

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND REAL-LIFE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: A STUDY OF NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

This qualitative survey was conducted to ascertain whether social media use by undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Nigerian have in anyway influenced their real-life social relationships and interaction, as well as identify the social and psychological consequences of social media use on social interaction of these young students. Merton's Functionalist theory and Symbolic Interactionism theory underpinned this study. The two basic questions asked in this study were;

- 1 Whether social media use has influenced real-life social relationships of these undergraduate students?*
- 2 What are the social and psychological consequences of social media use on the social interaction of these youths?*

Questionnaire schedule, FGDs and interviews were used to generate data which were qualitatively analyzed. Study result shows that there are more negative influences associated with social media use as a means of social interaction and relationships than with real-life social interaction and relationships. The study recommends that government and policy makers should set up machinery that will encourage and

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supervise social media network service providers to monitor the adequacy of content generated and shared on their social media networking sites.

Key Words: Social Media, Real-Life Social Relationships, Social Interaction, Relationships and Influence.

Introduction

The social media is part of the online interactive communication platforms referred to as the New Media. The New Media generally refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, and creative participation. Another aspect of the New Media is its real-time generation of new, unregulated content. There are some who have argued that New Media technology such as mobile phones is actually a regeneration of old Media forms and so not really new. However, no one can argue about the overwhelming presence of the new media around the world today.

The popularity and use of the new media and one of its offshoots, the social media has increased tremendously both in Nigeria and around the world in the current decade. It has been observed that social media use among young people in Nigeria is beginning to take precedence over other means of communication, social interaction and/or relationships, particularly face to face interaction or real-life social relationships. Communication as a universal phenomenon has been identified as one of the basic human needs and the social media as a popular new means of communication has become an integral part of human life both in Nigeria and around the world.

Social media has been variously described by different scholars according to their background and orientation but for this study it will be conceptualized as a form of electronic communication which aids interaction based on perceived interests and attributes. It is therefore a media for social interaction, using highly accessible and sealable publishing techniques. Social media employ web-based technologies to transform, broadcast and share information among subscribers. According to Toni, Back, Halonem and Heinonen (2008), social media came into existence on the perceived need to enhance the quality and quantity of social relationship. Essentially, social media refers to means of interaction among people in which they create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks.

According to Kaplan and Haenleim (2010), social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 which allows the creation and exchange of user generated content. Additionally, social media operate using mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. Consequently, this new mode of social interaction has introduces substantial, pervasive and profound changes to the communication process between organisations, communities and individuals.

Social media was again defined as “content created and shared by individuals on the web using freely available websites that allow users to create and post their own images, videos and text information and then share that with either the entire internet or just a select group of friends” (www.affilorama.com 18/06/13). Consequently, social media differ from traditional and industrial media in many respects

such as quality (Jan and Hermkens, 2011); reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence (Eugene, Castillo, Donato, Gionis and Mishne, 2008).

Historically, modern social media technologies came to line light in the early 1990s. One of the first social media sites was created in 1994 and it was called “Geocities”. The concept was for users to create their own websites. Social media technologies presently has taken many varied forms including interactive news sites, internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, social networks, instant messaging, podcasts, photographs or pictures sharing sites like Instagram, video sites like You-tube, rating sites etc.

By applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure), Kaplan and Haelein (2010) created a classification scheme with six different types of social media: collaborative projects (for example, Wikipedia), blogs and micro blogs (for example, Twitter), content communities (for example, You-tube and Daily Motions), social networking sites (for example, Facebook), Virtual game worlds (for example, World of War craft), and virtual social world (e.g. Second life). Technologies include: blogs, picture sharing, Vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Various media network sites include Facebook, Twitter, Dreams village, Bebo, Myspace, Eskimi, Dove, Blacberry messenger, Nokia chat, Binu, WhatsApp, Linkedin, Hangouts, 2go, etc.

Youths generally associate social media with positive outcomes, but this is not always the case. Some have argued that social media allows individuals to advertise themselves and form friendships (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). But, in the

view of some authors, the negative outcomes of social media from observations are tremendous. Social media has been suggested to positively correlate with cyber bullying, online sexual predators and decrease in face-to-face interactions. Some have also argued that social media tend to expose youths to images of alcohol, tobacco, and negative sexual behaviors (Wellman, 2012).

Thus, social media has been established as a medium of social interaction embraced by both youths and adults alike. Social interaction on the other hand has been defined as the mutual and reciprocal influencing by two or more people of each other's behaviour (Zanden, 1991). From the very beginning, humans have been identified as social beings. Human behaviour is learnt as humans grow and develop within their particular societies, guided and molded by their societal norms, values and mores. According to Rosenberg (1986), social interaction is the process by which people act and react in relation to others. Social interaction involves two or more people creatively shaping their reality through social interaction. Thus, the concept of social interaction is pivotal to understanding how social life takes place. Social interaction is the building block of social life (Egbue, 2002).

Several theories have been proffered to explain social interaction or relationship. According to the Functionalist view, behaviour of people in the society is structured. This implies that relationships among members of the society are organized according to rules. Social relationships in the society are said to be patterned and recurrent. They see society as a system, an entity that is made up of interconnected and interrelated parts. A change in one part of the society leads to a change in other parts. Thus, a society may undergo change overtime but functionalists believe that it will return to a state

of stability by incorporating these changes so that the society will again maintain its equilibrium. Merton (1957) took functionalism further by introducing what he called manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are those known to and intended by the participants in a specific type of social activity. Latent functions are consequences of that activity which participants are unaware of.

Another theory that is relevant to this paper is symbolic interactionism. This theory concentrates on face-to-face contexts of social life. It opines that human beings live in a richly symbolic universe. A symbol is something which stands for something else. Thus, symbolic thought helps to free us from being limited in our experience of what we actually hear, see and feel. Interactionism is focused on interaction which means action between individuals like small groups, two friends, within families etc. Symbolic interactionists are of the view that almost all interactions between human beings involve exchange of symbols such as ideas, signs, and languages. When we engage in interaction with others, we often look for clues about what type of behaviour is appropriate in the context and how to interpret what others intend.

The purpose of the study is to qualitatively evaluate the influence of social media on real-life social relationship among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigerian. In other words, the study intends to ascertain whether the social media has influenced real-life social relationships among Nigerian youths. Finally, the study will strive to identify the social and psychological consequences of social media on the behaviour of Nigerian youths?

1. How has social media influenced real-life social relationship among Nigerian youths?

2. What are the social and psychological consequences of social media on the behaviour of Nigerian youths?

Study design: The purpose of research design is to isolate the variables of interest in a study [so that patterns of relationship can clearly emerge (Infante, Rancer & Womack 1990, p.411). Therefore, the research design and methods of data collection for this study which aims at understanding whether social media use by undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Nigerian have in anyway influenced their real-life social relationships and interaction is the mixed method.

Participants: Faculty of Social Science was randomly selected from the fourteen faculties that make up Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Two hundred (200) respondents were equally randomly selected from the five departments that make up the Faculty. A total of Forty (40) respondents were again randomly selected from each department to participate in this study. All the respondents selected agreed to being social media users.

Instruments: The instruments used for data generation were interviews, observation, focused group discussions and questionnaire.

Procedures: The questionnaire contains questions on social media use and influence which the respondents proffered answers. The questionnaire was subjected to content validation. Thirty (30) questionnaires were distributed in each of the five departments. Further, responses to the questionnaire items were tabulated analyzed.

Five focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted on the whole. One FGD in each department and two male FGDs,

two female FGDs and one mixed FGD made up the five FGDs. The choice of which FGD will be conducted in each department was randomly decided by lucky deep. The focused group discussions (FGDs) were conducted on the bases of the research theme and their responses were recorded, transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. Each focus group (FG) was named up of eight (8) participants.

A total of ten (10) interviews were conducted in the five departments, meaning that two interviews were held in every department in the faculty on the bases of one male and one female interview per department respectively. Each respondent was independently interviewed to ascertain their attitude towards social media use and its influence on their real-life social relationships.

An observation diary was keep throughout the course of the study to systematically write down all observations relevant to the study. The observation centered on the nature of mobile phones and other digital devices used by students and what they mostly use the devices for.

Design and Statistics: The study is a qualitative survey research that made use of data transcription, simple axial coding and percentages for data analysis. The survey result is presented in this section in primary form.

Table One: Youths Responses presented in percentages

S/N	ITEMS	Responses and Percentages (%)
1	Social relationship better through social media than through real-life social Relationship.	Agreed that social relationship is better through social media (50%) and disagreed (50%).

2	Social media has improved social relationship in what ways?	Agreed that social media has improved social relationship by making distant communication faster (75%) and disagreed (25%).
3	I like social media. If yes why? If no why?	I like social media because It enables one to communicate with distant acquaintances (60%) and No because it does not allow for observation of facial expression in communication (40%).
4	Social media encourages social relationship apathy	Agreed (40%) and Disagreed (60%)
5	People now relate better with social media than with real-life social relationship.	Agreed (50%) and Disagreed (50%)
6	Social media has encouraged poor real-life social relationship	Agreed (75%) and Disagreed (25%)
7	With social media social relationship has improved tremendously in quality and quantity.	Agreed (50%) and Disagreed (50%)
8	Social media is the best thing that has happened to social relationship. If yes why and how?	Agreed yes because it has shortened long distance communication and makes communication faster

		(60%), and disagreed (40%).
9	Social media has encouraged social corruption.	Agreed (100%)
10	Social media are a source of pleasure to me. Why?	Agreed because it has a wide coverage (65%) and disagreed (35%).
11	I get along very well with my peers through Social media. Can you say the same for your real-life relationship with your peers?	Agreed getting along very well with my peers (60%) and disagreed (40%). On real life relationship with your peers Agreed (100%).
12	Social media makes social relationship easier. Does it make social relationship better?	Agreed on making social relationship easier (100%), Agreed on making social relationship better (40%) and disagreed (60%).

Discussion

Result from this study shows that there is no clear agreement among respondents on which of the two communication types (social media and Real-life social interaction) is better suited for social relationships. Majority of the respondents agree that social media use has improved social relationships because it enables old friends and acquaintances interact easily regardless of distance, as well as helps users acquire or establish new relationships faster and easier. For example, some respondent said that “social media has brought easy and

fast means of socialization”.

In addition, majority of respondents agree to the fact that they like to use the social media because of its ability to enable communication with distant family members, friends, loved ones and acquaintances. Exemplifying the view above, some respondents had this to say *“due to the fact that people have busy schedule, they have no time to set an appointment; the best solution is to communicate with their friends, loved ones and relatives through social media networks, especially those living in far away countries”.*

Further, majority of the youths under study disagreed that social media encourages social apathy. Some were of the view that it is socially stimulating for them. This view was held mostly by those who find it difficult to communicate in a face-to-face interaction situation. Some respondents confessed that *“interaction through the social media affords the opportunity to say things that would otherwise have been difficult to say to family members, friends or acquaintances in a face-to-face interaction”.*

The respondents generally could not draw a clear demarcation as to whether people relate better when interacting through the social media than when interacting in a real life social relationship situation. Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that both interaction situations have their advantages and disadvantages. They also agree that social media use has encouraged or brought about 'poor bonding in real life social interaction and/or relationships'. According to some respondents, *“most people prefer to sit in the comfort of their room or office and chat with friends instead of visiting them physically and providing the opportunities for better bonding”.*

The youths studied could not expressly agree on whether

the social media has improved the quality and quantity of their social relationships. Some argued that the social media does not allow for the observation of facial expressions and body language which is common in real life social interactions. Quoting some respondents on the issue of facial expressions and body language, they had this to say *“one important advantage of face-to-face communication is that it allows one to see the facial expressions of the other when one is passing information particularly about good or bad news, they either smile or frown and their eyes light up or pop up”.*

Again, majority of the respondents were of the view that the social media is the best thing that has happened to social relationship; for the fact that it has shortened long distance communication and also makes communication easy and faster.

All the respondents unanimously agree that the social media has encouraged immorality and social corruption because it enables the deceit of young innocent and unsuspecting users and provides easy access to uncensored immoral contents. Most respondents mentioned *“unrestrained access to unsolicited pornographic videos and nude pictures”.*

Furthermore, majority of the respondents are of the opinion that they get along very well with their peers through social media networks but, all of the respondents believe that social interaction is better in real life social relationships. Finally, majority of the respondents were of the opinion that social media does not make social interaction better than in real life social relationships. Hence, *“face-to-face interaction and relationship is better than social media mediated social interactions and relationship”.*

Conclusion

The study has given insight into the influence of social media use on real life social relationships among Nigerian youths. It highlighted the advantages and disadvantages inherent in social media interaction and relationships, as well as real life social interaction as means of communication in social relationships. The study also examined the preference of respondents over these two modes of interaction among Nigerian youths. The study result showed that there are more negative influences associated with social media use as a means of social interaction and relationship than with real life social interaction and relationship.

Recommendations

Based on the discoveries made by this study, the following recommendations were proffered.

1. Government and policy makers should set up machinery that will encourage and supervise service providers to monitor the adequacy of the content generated and shared in social media networking sites.
2. Parents should monitor and regulate their wards extent of indulgence and use of social media.
3. Youths should be properly orientated concerning the ill-effects of social media over-use and its social and psychological implications.
4. Policy makers should sponsor legislation restricting the use of social media among teenagers who are below 18 years like is the case with certain censored films and alcohol.
5. They should also create a mechanism to track and punish social media service providers who circumvents the law.

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