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MEDIA, GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Development in Nigeria**

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Internet and Interpersonal Communication among University Undergraduates in Nigeria

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Introduction

The introduction of the Internet has reshaped the way we communicate. With Internet technology, a series of computers are linked and pass information from one server to another. Kayode-Adedeji and Agwu (2015, p.27) remark that the use of the Internet has grown in Nigeria. The circle of telecommunications companies has widened; with some of them providing free data to their subscribers to allow them access the Internet through their mobile telephones. Sobowale, Amodu, Aririguzoh, and Ekanem's study (2015) shows that most residents in a suburban community access the Internet through their mobile phones. Most young people, including university students use their telephones to create, post and access their e-messages.

Every new technology confers some advantages to society. According to Aririguzoh (2013, p. 126):

The Internet and the World Wide Web connects host computers to each other. Individuals can send instant electronic mails (e-mails) to others with an e-mail address. The web is emerging as the great equalizer. It removes the constraints of geographical and physical location, scale and time zones.

The Internet has made it possible for users to pass across different types of messages — text, voice, pictures, and videos – at the click of the mouse. People can send messages to others in diverse places, countries and continents. Spatial distance between the senders and receivers of messages has been destroyed by advancing communication technologies. Hence, Amodu (2008, p. 288) remarks that “distance is completely exterminated”. Caincross (2001, p.2) describes it as the *death of distance* arguing that this type of death is only one of the indicators of the amazing changes taking place as communications and computers are combined in innovative ways. The introduction of the Internet has changed the way people relate and communicate with each other. This is in line with McLuhan's (1964, pp. 6-7) observation that new technologies not only reshape society in undeniable ways but also create new human environments. Our world has since changed with the advent of the Internet.

While the Internet and the social media have helped some persons to network, they have also caused the dearth of interpersonal communication, as most people prefer to spend long hours hiding behind their personal computers and other gadgets that they use to communicate on-line than having face-to-face communication. With the computers and cell phones becoming ubiquitous, more people are further retreating in front of their screens to hide from real personal interactions. Burgoon (1976, pp. 60-69) describes this as the unwillingness to communicate or a chronic tendency to avoid and/or devalue oral communication. There appears to be a discrimination against talking with people nearby in preference to those who are not in close proximity. This may explain Bamigboye's (2015, p.1) concern that advancement in communication technologies create fresh concerns about their abilities to weaken community ties and traditional human means of communication as a whole. It appears as if the advance of the Internet has resulted in shifts in interpersonal communication, with its attendant implications for social interactions and relationships. Accordingly, this study investigates why young people use the Internet; identifies the places where they use context of the use of the internet in daily activities of young persons; and examines the influences of the Internet on interpersonal communication

The Internet and interpersonal communication

Relationships are the building blocks of any human society. Communication is used to share knowledge and enhance understanding. Communication starts, seals, and maintains relationships. In the human community, it is a common experience for people to relate with others because they care, share or have some things in common. New relationships are built through communicating in words, symbols or signs. Lack of, poor or improper communications destroy relationships. Our relationships influence our lives. The quality of our relationships colours the worth of our communities because we interpret the world based on our success or failure to communicate with those who are near us. Where people are free and open with each other, they talk freely. Where they are not, they hide behind all kinds of masks, including personal computers. Duck, Rutt, Hoy and Streje (1991) establish that the quality of our communication distinguishes our friends from distant strangers and mere acquaintances.

Effective interpersonal communication breeds an atmosphere of happiness, fun, contentment and security. The myriad of real-life communication is indeed deep and at times, frustrating. Ineffective communication may cause deep pains that make the parties in the communication process withdraw in hurt and dejection. The need for social affiliation and acceptance by others are factors that force people to initiate communication and build up relationships. Maslow (1943, pp. 370-396) recognizes human needs for belongingness, love, and affection. Nevertheless, it is a common observation that some people shy

away from real-life communication, preferring to go online. It appears as if they are quietly disconnecting themselves from deliberate human communication. The wide adoption of social media by young minds has made some of them avoid face-to-face communication.

Face-to-face social interaction is the most personal form of communication. The people involved in the communication process talk to each other. Usually, they are in close physical proximity. Hence, the sender of information can quickly modify his message if he feels that his listeners do not fully comprehend what he is sharing with them. It is through this form of communication that people interact and move their societies forward. Face-to-face mode of communication builds up our social interaction networks. Therefore, the inability to engage in an effective form of communication may result in a dysfunctional society. Those incapable of engaging in face-to-face communication are seen as persons with severe challenges and unacceptable social misfits. Indeed, most people feel awkward when they cannot adequately communicate with others. Taylor (2006, p.20) writes that in a social situation "the inability to communicate effectively would mean that one wouldn't be a popular conversation companion".

Influence of Internet on interpersonal communication

People use the Internet for many reasons. Fayaz (2011, pp. 118-127) find that students from different disciplines use the Internet for communication, information gathering, entertainment and academic purposes. Kupperman and Fishman (2001, pp. 189-215) report that the Internet is a tool for education, recreation, and socializing. Wanajak (2011, p. 1) mentions some of the benefits associated with Internet use to include "access to needed information, worldwide access to news and events, and interpersonal communication through e-mail."

However, the impersonal space created by Internet technology provides users with new rooms to hide from probable adverse criticisms, especially where their behaviours are seen as inappropriate. Bargh and McKenna (2004, p.6) confirm that:

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is an impoverished communication experience, which creates a greater sense or feeling of anonymity due to the reduction of available social cues. This, in turn, is said to have a de-individuating effect on the individuals involved, producing behaviour that is more self-centred and less socially regulated than usual. This reduced-information model of Internet communication assumes further that the reduction of social cues, compared to richer face-to-face situations, must necessarily have negative effects on social interaction (i.e., a weaker, relatively impoverished social interaction).

Nie, Hillygus and Erbring (2002, pp. 215-243) report that those who devote more time using the Internet spend less time with their families; watching television, sleeping or doing other things. Nie and Erbring (2002), p. 275) also find that the more time some people spend using the Internet, the more do they lose contact with their social environment. This appears unfortunate as Goleman (2006, p.4) remarks that ""we are wired to connect"" and failing to do so causes what he labels as social corrosion. He adds that this is exhibited in inability to get along with, or caring for others, and loss of human connections. Goleman (2006, p.8) offers little comfort when he says that social intelligence is hindered when it is filtered through technology. According to him, ""to the extent that technology absorbs people in a virtual reality, it deadens them to those who are actually nearby. The resulting social autism adds to the on-going list of unintended human consequences of the continuing invasion of technology into our daily lives"". Thus, Kuss and Griffiths (2011, p.68) worry that the mass appeal of social networks on the Internet could potentially be a cause for concern when the amount of time young people spend online is considered. Although Beringer (2000) thinks that the Internet is a useful database, he still remarks that sitting alone before a computer screen for ""virtual"" life experiences can deprive us of the sensory awareness and human contact we need for our physical, psychological and social well-being.

Theoretical Framework

Media users decide the medium they want to expose themselves to satisfy their own needs. The Uses and Gratification Theory as postulated by Blumler and Katz (1974, pp. 13-16) tells us what people do with the media. It asserts that the media audience is in charge of selecting the media that best serve their needs and decide how to use them. The specific media outlets they chose must gratify or fulfil their peculiar needs. Blumler and Katz (1974 pp. 13-16) say that the expected gratification for the audience hinge around four needs: diversion; personal relationships; personal identity or individual psychology; and surveillance. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974, p.20) also add that ""to match one's wits against others, to get information and advice for daily living, to provide a framework for one's day, to prepare oneself culturally for the demands of upward mobility, or to be reassured about the dignity and usefulness of one's role.""

Rubin (1984, pp. 67-77) examined the television audience and grouped them into two categories: the ritualized and the instrumental users of television. According to him, the first category habitually watches television to have their attention diverted while the second watch to get information. Nwuneli (1984, pp. 81-86) investigation of media usage by the urban poor reveals that income and education are associated with media exposure. According to Rubin (1994, p. 420), this theory makes five assumptions:

Communication behaviour, including media selection and use, is goal-directed, purposive, and motivated; people take the initiative in selecting and using communication vehicles to satisfy felt needs or desires; a host of social and psychological factors mediate people's communication behaviour; media compete with other forms of communication (i.e. functional alternatives) for selection, attention and use to gratify our needs or wants and people are typically more influential than the media in the relationship, but not always.

The uses and gratification theory explains why people use the media and the possible benefits they enjoy from so doing. If media consumers are not gratified by a particular medium, it stands to reason that they may abandon it for the one that would give them more satisfaction. Hence media preference is dictated by the satisfaction envisioned by the media consumer. As new media technologies like the Internet emerge, they offer their users more room to make choices. It is apparent these choices would be based on the gratification they seek and intend to derive. Arinuzoh (2012, p.84) concludes that "media usage is determined by several factors: economic, political, cultural and technological factors. These factors influence both the producers and the users. Most students generally are young people who make use of the media in various ways. They use the media as individuals, members of a class or even as group members." Nevertheless, she (p. 93) points out that because "the traditional roles of the gatekeepers are diminishing, students can now create customized contents and share the same with whosoever they like."

Method and materials

This study adopted the survey research design, which allows the examination of a large number of people by selecting a representative sample from it and then generalizing the findings. The population of study are undergraduate students in Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State of Nigeria. Covenant University is a faith-based and residential academic institution. As a matter of policy, the school authority provides online facilities that students can easily access from any part of the campus. It is not uncommon to see some of these students sitting in different locations with their laptops using the Internet. These students are drawn from diverse backgrounds and different parts of the country. There are also students from neighbouring African countries and other non-African countries. Covenant University enrolls students to study Engineering, Business, Human Resource Development, Social, Environmental or Natural Sciences. The sampled students were systematically drawn from these programmes of study. However, each selected student must be Internet literate. A sample size of 180 respondents, aged between 15 years and 25 years were administered copies of a questionnaire. There were 83 males and 97 females ranging from freshers to those in the graduating classes.

Results and discussion

In a survey of the Internet consumption habits among students of Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria, the researchers established that young persons are truly natives of the new media. There are a total of 180 subjects, comprising 54 per cent females and 46 per cent males. The Internet is the most commonly favoured medium (95%) among the study group compared to the television (39%), radio (1%) and newspaper (1%). According to Blumler and Katz (1974, pp. 13-16), people actively choose and use certain media because of perceived gratifications. Most of these respondents consciously picked the Internet as the medium that they use most. This medium indeed offers interactivity, personalisation and opportunities to time-shift consumption. But the Internet emerging as the most used medium of communication has some implications because of its impersonal online means of communication. It is most important to point out that online discussion is not the same with face-to-face conversation. The use of the Internet forces correspondents to hide behind their computers or other types of devices when sending out or accessing their messages. These behaviours weaken face-to-face communication. Matusitz (2007, p.21) confirms that Internet use can diminish the quality of interaction in physical environments because individuals who rely mainly on the Internet to interact with others tend to engage less in normal face-to-face conversation. For face-to-face communication, the sender of the message can immediately modify his message for a better understanding of his listeners or audience. With the Internet, this is not possible. In fact, the Internet discourages face-to-face talking since its technology is built on mainly computers or enabled devices linking together to pass packets of data to each other.

Media gratifications

It is necessary to investigate the factors influencing youths in the use of the Internet. The primary reason for Internet use is the need to be in constant communication with online acquaintances, friends and families of youths. Staying on the online discussion is staying off from physical interaction for the sender's attention would be more focused on what he is sending or receiving on his gadget. This supports our findings that where most of the respondents claim that the significant thing they use the Internet to do is for social networking. Surprisingly, the students were least interested in using this medium for class assignments or entertainment.

Respondents use the Internet to browse social media sites – creating and sharing messages with other online personalities. This implies that more than half of the respondents use the Internet to reach and connect to other online personalities, friends, acquaintances and families. However, it must be noted that some of the respondents still go online to source for entertainment matters and current issues.

Respondents carry out their online communication in three places: their rooms of residence, lecture classrooms or any other area within the campus. However, most of the respondents isolate themselves in their rooms from people and interpersonal groups to concentrate on their use of the Internet. This will break off verbal communication with others. Isolation forces this class of people to think, retain and recollect their online conversations. This is further confirmation that the use of the Internet leads to the famine of personal interactions. Our results further depict that some students prefer to be online with their gadgets even while lectures are in progress in the classrooms. This connotes a distraction from their studies and a further hindrance to building personal communication.

A majority of the respondents (63%) do not see anything wrong in using the Internet every few minutes. Literarily, this means that they are permanently online or logging out for very short periods of times. With almost two-thirds subscribing to the intermittent use of the Internet is a clear message to parents and educators that these respondents are obsessed with the Internet. It is observable that students who ought to be studying are habitually online, especially on social media, chatting, posting pictures, videos or messages to others. Some of these online contents are not censored as anybody can produce and circulate online content, including indecent and prurient materials.

Moreover, a majority (66%) declare that not using the Internet daily makes their day slow. According to them, the day appears longer than the ordained 24 hours. This is not surprising, as these respondents confirmed that they see nothing wrong in going online every few minutes, even while in the classroom. To these respondents, it is much easier to spend hours surfing, and browsing for all kinds of things as not using the Internet appears to lengthen the day. For them, their inability to surf online makes the day looks longer than usual. The respondents have come to depend on the Internet to regulate their days

Most of the respondents say that what they would miss most from not using the Internet is their social networking. This is followed by loss of information on current news items. The students were not bothered about not completing class assignments on time or missing out on some entertainment. These are consistent with earlier findings above.

Respondents share the opinion that they would not find it easy disconnecting from the Internet as a channel of communication. This further corroborates their preference of the Internet as their most preferred medium of communication. Of course, we know that different people use different media because of the gratification they would experience. This aligns with Ruggiero's (2000, p.3) assertion that the arrival of computer-mediated

communication has re-energized the importance of people using the media to get gratifications.

The choice of television follows the preference for the Internet. It appears as if the Internet has replaced the television. Television appeals to respondents because of its audiovisual qualities. Radio follows closely as the next medium the respondents may not find it easy to disconnect from as the radio has the advantage of passing across its messages in the background. At the same time, the listener is engaged in some other assignments. Interestingly, most of the respondents say that they can most easily disconnect from reading newspapers and magazines, probably because of their bulkiness and cost of purchasing. Where newspapers are not delivered to the respondents' doorsteps, most of them may find it difficult to walk to the newspaper stands to buy their copies.

Summary

The Internet has provided important opportunities for social inclusion and diversification of viewpoints. Many students visit different social media sites apparently to engage. However, the younger generations not only scorn the traditional media but also are now so impassive about personal communication with members of their families, friends and the outside world. They are keener on e-communicating rather than getting involved with talking with people around them. Their obsessive use of the Internet is not helping them in building good inter-personal relationships, increasing human interactions or deepening their levels of personal relationships. Online communication is impersonal and lacks the critical personal touch of face-to-face communication, which our society needs to remain functional.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Internet has greatly accelerated the speed of communication. It has emerged as the most popular channel of communication for young people: providing them with a platform to access social media, news, information and entertainment. Surprising, most of them use the Internet less for doing their class assignments. Most users feel that time seems to move far slower whenever they are not online. Respondents pay more attention to their online communication. Since most of their Internet surfing is carried on in their residential rooms, this keeps them away from others, thereby causing a dearth in face-to-face communication. Their frequent use of the Internet has weakened their face-to-face or interpersonal communication. Thus, the sense of connection, caring, and commitment that are the hallmarks of face-to-face communication are slowly dying with the forceful marching forward of the Internet.

Recommendations

go online; this is a sign that they are suffering from Internet addiction. Parents and guardians should watch out for the tell-tale signs and address such before they grow out of control. Also, prolonged avoidance of face-to-face communication may be a façade hiding other challenges that a young person may be facing, like emotional turmoil and failed love affairs. It might be needful for parents, counsellors and school authorities to isolate very pronounced cases for further investigation, especially, when the young people feel that the hours of the day are longer than usual because they are not hooked online.

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