AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA SITES ON NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract
Social Networking Sites have become a pervasive means of communication among adolescents and young adults especially among students in tertiary institutions. This paper examined the influence which the use of these sites has had on students. It also examined the relevant literature and theoretical approach employing uses and gratification as well as media dependency theories. It adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods using questionnaire and FGD as major instruments. It focused on two institutions – Bowen University, two and The Polytechnic Ibadan, Ibadan. Results of 620 respondents to questionnaire and 16 participants in two focus group discussion sessions revealed different uses of SNS. These range from socialization, enhanced learning opportunities, communication usage, entertainment, political participation, sexting, bullying to poor academic performance. The findings also suggested that Nigerian youths visited popular sites that youths in other regions of the world visit as those sites served as vehicles of news information, opinion sharing, business development and cultural production. The paper concluded that those sites visited by Nigerian youths were not significantly different from those visited in other climes and these sites served as avenues for information, opinion sharing, entertainment business development as well as cultural productions.

Keywords: *Analysis, Influence, Social Networking Sites and Nigerian Undergraduates.*

Background to the study
Communication is a veritable instrument that helps in creating and sustaining a conducive atmosphere in any society. Michael & Michael (1978:18) define communication as:

> *symbolic behaviour that occurs between two or more participating individuals .It has the characteristics of being a process, it is transactional in nature, and it is effective. It is purposive, goal directed behavior that can have instrumental or consumatory ends.*

In essence, communication takes place between two or more people. It is a system of transmission of ideas which affect those concerned towards achieving a set goal or objective. It is germane and its effectiveness can be measured through the feedback.

Information is an essential ingredient that makes human beings survive and interact meaningfully with one another. They communicate with one another to share, to inform, to persuade, to influence relationships, to discover and uncover information. The use of social media Web sites among today's children and adolescents has become very rampant and trite. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, gaming sites, and blogs are frequented by the youths.

Social networks are Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, a view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd, & Ellison, 2007). Anderson (2009) describes social networks as the networked tools that allow people to meet, interact and share ideas, artifacts and interests with each other. Shirky, (2008) succinctly says that social networks facilitate the creation of groups and the exploration of new ways of gathering and getting things done.

Engaging in various kinds of social media has become a common activity which has equally benefitted children and adolescents by enhancing communication, connection and technical skills (Ito, et al, 2008).These sites daily offer myriad of opportunities for connecting with friends, classmates, colleagues and people with shared interests. In the recent times, the number of preadolescents and adolescents who use these sites has increased dramatically.

In a poll conducted, 22% of teenagers were found to log on to their favorite social media sites more than ten times a day, and more than half of adolescents log on to a social media site more than once a day(National Poll, 2009). Hinduja, (2007), found out that 75% of of teenagers owned cell phones, and 25% used them for social media; 54% used them for texting, and 24% used them for instant messaging. Thus, a substantial portion of this generation's social and emotional attachment/development seems to occur while on the Internet.

As a result of limited capacity in terms of self-regulation and easy vulnerability to peer pressure, children and adolescents are susceptible to some risks as they navigate and use social media. Findings indicate that offline behaviours such as clique-forming, bullying, and sexual experimentation have found their way of expression frequently expressed online and has led to cyberbullying, privacy issues and "sexting".(Patchin, & Hinduja, 2006; Lenhart, 2009).

In spite of the work done on the use of social media, bulk of the the work has been based on the West and other developed countries. There seems to be a lack of empirical study on the use and influence of social media on Nigerian youths. This study therefore, seeks to lay the basis for the understanding of the place of social media use by Nigerian youth as valuable tools of communication. Given the dearth of previous studies in the country, the study can be seen as a step for future research. Above all, the study basically aims at investigating the influence which the use of the Social Media Sites has had on Nigerian Undergraduates as means of communication.

The study is focused on proffering answers to the following questions:
1.   What kinds of social media have Nigerian youths chosen and why?
2.   What are the benefits derivable from using social media?
3.   To what extent have they been influenced by social media sites they visited?
4.   What challenges do social media pose especially to undergraduates?

Objectives of the Study
The underlining aim of the study is to meaningfully contribute to knowledge and relevant literature in the aspect of information communication technologies as well as the Internet. To effectively carry out this onerous task,
(1)   firstly, the study looked at the kinds of social media that youths chose and why they chose them.
(2)   Secondly, the study examined the accruable benefits that could accompany the use of these media.
(3)   Thirdly, the study tried to establish if these media had influenced the subscribers. And lastly, it attempted to investigate if there were challenges that these media pose to Nigerian undergraduates.

Social Media Sites
The new media is a broad term in media studies that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century that refers to on- demand access to content anytime, anywhere on any digital device as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content. New media has engendered the "democratization" of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content.
Most technologies referred to as "new media" are digital easily manipulatable, networkable, dense, compressible and interactive. Flew, (2002:13) stated that "as a result of the evolution of new media technologies, globalization occurs". He states further that globalisation is described as more than expansion of activities beyond the boundaries of particular nation states. It shortens the distance between people all over the world by the electronic communication.

Until the 1980s, the media primarily relied on print and analogue broadcast models, used by television and radio. The last three decades have brought a rapid transformation in the media which are predicated, upon the use of digital technologies such as the Internet, video games, digital broadcasting, as well as online publications. Shapiro, cited in Croteau & Hoyness, (2003:322) argues that the "emergence of new, digital technologies signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources".

With the use of the Internet, the world wide web, facebook, twitter, naijapals, blogs, short message service (sms), naija pings, badoo, pin book, pin share, YouTube, 2go, whatsapp, smoothie, etc. Students and people have been able to communicate. Social media have changed the entire world. These media ensure interactivity.

Literature review and Theoretical Framework
Uses and gratifications and media system dependency approaches
Media theorists want the audience to believe that media serve a number of needs such as communication, social control, cohesion and cultural continuity in a society. Considering the individual, the media provide the audience with the needs of surveillance, identity formation, personal relationships, personal learning/guidance as well as diversion/ entertainment. The underpinning proposition of the functional view of the media is that the uses and gratifications needs and therefore appropriately seek the media to fulfil them. Media do not do things to people: rather, people do things with media. Rubin,(2002:526) submits that the uses and gratifications study is "a psychological communication perspective" that "stresses individual use and choice". Ruggiero,(2000:14) also argues that "as new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audiences analysis". In the various studies, identified gratifications include surveillance, escape, arousal, sociability, instrumentality, diversion, reassurance and companionship. Thinking of motivations, gratifications seem to lead to both ritualized (passive) and instrumental (active) use of the media (Metzger and Flanagin, 2002).

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) posited that society, media, and its audience develop a relationship and that the more the society depends on the media to operate ,the more the media have influence on it (society).The degree at which the society/audience rely on the media would definitely serve as a barometer for measuring and forecasting media effects .Heavy dependency on media often leads to the conferment of authority that media have over such particular audience. Baran, (2010), affirms that Media dependency proposes that: the relationship between the larger social system, the media's role in that system and audience relationships to the media: the level of dependence on media and their content helps in understanding

when and why media messages can alter beliefs, feelings and behaviours and lastly, societies are increasingly dependent on media to understand the social world and act meaningfully and efficiently.

The strengths of the theories have been their explanatory power. They are relatively simple to apply and multidimensional. They nonetheless will certainly serve the purposes of evaluating the links between social media use and African youths especially Nigerian.

Methodology

The study employed a multi method approach that combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to generate a complementary set of data (Kelle, 2006; Strier & Kurman, 2009). Two focus group sessions were held with sixteen (16) undergraduate students who were social media compliant as participants-one at Bowen with 8 participants and one at The Polytechnic. The sessions took place with the researcher moderating. The sessions were transcribed later for analysis.

A questionnaire was also drawn and administered on the students. A total of 620 respondents properly filled the questionnaire. The participants and the respondents were drawn from all levels of undergraduate programme. The participants and respondents were drawn from 100 to 500 level undergraduate students for Bowen and both ND & HND students for Ibadan Polytechnic. All of them were purposively sampled because each of them either possessed a Smartphone or a BlackBerry. The questionnaire was administered personally by the researcher and his assistants and retrieved almost immediately from the respondents.

Results

Focus group sessions were transcribed and analyzed. The quantitative data were presented in simple percentage.

Results of focus group sessions

Socialisation

According to the participants, the sites allow them to accomplish online many tasks that are important to them offline: making new friends, sharing pictures, fostering one's individual identity and social skills, developing ideas from the creation of game sites, podcasts, blogs and videos, expansion of online connections as a result of shared interests (Boyd, 2007).

Enhanced Learning Opportunities

Most undergraduate students engage in the use of social media to connect with one another on assignments and even group work/projects. For instance, Facebook and

some other social media sites permit students to congregate outside of the classroom to deliberate, collaborate and exchange ideas (Boyd, 2008).

Communication

The sites help the students (participants in particular) to stay connected with family and friends, exchanging useful ideas with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. This has afforded some of them the opportunity to respect and tolerate others. It has also led, in some instances, to increased and robust discourse about personal (including health) and global issues.

Entertainment

Participants indicated that social media help in facilitating the enhancement of individual and collective creativity as well as sharing of artistic and musical endeavours (Boyd, 2007).

Political Participation

Social media afford the youths who hitherto had been relegated to the background to ply active role when politicians launched their campaigns online.

Texting

This is "sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices"(Berkshire District Attorney, 2010). Though, no participant claimed to engage in "sexting", the researcher observed that some of them engage in it. In fact, it led to expulsion of some students when discovered.

Cyber bullying or Online Harassment

Cyber bullying, often used interchangeably with online harassment is the act of deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person. Though, it is not common in Nigeria, it none the less takes place among students especially when it comes to dating. This can cause psychosocial outcomes like depression, anxiety and isolation. (Berkshire District Attorney, 2010). Students also can use this to embarrass school authorities.

Poor Academic Performance

Participants pointed out that using these sites has made some students to score low grades in their examinations. This is because students get distracted by staying glued to the sites at the expense of their studies.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative aspect made use of 620 respondents. Though, 700 copies of questionnaire were administered on youth drawn from two different tertiary

institutions who are majorly students. The age ranges of the respondents were from 18– 23 years. The range was chosen as a reflection of the dominant age for social media use.

Item I: How long have you been using the social media sites?
All the respondents 620 (100%) claimed that they had been using the media for more than two years indicating that the media have become very relevant and prevalent among the youths.

Item II: Which social networking sites have you subscribed to?
Most of the respondents subscribed to facebook 434 (60%) and twitter 243 (40%) underscoring the fact that the two sites ranked prominent among the youths in Nigeria. It should be pointed out that some of them claimed to have subscribed to more than one site.

Item III: Which video sharing sites do you engage regularly?
An astonishing majority of the respondents 589 (95%) claimed that they usually engaged YouTube to share Videos because they considered it as a major site for sharing video. Some even stated that it allowed them to comment on and rate videos.

Item IV: Which do you believe as the most popular image sharing site among Nigerian youths?
Majority of the respondents 558 (90%) believed and declared that BBM served as a major image sharing device and as a source of motivation. Respondents equally noted that it made it easy for them to discover and share excellent pictures.

Item V: Which social bookmaking site(s) do you employ to view online materials?
372 (60%) respondents stated that Twitter and 248 (40%) facebook were the commonly used sites that they engaged in viewing online materials. They saw them as good sources for seeking and getting consumer's advice regarding marketing activities.

Item VI: Do you agree that the social media have really changed communication habits in Nigeria?
All the respondents 620 (100%) agreed that social media had really changed communication habits of Nigerian undergraduates

Item VII: Which kind of social media do you regularly use to share your ideas?
Majority of the respondents 434 (70%) claimed that they regularly used SNS to share their ideas. 124 (20%) used Bogs while 62 (10%) employed photo sharing.

Item VIII: Do you think that social media have significantly contributed to the development of communication skills among users?
All the respondents also affirmed this in their responses. They claimed that the social media allowed the users to exercise their vocabulary development even in codes.

Item IX: Do you think that social media accurately and credibly relay information compared with the traditional old media?
Though the majority 372 (60%) indicated that they agreed but a sizeable number 248 (40) also registered their disagreement suggesting that the social media did not accurately and credibly relay information.

Item X: What are some of the positive impact of using the social media by the youths?
Social media are useful sources of information and meeting new people; the media educate, people tend to learn more, gain more about social life, and what is happening around the world. Political participation was mentioned as another form of usage that they actively engaged in.

Item XI: What do you consider as major challenges that social media can pose to users?
Respondents indicated that the use of codes or abbreviations in text messaging hampers knowledge of correct spelling; some users used social media to share unthinkable things and that the use can lead to bad influence on morals.

Discussion and Conclusion
The analyses revealed that social media had a great impact on the youths in Nigeria. A preponderant majority stated that they had been using the media for more than two years.

The respondents favoured the leading sites that were also popularly used across the globe including the West. The social networking sites of choice were facebook (60%) and Twitter (40%). The predominant use of Google Reader by the respondents was rather not surprising as they frequently searched online for materials.

YouTube appeared quite dominant (95%) as the video sharing site. Many FGD participants declared that they used YouTube for entertainment, i.e.to watch videos.

Majority of the respondents and participants equally agreed that the use of social media was actually on the upward rise within the teenagers and even adult population. They pointed out that social media had been useful in consulting others, searching for information, advertising, holding discussions and even distributing questionnaire (participating in online survey).

Equally indicated were the potential dangers of the social media which were revealed mostly in the FGD. Participants pointed out that the threats to teenagers who were using social media and chatting with older adults who were complete strangers. They also lamented about the use and sharing of inappropriate pictures and foul language. Social media could help corporations overcome prohibitive costs of marketing and make them respond quickly to complaints or requirements. They had been discovered to aid in developing communication skills. (Bruma, 2011).

Again, it was discovered that these technologies led to waste of precious time by teenagers during school time. However, most respondents and participants agreed that these media were vital sources of breaking news.

It was observed that the popular types of social media sites mostly visited in Nigeria were typically not different from those visited in other regions across the globe by the youths. These were facebook, YouTube and Twitter. They had served and still serving as vehicles for news, information, opinion sharing, entertainment, business development, and even cultural production. But the youths also were aware of the potential dangers of these media in the society.

Some scholars had found out that social networking could be a bit more effective than traditional old media of communication with respect to quick response, interactivity, an advantage which some corporations can utilize in acting upon complaints almost immediately. (Faraidooi, 2011). According to Internet World Statistics 2012, Nigeria constitutes 48.4% of Internet users in Africa with 6,630,200 facebook subscribers as at 31st December, 2012. This was quite reflected that social networking had been regularly and frequently used by Nigerian youths to share their ideas, thoughts and opinions with others.

Recommendations
Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:
1.   Social Media Sites (SMS) as veritable sources of socialization, communication, entertainment, motivation, learning opportunity and political participation
2.   Social Media Sites (SMS) can also be used for negative things such as texting, cyberbullying, sharing of obscene images, therefore the Nigerian youths should be properly guided in the way they use these media. They should equally be mindful of the fact that writing makes an exact person, therefore, they must not allow codes and abbreviations hamper the knowledge of good spelling skills expected of them in their writing skills.
3.   Parents and guardians should as well exercise some control on what their children and wards engage in online as a form of check when they are at home.

4.   All levels of government and NGOS should equally feed the youths with information that can enrich their life and not something that would affect their moral and lead them to degeneration.

5.   Policy that will regulate and control the use of these media outlets should be put in place.

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Appendixes

Item I: Respondents' period of year of using these sites

Less than a year	-	00
1-2 years	-	-
More than 2 years	620	100
	620	100

Item II: Social Networking Sites subscribed to by the Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	434	70
Twitter	186	30
My space	-	-
Eskimi	-	-
Others	-	-
	620	100

Item III: Videosharing sites usually employed by the Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
YouTube	589	95
Blip TV	-	-
Vimeo	-	-
Instalgram	31	05
	620	100

Item IV: Respondents' view on the most popular site

	Frequency	Percentage
Blackberry Messenger	558	90
Twitter	62	10
	620	100

Item V: Respondents' bookmarking site usually deployed to view online materials

	Frequency	percentage
Facebook	248	40
Twitter	372	60
MySpace	-	-
Eskimi	-	-
	620	100

Item VI: Respondents' opinio   n on whether social media have changed communication habits of youths

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	558	90
Agree	62	10
Strongly disagree	-	-
Disagree	-	-
	620	100

Item VII: Respondents' position on sites prevalently used to share ideas among youths

	Frequency	Percentage
Social Networking	434	70
Blogs	124	20
Micro-Blogging	-	-
Photosharing	62	10
Videosharing	-	-
	620	100

Item VIII: Respondents' level of agreement on contribution of social media to communication skills

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	620	100
No	-	-
	620	100

Item 1X: Respondents' opinion on credibility level of the social media

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	-	-
Agree	372	60
Strongly disagree	66	10.65
Disagree	182	29.36
	620	100