Nigerian child and the challenges of the social media: A way out

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Abstract

Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. While the social media have been gaining wide attraction among young people, there is concern over the adverse consequences of exposing children to the excessive social media usage. This paper explored some challenges of the social media to the Nigerian child. Using documentary sources, the paper identified some of the undesirable influences of the social media; employed the Bandura's social learning theory to explain the possibility of the Nigerian child imitating some of the unwanted contents of the social media; and canvasses for a way out of the social media negative influence on the Nigerian child. Among others, the paper advocates for parental censorship of social media use among children as well as due consideration by relevant authorities for the contents flowing online.
Keywords: Nigerian Child, Social Media, Challenges, Traditional Value

Introduction

The child is the greatest asset to any family, community or country. Nobody is born an adult. The adult of today was a child of yesterday. It is thus important that every society tries to nurture children of their desire in order to attain the future of their dream. In the pursuit of this very important task, certain factors at opposing ends may work for and against this effort. While

the family as the most important socializing agent, the school, the church as a moral barometer and other ancillaries of socialization provide proactive bases for this task, other factors within the emerging technological environment work to overturn this. The permeation of the new technology into every nook and cranny of the society has added to the pool of traditional socializing agents. Most importantly among these is the uncensored social media where children are exposed to certain classified contents without regards to the influence of these contents on their wellbeing. The social media throw caution to the wind and thrive on the gullible young ones. On daily basis, mischief makers and harbingers of perversions feed the social media with contents that are from all indications, in direct war with the traditional value system. Violence, immorality, oddity becomes stock-in-trade of the new feed all of which undermine the traditional values. Children who are more vulnerable to the information become the unfortunate victims.

Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Kolan and Dzandza (2018), also defined social media as websites and applications used for social networking. Another definition of social media is that it is a communication channel which is very popular, extremely fast and broad, has proven to be highly effective, as well as trusted by billions of people , to share and discover content concerning individuals, brands, information, entertainment and knowhow'' (Dearborn, 2014). One theme that all these definitions underpin is that social media involves some form of communication between individuals over the internet.

A report from the UK's communications regulator Ofcom confirms that children are avid social media users. Some 99% of children aged three to 17 used the internet in 2021 (Kuss, 2022). Acording to the report, YouTube was the most popular platform, with 89% of children using it. Meanwhile, about 45% of kids used TikTok, a popular site which allows users to watch and share short videos (Kuss, 2022). Although most social media platforms require users to be aged 13 or older, nonetheless, the report found that a majority of children under 13 had their own profile on at least one social media app or site. Overcoming these age restrictions is clearly not a difficult task. Children simply supply a fake age when setting up their account. Meanwhile, some children have multiple accounts on the same platform – one for their friends, and another for their parents perhaps to avert their parents' censorship. One-third of parents of children aged five to seven agreed their children had a profile. The rate is even higher at 60% for children aged eight to 11 (Kuss, 2022). In another survey, 71% of parents with younger children (under

12 years old) stated that they were concerned about their children spending too much time in front of screens (Smith, 2019).

Though the child may be defined in different ways across countries and climes, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provides a standard definition of a child as "a person whose age is below eighteen years". This age is also acceptable in Nigeria as age of responsibility. UNESCO recognizes that while children have the right to get information from the Internet, radio, television, newspapers, books and other sources, adults should make sure the information they are getting is not harmful. How far this onerous responsibility is carried out by the adult is a matter that calls for a serious rethink.

This paper addresses the challenges facing the Nigerian child in the emerging technological environment. It highlights some of the challenges posed by the social media to the Nigerian child; employs Bandura's social learning theory to explain the likely influence of the social media on the child, and suggests way out to protect the vulnerable Nigerian child from the negative influence of the new media.

Challenges of the Social Media

The advancement in information and communication technology (ICT) comes with some drastic changes into the traditional way of life and value system. Until the arrival of the new technologies, the radio and the television (traditional media) were about the only information technologies available to children. Fortunately, the contents of technologies were censored by various authorities in such a way that they were in tune with the traditional value system and acceptable to the generality of the populace. The emergence of the new media especially social media is a sharp contrast to the usual censorship associated with the traditional media. Information flow unfettered from diverse sources: some good, some bad and some ugly.

Social media have lots of good things to offer to users. The social media can expose users to new ideas and information which may enable them to improve on their lives (Onuchukwu, 2022). They may raise awareness of current events and issues especially in a fast-changing world we live. Social media encourage and promote community participation. They also help students work with others on assignments and projects. Social media allow families and friends to stay in touch, no matter where they live, enhance access to valuable support networks, especially for people with illnesses or disabilities and help promote wellness and healthy behaviours, such as how to quit smoking or how to eat healthy.

Although there are many good things that could come out of the social media, Adegboyega (2020) observed other negative ant-social behaviours. According to him, children learn

bullying, blackmail, involvement in fraud, impersonation among other negative influences through WhatsApp, Facebook, and google classroom. Likewise, Al-Sharqi, Hashim and Kutbi (2015) stated that in addition to having a good side, social media that is well integrated in society, also has a bad side, such as being involved in fraud, cybercrime, cyberbullying, and lack of physical human relations. Children and teens online can be victims of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can lead to short and long-term negative social, academic, and health issues for both the bully and victim. Fortunately, programs to help prevent bullying may reduce cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a category of bullying that occurs in the digital realm or medium of electronic text. It is any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others'' (Kolan & Dzandza, 2018). The causes of cyberbullying, according to Calvete, Orue, Estevez, Villardon and Padilla (2010), was significantly related with the use of proactive aggression, justification of violence, exposure to violence and less perceived social support of friends.

Rajeev & Jobilal (2015) expressed that youths do not usually use the good side of social media. They are tilted towards the downside. Moreover, Lowisz (2014) stated that instead of using social media for positive communication and the benefits of connectivity, youths (mainly adolescents) use it to the contrary. Onuchukwu (2022) found out that the effects of use of the social media range from spending increasing amounts of time online, behaviour change due to anticipated judgment from peers, and sensory overload, to more serious cognitive and emotional consequences such as attention problems, stress and anxiety. New research suggests that there appear to be differences across age groups with regards to the effects social media use can have on life satisfaction. In a large UK sample of over 17,000 young people aged ten to 21, research found out that the detrimental effects of high levels of social media use may be especially pronounced at ages 14-15 and 19 for boys, and 11-13 and 19 for girls (Smith, 2019). Moreover, Adu-Sarkodee, Asante and Akussah (2015) in a study found out that social networking sites have proven to be universally addictive for senior high school students who tend to spend considerable amounts of their time maintaining social connections, making new acquaintances and a broad base of friends during their years of study. These however reduce the amount of time they will use to read books aimed at successful completion of their studies. Due to technological development, reading habits are changing. In our society today, while technology is slowly taking a steady control over individual lives, the reading habit is fast vanishing into thin air. Students now lack the skill of reading and instead they spend more hours on electronic media. This assertion is a true reflection in the Nigerian society. Children

no longer have the urge to read; they are more interested in watching movies, comics, playing video games and engrossed in social media. Facebook users particularly often experience poor academic performance (Mensah & Nizam, 2016). It has been observed that social media has a negative association with children's academic performance which is much greater than the advantages derived through the use of social media platforms. Studies have also revealed that social media affects students' use of English. They tend to use short-handwriting to chat with friends and get used to it thereby replicating the same errors during examinations (Obi, Bulus, Adamu & Sala'at, 2012).

Many young people around the globe have been addicted to the internet which has given rise to more students using social media more often than before. Nalwa & Anand (2013) advised and recommended that those who are addicted users love to use the internet to set back their personal and professional responsibilities in which the final outcome is poor academic performance. It was highlighted in the finding of Karpinski (2019) that social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, etc) users usually devote lesser time to their studies and subsequently have lower Grade Point Average (GPA) compared to nonusers. It was also observed by Karpinski, & Duberstein (2019), that among the major distractions of the current generation, social media platforms (such Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) rank highest. According to Kubey, Lavin, and Barrows (2011), there is a correlation between academic performance and the dependency on social media platforms. In other words, children who indulge in the use of social media perform relatively low academically.

According to scientists, social networks are especially dangerous for teenagers, as they form a false impression that love and friendship are easy to conquer and just as easy to destroy (East, 2016). They found themselves in false Facebook 'friendship' that may destroy their future and at times, their lives. There is the privacy concern that everyone involved in social networking is faced with. The rate at which people post or share fake information calls for alarm and it is difficult to ascertain that, what people say and post are truly who they are. Individuals' private information are publicly displayed on some of these social networks and malicious people take advantage and perpetrate all kinds of harassment. It is also argued that the privacy options offered by most social networking sites (SNSs) do not provide users with the flexibility needed to handle conflicts with individuals who have different conceptions of privacy (Preibusch, Hoser, Gurses & Berendt, 2017).

Former Facebook employee, Haugen (2021) revealed that internal Facebook research has repeatedly shown detrimental mental health impacts of Instagram use for young girls. The report also showed that children as young as three and four watch videos on TikTok.

Meanwhile, it is observed that excessive screen time can be associated with symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and addiction. Recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics suggest no screen time for children under two, and a maximum of one hour per day for those aged two to five years, and should focus on high-quality content, for example, content which is educational (Kuss, 2022).

Some of the negative sides of the social media as it concerns children include (Obi, Bulus, Adamu, & Sala'at, 2012):

a. Inadequate sleep: Media use can interfere with sleep. Children and teens who have too much media exposure or who have computer, or mobile device in their bedroom fall asleep later at night and sleep less. Even babies can be overstimulated by screens and miss the sleep they need for growth. Exposure to light (particularly blue light) and stimulating content from screens can delay or disrupt sleep.

b. Obesity: Excessive screen use can increase the risk of obesity. Watching the screen for more than $1^1/_2$ hours daily is a risk factor for obesity for children 4 through 9 years of age (Smith, 2019). Teens who watch more than 5 hours of TV per day are 5 times more likely to have over-weight than teens who watch 0 to 2 hours. Also, children who overuse social media are less apt to be active with healthy, physical play.

c. Delays in learning & social skills: When infants or preschoolers hook on the screen, they may show delays in attention, thinking, language and social skills. One reason for this could be that they do not interact as much with their parents and family members. Parents who allow children use the social media or spend excess time on their own digital media miss precious opportunities to interact with their children and help them learn.

d. Negative effect on school performance: Children often use entertainment media at the same time that they are doing other things, such as homework. Such multitasking can have a negative effect on how well they do in school.

e. Behavior problems: Violent content on social media and screens can contribute to behaviour problems in children, either because they are scared and confused by what they see or they try to mimic on-screen characters.

f. Problematic internet use: Children who spend too much time using online media can be at risk for a type of additive behaviour called problematic internet use (Obi *et al*, 2012). Heavy video gamers are at risk for Internet gaming disorder. They spend most of their free time online and show less interest in offline or real-life relationships. There may be increased risks for depression at both the high and low ends of Internet use.

g. Risky behaviors: Teens' displays on social media often show risky behaviours, such as substance use, risky sexual behaviours, self-injury, or eating disorders. Exposure of teens through media to alcohol, tobacco use, or sexual behaviours is linked to engaging in these behaviours earlier.

h. Sexting, loss of privacy & predators: Sexting is the sending or receiving of sexually explicit images, videos, or text messages using a smartphone, computer, tablet, video game or digital camera. About 19% of youth have sent a sexual photo to someone else (Smith, 2019). Children need to know that once content is shared with others, they may not be able to delete it completely. Kids may also not use privacy settings. Sex offenders may use social networking, chat rooms, e-mail and online games to contact and exploit children.

From the foregoing, it may be deduced that social media use among children is fraught with many challenges. There is the fear that these challenges may have serious influence on the wellbeing of the Nigerian child. This fear is borne out of the tendency to imitate what they perceive.

Bandura's Theory of Social Learning

The social media influence on the Nigerian child may be explained by the Bandura's social learning theory. Bandura's social learning theory (1977) emphasizes that part of what a person learns is through imitation or modeling and that learning takes place in a social situation. During interaction with the environment an individual may learn to modify his behaviour as a result of how others in the group are responding. Bandura sees behaviour as internal cognitive structure and the environment as interacting factor, so that each act is an interlocking determinant of the other (Bandura. 1978). He believed that children learn through observation or copying and watching carefully the behaviour of adults, be they their biological parents, caregivers or adults around them, as their models. Thus, where their models depict pervasive and anti-social behaviours, they grow up with these experiences and tend to be pervasive themselves. Likewise, children who watch violent, immoral, distractive and pervasive scenes in the social media, may be so influenced and grow up to practice the same. Those who grow up under such unbecoming conditions are likely to engage in those things learnt through imitation. The relevance of this theory is that conversely, exposure of children to acceptable norms and values and less of violence and immorality pervading the social media, will go a long way to help motivate positive behaviours in the Nigerian child.

The Way Out

Children today are growing up in a time of highly social media use experiences. Support for young media users needs to come from parents, teachers, governments and the social media industry. Parents can be encouraged to start an open dialogue with their children, which will build rapport and allow children to open up about their social media use. It is smart for parents to develop a customized social media use plan for the children. This will help the children to avoid overusing social media by balancing it with other healthy activities. A media plan therefore, should consider each child's age, health, personality and developmental stage (Smith, 2019). Parents should remember that all children need adequate sleep (8–12 hours each night, depending on their age), physical activity (1 hour a day) and time away from media. They should therefore create a customized plan for the family or better still, delay children's use of social media.

There is the need for an online safety law to protect the Nigerian child. Faced with similar concern, the United Kingdom government enacted same to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online (Smith, 2019). Accordingly, Nigerian government need to consider the potentially detrimental impacts internet use in general and excessive social media use specifically can have on young people, especially those who are vulnerable. Similarly, there is the need to see increased user protection (such as age verification measures) and harm prevention initiatives (such as school-based education about the benefits and potential harms of social media use).

 Also, there is the need to see the involvement of community and government organisations in education and awareness campaigns, as well as a focus on increased corporate social responsibility, where the industry takes an active approach in designing products with the best interests of the user in mind. The social media should not be a marketplace of garbage that tend to undermine the Nigeria's traditional values.

While it is important to discourage over-pathologising everyday behaviour – for example, it should not be assumed that everyone who spends a few hours online has a problem with their media use. Problematic behaviour needs to be acknowledged and users need to be supported. This can prevent it leading to negative consequences.

Summary

Conclusion

Social media have lots of benefits that can be derived by users. The downside of social media especially on the Nigerian child however, is enormous. The social media contents can exert

bad influence on vulnerable children. The anti-social behavioural change, health implications and distractive tendencies associated with the social media are highlighted. One can make a case for minimal exposure of children to the social media if the traditional values must be sustained.

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