes the attainment of quality education (Qwabe, Maluleke & Olutola, 2022). According to Burton (2008) violence does not only take place in schools but it is seen in communities, streets, and homes. The common forms of violence that jeopardise school safety are teen

suicide, bullying, sexual harassment and various kinds of discrimination based on race, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity (Makhasane & Mthembu, 2019). Protecting schools from attacks or any form violent acts is one of the fundamental goals of the United Nations (UN) Agenda for Sustainable Development which aims to ensure that all children have access to quality education (UN, 2015). Unsafe schools both disturb the fundamental purpose of education and the broader development of children. School violence deprives children of their fundamental right to education and affects teachers' efficiency and morale (Mboweni, 2022; Hockfeld et al., 2022). As result, Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) aver that teachers feel their ability to teach effectively is undermined and constrained resulting in time wasted attempting to manage and resolve conflicts. Despite various intervention or initiatives by the Department of Basic Education in South Africa in managing this scourge and to restore order, discipline and safety in South African schools, research indicates that the problem still persists. According to Safer Spaces (2022), South African initiatives such as whole-school National School Safety Framework launched in 2015 has failed in addressing the problem of violence and bringing necessary change in schools. In addition, the partnership between the South African Police Services (SAPS) and the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which involves the search and seizure of dangerous weapon in classrooms and around school premises had not yielded results (Netshitangani, 2014). On a similar note, a study by Dube and Hlalele (2018) highlights that subjects such Life Orientation have failed to inform learners about their constitutional rights and to promote tolerance of other cultures and religious backgrounds; instead, violence continues to undermine the culture of peace in South African schools. Therefore, the lack of effective intervention to support education in the midst of school violence is a challenge in South Africa.

Notably the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent national lockdown accelerated the use of technology in South African schools which can now be harnessed in the promotion of peace education. During the pandemic school managers and education administrators explored alternatives to the traditional learning system of the physical classroom (Matema & Kariuki, 2022). While some opted to continue with the use of proprietary learning management systems, many schools encouraged their teachers to use free applications and various social media platforms (Baytiyeh, 2021). This highlighted the use of online learning technology and social media as a tool for delivering education where it was most needed (Baytiyeh, 2019). Social media platforms are deemed as one of the most valuable tools in the educational process, as they provide a flexible virtual environment and platform in which parties in the schools can communicate while providing educational models based on strategies that allow learners to obtain information, knowledge, and exchange ideas (Alhumaid, 2020). Teachers can use social media to reduce distance between school and the world outside by coming with innovative ways to engage and extend classroom learning. Thus, these technologies have the potential to attract more learners to participate in peace education and provide cost effective ways to reach a large audience of learners with the message of peace education as strategy to combat violence in schools.

This research paper is theoretical, qualitative and constructivist in nature. In the light of the foregoing, the following research question has been formulated: What is the feasibility of using social media as educational space for peace education? The aim of the study is constructing knowledge on the potential of social media as an educational space for peace education on the basis of extant literature. The paper is informed by the Integrative theory of peace proposed by Danesh (2006) as a theoretical framework. Thereafter, the concept of peace and of peace education are clarified and conceptualised. The basic knowledge and skills that could be acquired through peace education using social media as an educational platform follow. The paper concludes with an illustration of how various social media platforms can be used as possible means of delivering peace education in schools as a strategy to combat violence.

Theoretical Underpinning and Literature Review

The goal of this section is provide an outline of the integrative theory of peace as theoretical frame anchoring this study. Thereafter, the existing literature dealing with the role of the social media, the concept of peace and the concept of peace education are discussed.

The Integrative Theory of Peace

This article is grounded on Danesh's (2006; 2008) integrative theory of peace. According to this theory, peace is the outcome of human cognitive, emotive, and conative capacities that undergird people's worldviews (Danesh, 2006). In accordance with a peace-based worldview, elements of the culture of peace such as freedom and human rights, assume a unique character. The theory is made of four sub-theories: 1) peace as psycho-social, moral, spiritual, and political condition; 2) peace as the primary expression of a unity-based worldview; 3); a unity-based worldview as a prerequisite for a culture of peace and healing; and 4) peace as comprehensive lifelong education. Through this theory, scholars developed integrative peace education that embraces the various goals and approaches to peace (Danesh, 2006; 2011). Education, according to this theory, can be used to transform and formulate worldviews of people, which are the necessary framework for life processes (Danesh, 2006).

The Value of Social Media in Learning

Various scholars have defined the social media as referring to websites and applications that enable the interaction among people, where they can create and or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities or networks using technology-based applications (Odero, 2013; McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2016.) Schirch (2019) also views social media as the internet-powered communication platforms that enable users to continuously exchange information. Social media possess the unique characteristic of massive information, rapid transmission and provide openness of communication which allow interaction and fast information sharing. For the purpose of this article, the definition adopted is that of Buda et al. (2020) who describe social media as virtual communities that allow users across various platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to interact. These platforms have become an integral part of teachers and learners' daily life engendering a transformation in the way they communicate and collaborate. If used effectively, social media can be used to promote peace education across the world through meaningful communication which nurtures the universal values and behaviour in people on which the culture of peace is predicted (Bashir & Raveendran, 2022). Another positive effect of social media is that social media have the power to facilitate online and offline friendship ties to support development of intimacy and connection with others (Parris et al., 2020). For example, schools in South Africa can use social media to bring together hostile groups and individual learners by encouraging dialogue, addressing perceptions of violence, reshaping attitudes, and promoting tolerance, mutual affection and understanding (Baytiyeh, 2019).

Peace and Peace Education

Although various definitions of the concept of peace exist in literature, there is still a lack of a universal definition (Dogus, 2019). Peace is normally conceptualised positively or negatively: negative peace means the non-existence of war and positive peace implies the peaceful state of mind marked by harmony, unity, justice, and equality (Mukertji, 2021). Based on Olivius and Akebo (2021), the concept peace involves the presence of stability and security and well the ability of individuals in the society to anticipate, manage and resolve conflicts without the use of violence. Supriya and Kapani (2017) note that peace involves a state of harmonious existence and the non-existence of all kinds of violence through the promotion of non-violent practices and peaceful relationships among individuals, groups and institutions.
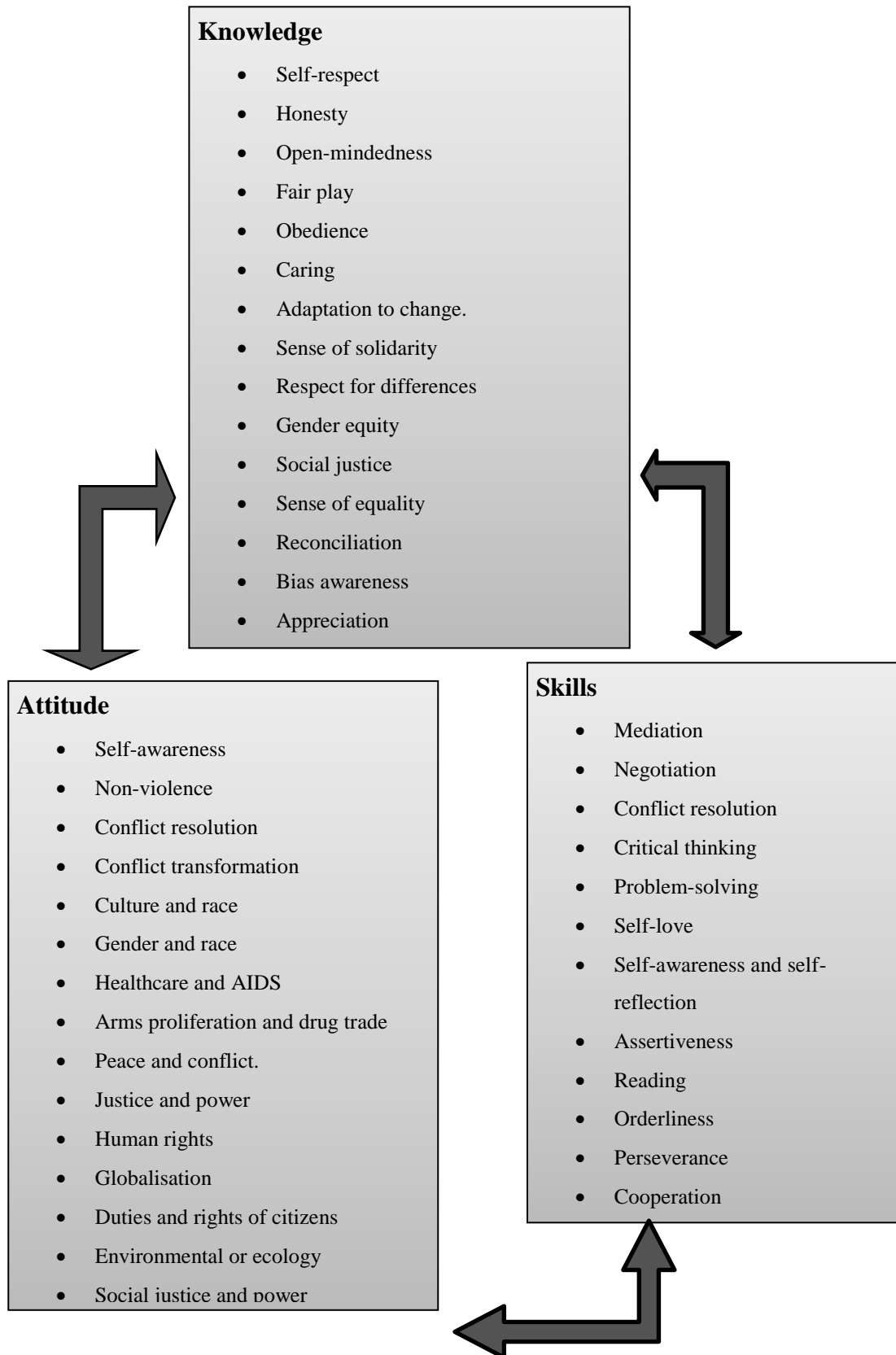
In this study, peace is understood as the absence of direct or physical and structural violence or conflict amongst social groups.

Peace education involves the transmission of knowledge about peace, the requirements for peace, the obstacles to peace and the possibility of concluding and maintaining peace (Biswas, 2018). Ojha (2018) defines peace education from a behavioural perspective and highlights that peace education involves the nurturing of the values of impartiality, non-violence, respect for and devotion to humankind, which usually leads to peaceful socialisation. Knang and Uwah (2021) define peace education as acquiring the values, knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, and skills to co-habit in harmony with oneself, with others and with the environment. It is a social science that identifies and analyses violent and non-violent behaviours to realise some desirable human condition (Jeong, 2017). It also includes social action geared towards finding solutions to manifestations of all forms of violence by furnishing individuals with skills, values and knowledge that promote harmonious relationships among people in the society (Okolie-Osemene, 2012). Peace education can be either formal or informal in terms of delivery. From the above definitions, it is evident that the particular goals of peace education are to develop a caring and non-aggressive individual who can relate peacefully to others, and it also involves the transfer of knowledge and skills to promote peace and harmony in oneself and in society.

Role of Social Media in Acquiring Basic Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills for Peace Education

Peace, as a valuable goal of humanity, should be embraced and accomplished in all possible ways. This paper argues that social media can serve as educational tool in schools for increasing and delivering knowledge about peace to learners and to empower learners with positive attitudes and skills to be peace builders in their own space (Gul, Bashir & Mustafa, 2020). The use of social media could provide immense opportunities to promote the teaching and learning peace education and serve as a source of information for both personal and national development.

Schools through the use of social media can serve as an educational platform for teaching attitudes of tolerance, social cohesion, cultural understanding, inclusion, and diversity. Mor et al. (2016) affirm that social media have the potential to offer a breadth of public information that allow individuals who are peacebuilding to carry out analyses of conflict and evaluation of peace-building activities. Social media can be an instrument for peace and conflict management, which can be used disseminate and promote messages of peace and strategies that can lead to peaceful agreements and tolerance in schools and society (Bashir & Raveendran, 2022). The next section discusses the basic knowledge, attitudes and skills that could be acquired through peace education using social media as an educational platform. Schema 1 identifies the skills, knowledge and attitudes for fostering peace in schools which can be promoted by social media.

Knowledge

- Self-respect
- Honesty
- Open-mindedness
- Fair play
- Obedience
- Caring
- Adaptation to change.
- Sense of solidarity
- Respect for differences
- Gender equity
- Social justice
- Sense of equality
- Reconciliation
- Bias awareness
- Appreciation

Attitude

- Self-awareness
- Non-violence
- Conflict resolution
- Conflict transformation
- Culture and race
- Gender and race
- Healthcare and AIDS
- Arms proliferation and drug trade
- Peace and conflict.
- Justice and power
- Human rights
- Globalisation
- Duties and rights of citizens
- Environmental or ecology
- Social justice and power

Skills

- Mediation
- Negotiation
- Conflict resolution
- Critical thinking
- Problem-solving
- Self-love
- Self-awareness and self-reflection
- Assertiveness
- Reading
- Orderliness
- Perseverance
- Cooperation

Source: Navarro-Castro & Nario-Galace (2010)

The basic skills, knowledge and attitudes depicted in the above schema should be embraced by all teachers and learners to foster positive peace in schools. Alimba (2013) avers that providing basic skills, attitudes and knowledge of peace has the potential to empower learners to embrace peace everywhere. Through peace education, individuals learn peace making skills, gain knowledge and develop attitudes which can defuse the escalation of a conflict and contribute towards a peaceful teaching and learning environment (Nkah & Uwah, 2021). To realise this aim social media can contribute to peace education for large numbers of learners. Social media can serve as key instrument in peace education since it is a valuable platform for cultivating conversations about issues of peace and can be used to share important information about dangers of violence and peace messages.

The Use of Various Social Media Platforms in Promoting Peace Education

In this section, the role of various social media platforms in delivering peace education in schools to combat violence is discussed. The popular social media tools discussed are blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp Messenger.

Blogs

Blogs as social media platform can serve as an excellent communication tool between teachers and learners to post new learning materials and to stay up to date with the most recent posts on peace issues. In addition, learners can hold conversations, provide comments on specific posts, reply to other comments, and motivate other readers to respond to a post (Chawinga, 2017). The use of blogs can expand learning opportunities and experiences beyond the limited classroom setting so that a sense of learning community and peer connectedness is forged (Lee & Bonk, 2016).

Facebook

In the case of South African schools engulfed by school violence, Facebook can assist in maintaining communications and building friendships and groups who share peace building information and ideas (Bashir & Raveendran, 2022). It can be used as important tool to maintain interaction between learners and teachers on matters of peace. Teachers can invite their learners to share material, communicate through sharing of messages, reply, and receive notification of peace education projects or assignments (Kent, 2013). In addition, teachers can design groups according to grades, topics, themes, or projects on peace. Tusingwire (2023) suggest that that social media platforms such as Facebook when used efficiently can build bridges of mutual understanding through lateral learning that address peace and promote dialogue by framing news stories that encourage a peaceful means of resolving conflict, promote peace initiatives, show respect for humanity, and provide information that is accurate, balanced and reliable. Facebook could also be used to collaborate with various NGOs that foster peace. On Facebook, modern peace researchers can be connected to schools and come live and discuss peace. Facebook is not like television because it can allow learners to ask question directly, discuss and share opinions. Images that have messages of peace can also be shared on Facebook. However, Facebook is not designed to accommodate educational needs and is not suitable for deliver complex online materials but can be useful in learning in informal settings (Sebo & Haskova, 2020; Ritonga et al., 2021).

Twitter

As an online social networking tool teachers and learners could use this platform during emergencies or during disasters to converse about issues of safety and peace by sending short, 140-character tweets. This online platform has the potential to facilitate peer to peer discussion, share ideas beyond the classroom setting and can deliver positive impacts on learners in formal and informal learning (Baytiyeh, 2021). According to Sharma (2018), teachers can also direct learners to a page for peace and

justice institutions on Twitter where quotes for promoting peace and videos are uploaded which spread harmony and followers can follow global campaigns of promoting peace.

Instagram

Instagram is a free app launched in October 2010. It is online social network for sharing photos and videos where users can link photos related to the same topic by adding hashtags. It is a fast-growing App; in 2017 it had 700 million users active per month, the majority young people (Rouse, 2019). In terms of peace education Instagram can be used as platform for several activities: digital story telling on peace education, photos, role play and speaking activities on peace issues. As the younger generations of learners are more familiar with Instagram, teachers in schools can supplement what is taught in the classroom so that learners are provided with a chance to participate in online discussion, making learning about peace fun and interesting (Handayani, 2016; Seogoto 2018).

WhatsApp Messenger

In more than 180 countries, more than 1 billion people use WhatsApp to stay in touch with friends and family. In South Africa, a large of number of learners use this platform to communicate with others. WhatsApp is a smartphone application that allows for instant messages to be sent to either an individual or groups. Through WhatsApp, sharing of information among teachers and learners is possible. An advantage of WhatsApp is that it is cost effective, since the phone only uses an internet connection to send messages and there is no fee. It is common for people to use WhatsApp to share messages, jokes, quotes, pictures, and videos especially among the youth. This platform can be used in peace education by promoting and spreading messages to promote communal harmony, Unity, and peace to a large of population in a very short of time (Sharma, 2018).

Conclusion

The paper explored the potential of using social media as space for dispersing and promoting peace education as a strategy to combat violence in schools in South Africa. It was argued that social media is a valuable arena for delivering peace education by cultivating conversation and wide debate to transform the schooling environment and empower learners with peace values. The study also found that various social media platforms can be used as educational tool in peace education by engaging in credible representation by representing well balanced opinions in page content and videos, thus providing a suitable platform to engage large numbers of learners in peace issues since studies indicate that many young people find social media interesting to use. Importantly, the study shed light on how peace education, through the use of social media, could contribute to social growth for learners towards the attainment of peace, improving their communication skills and practicing empathy for others.

Although some research has been conducted on the role of social media in education in general, no single study exists which explores the role of social media in peace education in South African schools. This paper served to close that gap and contributes to new knowledge by exploring social media as space for peace education. The findings of the study have further extended research on the critical role of social media as educational tool for delivering peace education in schools which can prepare learners to become agents of peace at home and broader society and thus reduce the scourge of violence in schools and communities. Finally, making use of social media in peace education should be a national priority and various stakeholders in education should embrace this innovation since peace is synonymous with development.

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