

NIGERIAN YOUTHS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: HARNESSING THE POTENTIALS FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

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Abstract

One of the breakthroughs in information and communication technology in the 21st century was the discovery and emergence of the new media which have facilitated the creation of the different platforms for social interaction. The potentials of the new media are seamless and boundless in terms of interactions, interrelationships, and information sharing and exchanges. The only limitation to the utilization of the potentials of the platforms is illiteracy in terms of the hardware, software and usage. The question is, to what extent has the Nigerian youths converted the potentials and possibilities of the social media to platforms for networking academic materials for scholarship and academic excellence? The study examined the extent of usage of one of the most popular social media platforms, facebook, by the Nigerian youths in their academic pursuit. It found that about two-thirds of the Nigerian youths that use Facebook platform use it for other reasons than exchange of academic materials. And, recommends that the youths should be encouraged to harness the potentials of the platform for scholarship.

Keywords: New media, social media, platforms, facebook, academic networking.

Introduction

The transformation in the technology of information and communication generation, processing, storage and dissemination witnessed in the 21st century unprecedentedly opened-up new media platforms unmatched in history in terms of interconnectedness, interactivity, multiplicity and accessibility (McQuail, 2005:38).

The new media, that resulted from the invention, encapsulated the characteristics of the old or traditional media, and extended the potentials and possibilities into which both the “old” and “new” media could be put into use. The new media, promoted by Internet technology, exhibit an integration and convergence of the existing media to extend the frontiers of the possibilities of the media of communication. The new media, which hallmarked the integration and convergence of computer and telecommunication technologies, revolutionized the face of human communication especially in the 21st century. The new information Technology “provides near limitless possibilities of increasing the quantity and enhancing the quality, speed, and availability of information in a complex but increasingly interdependent world ...” (Soola, 1998:86).

The new media, propelled and driven by the Internet, provide platforms for social interactions between and among users in such a manner that no older platforms/media can boast of. The new media display such potentials that the only limitation to the dynamism is ignorance or illiteracy in terms of the ability to use the hardware and/or software for maximum effects in the realm of communication, education, politics, economics, social or technology.

Theoretical foundation of the study

The study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications theory developed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in 1974 (Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso: 2008). The theory considers the audience as active, that is, they actively seek out specific media and content to achieve certain results or gratifications that satisfy their personal needs (Nayyar, 2007).

Uses and Gratifications analysis shifts attention and focus from media production and transmission to media consumption. According to Folarin (2002:72), the central issue becomes, “who uses which content from which media under which conditions and for what reasons”. The theory seeks to explain the uses of media and the satisfactions derived from them in terms of the motives and self-perceived needs of audience members (McQuail, 2005:569). It emphasizes the fact that the audience are not passive receivers of media contents, but that, “they actively influence the message” in that they “selectively choose, attend to, perceive and retain the media message on the basis of their needs, beliefs, etc” (Anaeto et al, 2008:71). Media audiences usually derive gratifications from three different sources, namely, media content, media exposure and the social context of exposure (Blumler and Katz, 1974).

However, Nayyar (2007), while citing Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch states that there are five basic assumptions guiding Uses and Gratifications theory. According to Nayyar, the theory assumes that:

- (i) the audience is conceived as active.
- (ii) media choice and gratifications depend on the audience member, that is, people use the media to their advantage more often than the media use them.

- (iii) the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction especially face-to-face communication.
- (iv) many of the goals media use can be derived from data supplied by the individual audience members themselves.
- (v) it is the individual audience member that makes the decision to view the media based on the value placed on such media.

The underlying presupposition is that, media users selectively engage media that possess the features or characteristics that can meet or satisfy their needs at that point in time. Thus, it is not the pervasiveness or popularity of the medium or media that matters but the relevance and utility of the medium/media to the user. The theory stresses the consumption utility of media rather than the transmission capability.

The New Technology of Information and Communication (New Media)

The technology of information generation, processing and transmission dates back to earliest times. Man has continuously continued to improve on the technology of communication to better human lives and the society at large. According to Soola (1998:86):

The earliest form of writing (cuneiform), for example was invented in 35BC. Evans (1989) reported that Tiro invented shorthand in 63 BC, Henry Mill patented the typewriter in 1794, while the principles of modern-day facsimile (fax) transmission was patented by Brian way back in 1843.

Thus, the new media of information communication did not just appear from the blues. The technology evolved and followed a gradual process. However, what can be regarded as new “is the impressive array and sophistication of IT, its increasing efficiency, reliability, speed, accuracy, cheapness, portability and ubiquity made possible by microprocessors” (Soola, 1998:87).

The new media are new communication technologies that combine computer and telecommunication technologies which are used as channels of information dissemination to heterogeneous audiences without the constraints of time, space or distance (Ikpe and Olise, (2010).

According to Spurgeon (2008), interactivity is a major criterion of comparison between “old” mass media and “new” digitally networked media. It is important to note that the more interactive a communication system is, the more flexible the system is in terms of the types of communication and exchange such a system can support.

However, Jenkins (2006) identifies two properties of communication as participation and interactivity. While “interactivity” is a property of non-human actors, participation is a characteristic of human actors. According to Jenkins, while “interactivity describes the technical possibilities of communication in closed systems; participation denotes the will to communicate in cultural and social contexts” (Jenkins, 2006).

The new media environments provide possibilities for conversational interaction and participation as well as generate new possibilities. The possibilities, according to Spurgeon (2008), consist of “direct involvement in the selection and distribution of media

content, the appropriation and transformation of media content to create new content, and the generation and circulation of original content”.

In view of the differences in the level of interaction and participation in the different media systems, Bordewijk and Van Kaam (2003) classified all media into five categories, namely, allocutionary media (broadcast), conversational media (telephone), consultational media (print), registration media (cable networks) and digital (Internet). For “allocution” it is one-way communication; conversation, it is two-way communication; consultation, one has to consult or check out the properties before selection, registration, one must obtain permission or register to participate; and digital, refers to the networking capabilities of the medium. According to Spurgeon (2008), “the Internet is considered the most interactive of all communication media because it is engineered to support all modes of interpersonal, mass and computer-mediated communication”.

Paxson (2010) posits that the new media include internet websites such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and other social networking or social media, and sharing sites, as well as blogs, video games, virtual worlds, mobile telephones, text messaging devices and Global Positioning System (GPS) devices. Social media, which include blogs (political Blog), networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc), video sharing (YouTube) audio sharing (Podcast), mobile sites (2go etc), image or picture sharing (flicker), etc have the capacity of boosting participation because of its openness, conversation nature, connectedness, and textual and audio-visual characteristic appeal (Abubakar, 2011:447).

It is imperative to concede to the fact that social media are “fast becoming the default internet mode of interaction, communication and collaboration” (Verster, 2010). And, according to Abubakar (2011), “social media are both internet and mobile based apparatuses that allow people to easily share and discuss information”. Thus, the role of the different social media platforms in enhancing socio-cultural, economic, political and technological development of any nation as well as its citizenry can never be over-emphasized. More importantly, social media are being used to promote scholarship by youths in institutions of higher learning across the globe. Overholser (2010), while citing a group of students in Annenberg College of Journalism, quotes:

... we at Annenberg have done it patchily by bringing in folks to do series of workshops for students and faculty. We’ve had regular discussions with digital media innovators throughout the year.

The above stresses the fact that, social media platforms could be activated and actively used for the promotion, acquisition and distribution of knowledge-based information.

Facebook

Facebook has been described as one of the important social media networks and websites (Paxson, 2010, Abubakar, 2011). It is one of the new media networks which provides users with the mix of interpersonal and mass communication capabilities that have not existed before, and which place emphasis on interactivity and mobility (Paxson, 2010). Mark Zuckerberg originally launched “the facebook” on February 4, 2004 and was

located at “the facebook.com”. However, in 2005, it dropped “the” from its name after purchasing the domain named facebook.com for \$200,000 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/facebook>).

Zuckerberg, a sophomore at Harvard University, first created the site with 500 Augustan images with one image per page which he opened up to his classmates for note sharing (Ibid). However, Facebook was opened up for everyone of age 13 and above with a valid e-mail address on September 26, 2006. Thus, by September, 2012, Facebook has over one billion active users (Ibid). The platform allows users to join common interest groups, organized by workplace, school or College for social networking (Ibid). Facebook, according to wikipedia, is the most popular social networking site in several English speaking countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Even in Africa, there were about 17 million Facebook users at the start of 2011 and the figure was expected to rise to 28 million by 2012 (Ledgard, 2011). Thus, as at June 2011, Facebook had reached one trillion page viewers, making it the most visited website in the world. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/facebook>)

The above assertion corroborates Experian Hitwise (2011) study and its ranking of the world 10 most visited sites.

Table 1: The Ten World most visited sites

Rank	Website	Visit Share (%)
1	facebook	64.69
2	YouTube	19.64
3	Yahoo!answers	1.15
4	Twitter	1.11
5	MySpace	0.79
6	Tagged	0.43
7	My Yearbook	0.40
8	Linkedin	0.32
9	My life	0.32
10	Meebo	0.26
11	Others	10.89
TOTAL		100%

The table shows that about 65% of website visitors visit Facebook. At inception, Facebook was exclusively limited to the undergraduates of Harvard University, but by March same year (2004), it allowed students of other Universities such as Stanford, Colombia, Yale, Boston, etc to use it. And, by September 2005, it allowed high school students in countries such as England, Canada, etc to use it. And by 2006 it allowed everyone above age 13 to use the site.

Facebook became popular among youths, especially, undergraduates because of its potentials. Verster (2010), while commenting on the potentials and usage of facebook, says:

You can create a social space from where you can send notices, organize classroom events and aggregate learning feeds from any of the aforementioned tools using Facebook’s built-in array of tools ... You can make it your

classroom's informal start page to kick-start any formal assignment and discussion.

Thus, it is imperative to note that the new media, and by extension social media, by their very nature are drivers of social change, national development and organizational development. They possess the capability to increase work efficiency and speed as well as reduce cost (Ikpe and Olise, 2010). According to Pempek et al (2009), an estimated ninety-one percent of college students utilized facebook.com. The utility ranged from simple ownership of a Facebook account (profile) to active daily visitor or user. It is important to note that, according to a study conducted by Madge et al (2009), about 53% of College students who use Facebook had an active profile.

Statement of the problem

It is imperative to acknowledge that Facebook serves diverse functions as a result of its potentials. Students at different levels of their education use Facebook for messaging, contact, research, etc. It is imperative to examine the extent to which Nigerian Youths (undergraduates) use Facebook for academic assignments. More so, that the inventor of the website was a student who developed it to meet his academic needs and his colleagues' academic challenges, and opened the site first for students. The study investigates Nigerian Youths' usage of Facebook platform for knowledge acquisition and exchange of academic materials.

Research Questions

For the study, the following research questions were developed.

1. Which of the social media networks is mostly used by Nigerian Youths?
2. How many Nigerian Youths ever sent/received information via Facebook?.
3. How often do Nigerian Youths use Facebook for information exchange?
4. Do Nigerian Youths use Facebook platform for academic information exchange?

Methodology

Survey research method was used for the study. The population of the study consisted of undergraduates of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria. One department, Mass Communication, was purposively selected for the study. The decision was influenced by two reasons.

First, the department is communication-based and communication-oriented. So, students of the department are presumed to be familiar with the tools of communication and the different social networks.

And second, the researchers have access to all students' registration documents that enabled scientific selection of respondents. The respondents were selected through simple random method without replacement. A total of 200 respondents were given copies of the questionnaire to fill across the four levels; that is, 50 respondents were selected per level. However, only 186 were valid for analysis.

FINDINGS

Table 2: Which of the social media platforms is mostly used by Nigerian Youths?

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
YouTube	11	6
Twitter	25	13
My Space	30	16
Facebook	100	54
SMS	20	11
TOTAL	186	100

The study revealed that over half of the respondents use Facebook to send and receive information more than any other social networks. This confirms the Experian Hitwise (2011) study that Facebook ranked first as the most visited site in the world.

Table 3: How many Nigerian Youths ever sent/received information through Facebook?

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	127	68
No	49	26
Unclear (void)	10	6
TOTAL	186	100

The table above shows that 68% of the respondent agreed to have sent/received information via Facebook. Twenty-six percent of the sample never sent or received information through Facebook, while six percent of the responses were unclear and could not be categorized.

Table 4: How often do Nigerian Youths use Facebook for information exchange?.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Often	20	16
Often	96	75
Occasionally	11	9
Not at all	-	-
TOTAL	127	100

Table 4 shows the responses of the respondents on the frequency of Facebook usage. While 16% of the 127 respondents who use Facebook very often use it for information exchange; 75% responded that they often use Facebook. Thus, a total of 91% frequently use Facebook. Nine percent of the respondents who use Facebook platform use it occasionally.

Table 5: Do Nigerian Youths use Facebook platform for academic information exchange?

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	42	33
No	85	67
Undecided	-	-
TOTAL	127	100

Table 5 shows that 67% of the 127 respondents who use Facebook do not use the platform for academic information exchange, while only thirty-three percent responded that they use Facebook platform for academic information exchange.

Discussion of Findings

The study reveals that, Facebook is the most widely used platform by the Nigerian students. Over half of the respondents use Facebook as their favourite network platform for social interaction.

Again, over two-thirds of the sample agreed to have used Facebook platform to send or receive information. This shows that the network is popular among Nigerian Youths. Those who use Facebook platform agreed that they frequently use it.

However, it is important to note that 67% of the respondents who use Facebook use it for other things different from academic networking. As popular as Facebook is, and with its potentials for networking, only 33% of the respondents who use Facebook use the network for academic information exchange.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that Nigerian Youths have effectively keyed into the capabilities and potentials of social media, especially, Facebook. About two-thirds of the sampled population use Facebook platform for social relationships and interactivity. However, it is a thing of concern that only one-third of the respondents use Facebook for academic purposes. In view of the fact that the platform was created by a student and for the use of fellow colleagues, one would have expected Nigerian Youths to consolidate and expand the platform for the exchange of academic materials. More so, that there is paucity of academic journals, especially international, in the Nigerian market and libraries of tertiary institutions.

It is imperative to recommend and sensitize Nigerian Youths to the benefits of using Facebook to access, gather and distribute academic articles, summaries, texts, journals, research findings, etc., that can augment their knowledge level as well as currency in terms of new developments in the different disciplines. It is only through this that Nigerian Youths can compete favourably with their counterparts in other parts of the world.

Again, tertiary institutions should integrate into their curricula the use (potentials and benefits) of the new technology of information communication especially, the more accessible communication tools and sites like cell phones Facebook, Twitter, etc. through which scholarly information can be shared among students:

Furthermore, parents, guardians, tutors, religious leaders, etc. should monitor their wards on how they use these sites and what they use the sites for. They should also encourage them (youths) to engage the tools pro-actively and profitably. The youths should be encouraged to use the websites more creatively to their advantage and the benefit of the society.

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