

The Moral Implication of Social Media Phenomenon in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the moral implication of the phenomenon of social media in Nigeria. The paper posits that though social media offer great benefits, the phenomenon has given rise to moral issues in Nigeria, especially among the youths. Through the use of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, it was found that the social media phenomenon is overwhelmingly popular among Nigerian youths as well as one of the major contributors to moral degeneration in the country.

Keywords: *Social media phenomenon, Moral decadence, Nigerian youths, Facebook, Information and Communication Technology (ICT)*

1. Introduction

The world of Information and Communication Technology is yet to experience something more phenomenal than the phenomenon of social media. According to Nche (2012:18) "without doubt, social media currently seem to take the centre stage in the field of information and communication technology (ICT). In the same vein, Adaja and Ayodele (2013:65) observed that "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." Kaplan (2010) defined social media as "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web which allow the creation and exchange of user generated content". They refer to the internet-based social websites like the Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc. which allow users to interactively communicate with one another. Social media can also refer to those "web-based and mobile-based technologies which are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue between organizations, communities and individuals" (www.wikidpedia). The media allow users to meet friends, exchange ideas, images, audios, videos and most importantly stay connected. Since their invention, they have become increasingly popular in different countries across the globe. Hence, Verster (2010) observed that "social media are fast becoming the default internet mode of interaction, communication and collaboration". In Nigeria, for instance, social media sites especially facebook, have apparently become common, especially among the youths in the country.

Prior to the invention of this phenomenon, communication over a distance was comparatively difficult. However, the advent of the social media has made the erstwhile impossible become possible, as one can conveniently communicate with anyone at anytime irrespective of geographical barriers and distance. Umekachikelu (2013) has expressed that "it is amazing that with a click one passes information to thousands of people in a second. This is the power of social media". It has made business, politics and social life effortless and easy. This is further accelerated by the fact that these social media sites are accessible with mobile smart phones, anywhere and at anytime.

However, amidst all sociological benefits, social media have regrettably contributed to moral degeneration and decadence among youths in several countries, including Nigeria. This, no doubt, stems from the gross obsession with and abuse of these social networking sites. The objective of this paper therefore is to critically analyze the moral issues that have arisen from the usage of social media in Nigeria especially among the youths in the country. A qualitative as well as quantitative analytical approach would be employed to achieve this objective.

2. The Concept of Morality

Morality refers to the principle of right or wrong behaviour. It has its etymological origin from the Latin word “mores” which means “conduct or custom”. Ezekwu (2008:16) has therefore noted that “morality is used to denote a generally accepted code of conduct in a society or within a subgroup of society that comes to be regarded as essential to its survival and welfare”. These accepted norms or codes of conduct in any society often appeal to the moral nature of man “for the human nature is a moral nature, and the moral sphere is exclusively the human sphere” (Omeregbe, 1993: 102). They appeal to the sense of humanity and relevant for the welfare of the entire members of any society including Nigeria. Some of the common moral codes of conduct, in Nigeria, for instance, include respect or sacredness of human life, respect for elders, hard work and industry, avoidance of premarital sex, and so on. To this end, any conduct that is not in tandem with these and more accepted norms or laid down principles of behaviour in the country is declared as immoral and unacceptable. Also, a consistent and unchallenged abandonment and overlook of the moral principles of conduct in a society by members of the society, is what often leads to moral decadence or degeneration in such society, which seems to be the case in Nigeria.

3. Social Media Usage in Nigeria

The world of social media is indeed a fascinating one for Nigerians especially the Youths. This is not surprising as it is generally acknowledged that youths, by their nature are more disposed to social communication technologies. Lenhart et al (2010) have observed that:

Almost two-thirds (63%) of all adolescents use the internet to go online at least once a day. For those youth who go online, social media use is high-nearly three-quarters (73%) use a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace; 38% share content online such as photos, videos or art work; and 14% blog. Additionally, three-quarters (75%) of all teens have a cell phone, with 88% using them to text message, 64% to exchange pictures, and 23% to access social networking sites.

Nnamonu (2013) aptly expressed that “while the internet is the chief host of social media sites, the youths are the most predominant clients”. Hence, social media have become overwhelmingly common among youths in the country. Nche (2012:19) has observed that

In the manner of a wild fire in harmattan, the phenomenon of social media (networking) has spread to all nooks and crannies of Nigeria, engulfing a large number of her youths. Social media usage has become so common among the youths, that it has become unfashionable not to engage oneself at least in one of the social networking sites.

In the same vein, Umekachikelu (2013) asserted that “Many Nigerians including the rich and poor, educated and illiterate, young and old, Muslims and Christians now enjoy the services of the social media. But the youth are the major players in this sector, as they have being tagged as the digital age.” Some of the common social media sites among Nigerian youths are Facebook, 2go, Myspace, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. According to the research conducted by Adaja and Ayodele (2013:71) to determine the percentage of Nigerian youths on Facebook and how often do they use the social network, using questionnaires issued to the students of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun state of Nigeria, the results as represented in tables include:

Table 1: 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

Source: Adaja and Ayodele 2013:71

Table 2: How often do Nigerian Youths use Facebook?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	20	16
Often	96	75
Occasionally	11	9
Not at all	-	-
Total	127	100

Source: Adaja and Ayodele 2013:71

Table: 1 shows that 68% of a total of 186 analyzable respondents agreed to have sent or received information via facebook; while the table: 2 shows that 91% of the 127 respondents who use facebook, frequently use the social network.

These show that most Nigerian youths have actually joined the social media trend. Beyond this, however, it has been estimated that the total population of Nigerians on Facebook as at 19th October 2012 currently stands at 6 million, which makes the country the Africa's second largest country on facebook after Egypt (www.socialbakers.com). This Statistics also ranks Nigeria 31st largest facebook users in the world after Russia (www.techloy.com). Obviously, these statistics do not take into account the involvement/engagement of Nigerians with other social media sites or devices. Of course, cases abound in the country in which, one may have more or different accounts with different social networking sites.

The popularity of Blackberry phones in Nigeria also worth an attention here. Okonedo (2012) has observed that "the Blackberry device is becoming increasingly popular in Nigeria". According to the 2012 Nigerian business news publication "Business Day", the number of Blackberry users in Nigeria currently stands at about 2.4 million (Business.dayonline.com). Apart from the fact that social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, are easily accessible with Blackberry phones, the phones themselves, come with a chatting device known as Blackberry Messenger (BBM) which enables subscribed users to chat or "ping", share images, audios and videos with fellow subscribed users.

Interestingly, what seems to be the peculiarity with Nigerian blackberry users is the overwhelming passion and affection with which these activities are carried out, especially by Nigerian Youths. For instance, with the Blackberry Messenger (BBM) device, "it is common to see some Nigerian youths engrossed and chatting on the road, in the market, classroom, library, church, toilet, bathroom etc. in utter negligence and recklessness" (Nche 2012:19). Here lies the social media abuse and obsession which has given rise to some moral issues being experienced in the country. Notwithstanding, it is clear from the foregoing, that the phenomenon of social media is indeed common among Nigerians especially the youths in the country.

4. The Benefits of Social Media

Social media offer great benefits. Ikpe and Olise (2010) have observed that "social media are new communication technologies... which are used as channels of information dissemination to heterogeneous audiences without the constraints of time, space or distance". With the social media one can conveniently send or receive information to or from anyone and at anytime irrespective of geographical barriers. Soola (1998:87) described the new media (social media) as communication technologies with "impressive array of sophistication, increasing efficiency, reliability, speed, accuracy, cheapness, portability and ubiquity made possible by microprocessors". Some of these phenomenal media include internet websites such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Flickr and other social networking or social media and sharing sites, as well as blogs videos games, virtual worlds, mobile telephones, text messaging devices and Global Positioning System (GPS) devices (Paxson 2010). These devices currently serve as easy, quick and reliable sources of information. Soola (1998:86) observed that social media "provides near limitless possibilities of increasing the quantity and enhancing the quality, speed and availability of information in a complex but increasingly interdependent world...". Through the use of social media, people can be kept up dated on issues or events on a minute interval. This is particularly possible because these social websites are interactively accessible with mobile phones. The use of Blackberry phones (BBM) for instance, makes this easier, as one can send both images or snapped shots alongside information on the most current event or issues as the case may be, on minute interval. An example of this can be seen in the case of the "3 June 2012 Dana Air crash" and the October 6, 2012 lynching of four students of the University of Port-Harcourt in Lagos and Port-Harcourt respectively. These news and events alongside with pictures circulated all over Nigeria, within a twinkle of an eye, through social networks and mostly by Blackberry users who were probably presents at the scene. Apart from this,

social media can as well serve as easy source of information for academic purpose. For instance, while citing a group of students in Annenberg College of Journalism, Overholser (2010) 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".

Additionally, social media contribute immensely in the enhancement of social bonds and relationships. According to Adaja and Ayodele (2013:65) "the potentials of the new media are seamless and boundless in terms of interactions, interrelationships, and information sharing and exchanges". In the same vein, Nche (2012:20) has noted that:

The fundamental aim of social media sites is to enhance communication through the act of socializing. These sites enable users to interactively communicate, share images, audios and videos with friends online. They offer users opportunities to meet lost friends, make new ones, meet family members who might be in different locations and generally stay connected. Hence social bonds and relationship are maintained and enhanced.

With the social media, "people communicate and keep in touch, through sharing experiences, pictures, audio, videos and all manner of information, without having to see each face to face". (Nnamonu 2013). However, in as much as social media maintains social bonds/relation, it unfortunately fails to meet all the social needs of man as a gregarious animal. Hence, Tapscott as cited in Awake (2012:7) observed that "one of the ironies of the internet is that while it makes staying in touch easier when family members are physically apart, it can also keep them apart when they are at home".

Social media also contribute in the enhancement of work efficiency in the office and business centres. Ikpe and Olise (2010) have observed that social media "possess the capability to increase work efficiency and speed as well as reduce cost". Likewise, Umekachikelu (2013) noted that social media have "improved efficiency, as many tasks, intellectual and otherwise can now be completed within a shorter timeframe and with less error". Some of the social media sites that aid in businesses include LinkedIn, companyloop, DoMyStuff, etc, while the "Business wiki" can be employed in carrying office tasks.

As has been noted earlier, social media offer great and seemingly limitless benefits. Social media, "by their very nature are drivers of social change, organizational and national development" (Adaja and Ayodele, 2013:70). However, notwithstanding all these benefits, social media have inadvertently given rise to moral decadence and degeneration in Nigeria, especially among the youths. The moral issues that have arisen from the use of social media in the country, therefore, shall be discussed in the succeeding sub-heading.

5. Moral Implication of Social Media Phenomenon in Nigeria

Amidst all the benefits of Social media, the phenomenon has inadvertently given rise to moral issues in Nigeria. While they have fuelled or deepened the level of immorality among the youths in the country; new acts of immorality have cropped up as result of the negative influences available on these social sites. For clarity, some of the moral issues that have arisen from the abuse and obsession with social media shall be discussed below:

5.1 Sexual Promiscuity

The level of moral decadence in Nigeria has become repugnant. The previous invaluable moral values and norms have regrettably been ruined, while immorality now reigns especially among the youths. Yaro (2013) has noted that "gone are the days when morality and discipline used to be virtues. Today it is the exact opposite. We now live in a decadent society where morality and discipline are (thrown) overboard". This is evident in the current level of sexual promiscuity among the youths in the country. Ani (2002: 27) has observed that "sexual immorality has become the talk of the day in the country as one is regarded as the greatest by the number of sexual partners he/she has in the name of lovers. As a result, pre-marital sex, homosexuality and lesbianism are no more vices among our youths". The phenomenon of social media has ruefully exacerbated the matter "as one can easily reach out to friends of opposite sex, make new ones and even invite them over" (Nche, 2012: 21) through these social sites. Hence, social ills that are erstwhile strange and alien to the indigenous norms and values, are becoming increasingly common in the country. For instance, in an interview by the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) in Lagos on 26th May 2012, Mr. Bright Gbolahan (a lawyer) cited a case in court that emanated from a connection on Facebook, in which a complainant alleged that he came in contact with a friend on facebook who invited him over to his house. On reaching the house, Mr. Gbolahan continued, the complainant discovered that the person in question was a gay (homosexual) who wanted to lure him into the act (www.nigerianssavinnigerians.org). Apart from this, social media sites have also served as avenue for some youths to share risqué, nude and sexual images, especially of themselves. This has encouraged sexual immorality and promiscuity in Nigeria.

5.2 *Internet Crime*

The emergence of the internet saw the emergence of internet or cyber-criminals commonly known as internet hackers and scammers. Whereas internet hacking is the act of breaking codes and passwords to gain an unauthorized access to computer system; scamming is a clever and dishonest way of making money. These twin criminal acts are fondly known in Nigeria as "yahoo-yahoo" which literary means a consistent surfing of yahoo-chatting device in endless search for victims or "mugus". Nevertheless, it is particularly interesting how one can be at a particular place and commit crime thousands of miles away-this is the power of internet. The phenomenon of social media has unfortunately added to their options, as these internet criminals see these networking sites as avenues to achieve their ignoble and immoral missions. The case of a Australian-based facebook user Kaina Wells who almost lost 500 dollars to a Nigerian who impersonated Adrian, Kaina's friend (www.metro.co.uk) and that of Evan who almost gave out 900 dollars to a Nigerian, who impersonated Calvin, Evan's friend and claimed to be stranded in London. However, what seems to be climax of this moral decadence was the case of late Cynthia Udoka Osokogu who was defrauded and killed in August 2012, by two people she met through the Blackberry Messenger (BBM).

5.3 *Indecent Dressing and Sexual Harassment*

The problem of indecent dressing and the consequent sexual harassment in the country, especially in tertiary institutions, have been made worse by the phenomenon of social media. As has been said earlier, some, if not all, of these social media sites often provide room for users to upload and share pictures and videos. Unfortunately, these provisions have been abused as many users share risqué pictures of themselves or celebrities wearing skimpy clothes while some appear wearing their pants or trousers below their waste in the name of sagging. Again, some of these social networking sites such as facebook, also have provisions for advertisements in which some of the so called trendy mini-female clothes are advertised for users. All these exposures have really influenced the mode of dressing in Nigeria especially among the youths, which partly explains the rise of sexual harassment in the country.

5.4 *Loss of Sense of sacredness of Human Life and Neighbourliness*

Regard for human life and good neighbourliness are very important moral injunctions and demands. In fact, these moral values are integral parts of the moral norms and values of virtually all societies, including Nigeria. However, many Nigerian youths seem to have lost these values as a result of the gross obsession with the world of social media. This is evident in the manner with which critical events that concern human lives are currently being handled by these youths in the country. Nigerian youths have unfortunately been turned into onlookers in times of disaster with no concern or regard for the dying-lives desperately in need of help. Umekachikelu (2013) has elaborately observed that:

Since the advent of the social media in our country, the lost of the sense of dignity is on the increase. Young people in the name of being the first to know forget the sacredness of the human life that we were known with. This is evident in the attitude of our young men and women towards life. One discovers nowadays that, in the face of a disaster in which people are maimed, injured or killed. Youths rather than coming to their rescue only care about taking pictures or recording of the disaster and the victim with their phones and then upload the images to YouTube, Facebook or other online forums. This is very evident in the aftermath of the June 2012 Dana Airline crash in Iju-Ishaga, Lagos, when thousands of young people residing in the area rushed to the scene, instead of rescuing the people in the plane, began using their phones to take images of the dying plane crash victims. A similar thing occurred when almost a hundred people were burnt to death after an oil tanker caught fire in Rivers State.

Indeed, this is wrong, unacceptable and should be stopped forthwith. The worth of human life is unquantifiable and priceless, hence, should be compulsorily prioritized in all situations especially during moments of disaster.

5.5 *Impatience and Quick Syndrome*

Research has shown that the evolution of the computer and the internet with its characteristic promptness, automation and highly overwhelming speed in carrying out activities has influenced patience and endurance in humans. Yet, the phenomenon of social media seems to have deepened this effect, as with a click of a button, one sends information to thousands of people. This has affected the value of patience in people generally and particularly among the youths in Nigeria. This is evident in the hasty and impatient lifestyle found among the youths who would want to get everything quick, fast and in the speed of the internet. Mefoh (2007) noted that "even our communication is becoming so crisp and

blunt. The verbs found in our speeches reveal inner compulsion of speed. We 'snatch' a file; 'dash off' to a meeting; or 'catch' a plane". Interestingly, this lose of patience among the youths seems to be furnishing the "get-rich-quick syndrome" that has significantly contributed to the rise of crime in Nigeria.

6. Recommendations

To actually control or curb the moral effects of social media phenomenon in Nigeria, the following have been recommended:

1. Parents should guide against social media obsession among their children, by ensuring that they are not allowed much time to surf the internet or their phones especially at home.
2. Parents should also consciously contribute to the building of a morally viable Nigerian society by instilling strong moral values into their children right from their homes which is the microcosm of the larger society. This will curb the level of moral decadence in the country.
3. The youths should refrain from every act of immorality as this does not mean well for the future of the country, since it is said that youths are the leaders of tomorrow.
4. They should also avoid the obsession and abuse of the social media sites, but instead should moderately utilize the array of benefits which they offer.
5. The traditional media like the television and radio broadcast as well as newspapers should through their routine activities discourage the abuse of social media in the country. This can be done through the organization of a discourse on the phenomenon of social media, or through advertisements and publication of write-ups of this nature.

7. Conclusion

So far, this paper has highlighted the phenomenal nature of social media in Nigeria, especially among the youths. It also discussed the benefits which these social media sites offer, which included the enhancement of work efficiency, maintenance of social bond, source of information and so on. However, a greater attention was given to the moral implication of the abuse of these social media sites especially by the youths in the country. These included Sexual promiscuity, Internet crime, Indecent dressing and sexual harassment, Loss of sense of sacredness of human life and neighbourliness and Impatience and quick syndrome.

Notwithstanding these moral effects of the phenomenon of social media in the country, one can no longer imagine a world with it. Therefore, all hands must be on desk especially that of parents and youths themselves, to salvage the social media-induced moral degeneration that is currently been witnessed in the country.

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