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## SOCIAL NETWORKING IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITY CENTRES: USES AND PERCEPTION AMONG SELECTED NIGERIAN STUDENTS

**DR. SULEIMAN SALAU**

**LECTURER**

**DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION**

**AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY**

**ZARIA**

**NATHANIEL OGUCHE EMMANUEL**

**STUDENT**

**DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION**

**AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY**

**ZARIA**

### ABSTRACT

*Social media culture has become one of the dominant cultures in 21<sup>st</sup> century. While there are divergent views about the significance of this technology, one thing is most definite – the youths, especially university students have incorporated the use of social media into their daily routine. This study evaluates the manner of interaction within the virtual community centres (social networking sites) and examines students' perception of this emerging technology. The study, conducted in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, a metropolitan university in Nigeria, surveyed 262 students out of which 120 (45.8%) and 110 (42%) were first and final year students respectively. The study, conducted within the theoretical ambience of mediamorphosis, found that most students use social media more to connect with their existing relationships than using it to create new relationships. In this regard, social networking could be described as an extension of face-to-face communication, a situation where old and new media live in mutual coexistence without abolishing the old ones. The study also revealed that mobile phone constitutes the most popular means through which the students access social media. Perceived negative effects of social networking as revealed by the study are time wastage, invasion of privacy, addiction and promotion of social vices.*

### KEYWORDS

Social networking, mediamorphosis, virtual community centre, Internet, social media.

### INTRODUCTION

Internet revolution has brought about a new form of communication, a development that is drawing the attention of scholars worldwide. This form of communication, otherwise known as social networking has become one of the most important products of Internet technology. With its ubiquity and high rate of prevalence, social networking has become one of the most convenient ways of sharing ideas with distant relations and friends and an avenue of 'meeting' those we have never met before or may never meet for life. Hempel (2005:89) describes these social networking sites as "virtual community centres", what most adults see "as supplements to their daily lives" where they can "tap into information, buy book or send flowers."

Despite the high level of diffusion of social networking sites, few studies have been conducted on this emerging and phenomenal technology. From the various studies, while some individuals perceive social networking site as a form of distraction or a platform where the youths share some ephemeral issues about life when they are supposed to be engaged with more serious issues like their academics, career, and trade, others argue that social networking is a social phenomenon and must be approached from multiple perspectives. Hence, social networking has both good and bad sides.

This study provides descriptive information about how university students (fresh and final year) use the various social networking platforms. Critical questions for understanding the pattern of utilization of such applications address the time spent on it, motivations behind the use of such sites, and their perceived benefits and danger.

### SOCIAL NETWORKING

The Internet revolution has brought about a new form of relationship that is gradually eclipsing the face-to-face communication. This new form of social interaction has not only brought about the expansion of one's social networks, it also affords individuals to have 'access' to an array of people that would have not been possible in the 'real' world. This form of relationship, popularly known as social networking, allows people to relate and connect with one another in the virtual realm through wired social networking sites. One good thing about social networking is that everyone within the network can participate in an ongoing debate, share contents, photographs, opinion, create and join groups of interest. Popular among the social networking sites are Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube; all these have attracted millions of users all over the world and have become a common language among the present generation especially the youths and teenagers who have integrated them into their daily routines.

By definition, social networking sites are those web sites that allow users create connection through the Internet to share and exchange content, chat or leave message (Vivar and Aguilar, 2010). For Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield (2007), social networking sites allow users to engage in virtual representation, articulate connections, view their own networks and the networks of others and fundamentally, allow individuals share both serious and ephemeral changes about life. However, which ever way one may define social networking the 'human' factor is always important as those sites become useless without the presence of human being in them as the various connections in them are driven by humans.

The first social networking sites, SixDegrees.com, was launched in 1997 and it "allowed users to create profiles, list their friends" (Boyd and Ellison, 2008:214). Since then, many other social network sites are burgeoning in the virtual domain but it has been observed that MySpace and Facebook have dwarfed the other social networking sites due to the large traffic they attract (Kent, 2008). In fact, social networking became more popular between 2004 and 2006 with the launch of MySpace and Facebook (Stollak, Vanderberg, Burklund, Weiss, 2011). While Facebook and MySpace are the most popular social network sites, the popularity and adoption of any social networking site may vary from country to country and from time to time. For instance, Japanese embraced Mixi, LunarStorm took off in Sweden, Dutch users embraced Hyves, Grono captured Poland, Hi5 was adopted more in smaller countries in Latin America, South America, and Europe, and Bebo became very popular in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

### CURRENT USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Social networking in Africa, though a relatively recent phenomenon but it is gradually becoming pervasive to the extent that in some quarters if you are not using it you may be labelled a resident of another generation. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), in Africa, social networking becomes more popular as a result of the improvement in mobile communication that allows the owners to get connected to the virtual world.

Though there is so much noise about social networking sites but little is known about how and why the youths use them (Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009). Some argue that users, by displaying their personal information, may be putting themselves at risk both online and offline. However, the high level of diffusion among people shows that there are certain needs that social networking sites gratify.

Nyland (2007) explored the motivations for use of Internet social networking in comparison with other communication alternatives (email and face-to-face communication) and found that users tend to find it (social networking) more convenient than face-to-face communication. The result of the research on the uses and gratifications of Myspace and Facebook by Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) reveal that significant proportion of students use the social networking sites for making new friends and locating old friends. This finding also lend credence to an earlier survey of college students in the United States which reveals that social networking sites are used for social interaction with offline acquaintances in order to maintain friendships rather than to make new friends (Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield, 2007).

Nyland and Near (2007) conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the relationship between the use of social networking and the religiosity of the individual and the result reveals five main uses of social networking sites which are: meeting new people, entertainment, maintaining relationships, learning about social events, and sharing media. However, the result shows no relationship between exposure to social networking sites and religiosity.

While Internet has a lot of social and educational relevance, most of the literatures about online social networking sites are tilted toward their negative dimensions (Ahmad, 2011). However, studies show that social networking sites have potentials to become valuable resources to support teaching and learning though it is still unclear how this can be done (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty, 2010). Ismail (2010) evaluates the international students' acceptance on using the social networking sites to support their learning activities and found that performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions will affect their behavioural intentions of using the sites for learning purposes. Also, in an academic environment, there may a wide social gap between the students and their lecturers and social networking can help in closing this gap and provide support and expand students' learning activities by linking them to a group, relevant articles, websites, social bookmarks, videos and blogs (Ramirez, 2007).

### AFRICAN INTERNET PENETRATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKING STATUS

Social media has been identified as an important trend that has driven Internet access over the last few years. But does it mean that high social media penetration is tantamount to high Internet penetration? According to the 2011 report of the United Nations body, International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a comparison of data from Facebook, which is arguably the world most popular social networking site, reveals that in some developing countries the number of Facebook users are as many as Internet users. However, the report added that such comparison should be done with caution since Internet users are individuals while Facebook accounts may belong to individuals and corporate organisations.

Some social networking sites are designed to cater for the interest of some groups, individuals, continent, region or country. In Nigeria for instance, social networking sites like Nairaland, Naijapals, onlineNigeria, LagosMeet, LagBook, Nigerianbestforum, 9jabook are popular among the youths especially those seeking for platform to get latest information about job opportunities, politics, gossips and those who want to chat, flirt and date. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace can however be described as the mainstream social networking sites due to their global pervasiveness.

In 2011, the report released by the Worldinternetstats revealed that social media is growing tremendously and in the leading position is Facebook with 799 million users at the end of 2011 and as at March 31, the "Burson-Marsteller's Global Social Media Check-Up 2012", reported that Facebook had 901 million active users while 340 million tweets in a day. Internetworldstats also revealed that as at March 31, 2012, of all the world 835.5 million Facebook users, only 40.2 million (6.2%) come from African continent whose population estimate stands at 1.5 billion (that is, 15.0% of the world's population). According to the internetworldstats, as at 2011 in Africa, Nigeria maintains third position in terms of the number of Facebook users, coming behind Egypt and South Africa whose figure stood at 9.4 million and 4.8 million respectively. The tables below provide the latest information on African Internet Status, Population statistics and social networking (Facebook) figure.

#### INTERNET USERS AND POPULATION STATISTICS FOR AFRICA

AFRICA REGION	Population (2011 Est.)	Pop. % of World	Internet Users, 31-Dec-11	Penetration (% Population)	Users % World	Facebook 31-March-12
Total for Africa	1,037,524,058	15.0 %	139,875,242	13.5 %	6.2 %	40,205,580
Rest of World	5,892,531,096	85.0 %	2,127,358,500	36.1 %	93.8 %	795,319,700
WORLD TOTAL	6,930,055,154	100.0 %	2,267,233,742	32.7 %	100.0 %	835,525,280

NOTES: (1) Internet Usage and Population Statistics for Africa are for December 31, 2011. (2) Facebook subscriber data has been updated for March 31, 2012.

Source: [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)

FACEBOOK SUBSCRIBER GROWTH BETWEEN 2011 AND 2012					
Geographic Regions in order by size	FB Users 31-Mar-2011	FB Users 30-Jun-2011	FB Users 31-Sept-2011	FB Users 31-Dec-2011	FB Users 31-Mar-2012
Europe	200,260,360	208,907,040	214,988,320	223,376,640	232,835,740
Asia	131,556,800	152,957,480	169,392,060	183,963,780	195,034,380
North America	173,640,240	167,999,540	172,636,960	174,586,680	173,284,940
South America	69,594,760	82,207,800	92,049,480	103,294,940	112,531,100
Central America	28,090,240	33,081,140	36,333,060	38,317,280	41,332,940
Africa	27,414,240	30,665,460	34,798,940	37,739,380	40,205,580
Middle East	15,779,440	16,125,180	17,326,520	18,241,080	20,247,900
Oceania / Australia	12,333,780	12,881,560	13,177,360	13,353,420	13,597,380
Caribbean	5,362,600	5,903,520	6,182,080	6,218,960	6,355,320
World Total	664,032,460	710,728,720	756,884,780	799,092,160	835,525,280

Source: [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)



**MEDIAMORPHOSIS THEORY AND THE EMERGING CULTURE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING**

No doubt, the emergence of Internet technology has altered the manner of interaction and relationships among people; it has brought about a new culture where relationship is built within virtual territory. Thus, social relationship through face-to-face communication is metamorphosing with the insurgence of social networking sites. With a gradual shift from face-to-face communication and the swift integration of social networking to the daily routines of people, mediamorphosis theory can be used to explain these changes.

Mediamorphosis was first used by Kurt Blaukopt, an Austrian music sociologist (Sperlich, 2006) to signify the metamorphosis of music in relation to the dominant role of the electronic media in contemporary music life (Blaukopt, 1992). For Fidler (1997), mediamorphosis involves the changes of communication media that are brought about by the interplay of multiple factors such as perceived needs, competitive and political pressures and social and technological innovation. Hence, the changes in the communication technology should not only be seen as a mere technological transformation but should also be considered as an interdependent relationship between the past and the present. By this, we mean that this new means of communication (social networking) did not emerge independently or spontaneously but it is a product or an extension of old means of communication (face-to-face). Hence, even though social networking sites have brought about tremendous changes in human relationship, such changes are done within the context of the existing patterns of relationships. For instance, social networking does not only allow us to connect with those we have never met before, it has also further boosted face-to-face communication by providing avalanche of possibilities and serving as platform to reconnect with those we have shared close affinity, those we have in the past, met face-to-face.

Findler (1997) identifies six fundamental principles that provide insight into our understanding of the emerging computer-mediated communication; coevolution and coexistence (that is, as newer media emerge and become part and parcel of the communication system without necessarily abolishing the older media); metamorphosis (that is, new media emerging out of the existing ones); propagation (that is, the new media propagate the dominant traits of the old media); survival (that is, both the new and the old media are forced to adopt to the changes for their own survival); opportunity and need (these media must meet the political, social and economic needs of their adopters in order to survive); delayed adoption (it takes a long time for the new media to become a success commercially). The above six principles can be used to explain the face-to-face communication and the emerging culture of social networking where distance no longer stand as barrier among people. Social networking sites represent a new domain of social interaction and as a new phase of communication platform, it infuses new technologies into the existing possibilities, and now coexists with the face-to-face social interaction.

**METHODOLOGY**

To find out the manner of interaction within the virtual community centres otherwise known as social networking sites, two hundred and sixty two students of the Department of Mass Communication, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, were sampled. Being a metropolitan and federal university, the school can boast of people from every part of the country and may as well represent a typical Nigerian university. Only students who came for lectures the day questionnaires were administered filled them. Copies of the Questionnaire were administered to those in the final year of their study and those in their first year (freshers) to see if there is a difference in the manner SNS is used. Of the total number of students sampled, 120 students representing 45.8% of the sample size were first year students while 110 (42.0%) were in their final year and 32 (12.2%) failed to indicate their level of study. The questionnaire has two sections; one section handled the demographic profile of the students while the other parts handled the students' uses and perception of Internet social networking. The questionnaire had both closed and open ended questions.

**DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The data from this survey is limited to the number of copies of questionnaire administered but it revealed an interesting picture of how university students make use of the Social Networking Sites (SNS) with special emphasis on freshers (first year students) and final year students.

**a. PROFILE OF SNS USERS AND PATTERNS OF USAGE**

Table 1 presents the quick profile of SNS users in terms of the sex, level, when they joined SNS – whether while they are in the university or before coming to the university. Also, time spent which is measured by the number of minutes or hours spent on the sites was measured in terms of minutes and hours while frequency of usage was measured in terms of whether it is 'daily', 'sometimes', and 'rarely'. The study found that while 35.5% spend 30 minutes to 1 hour daily on social networking, 29.4% spend 2 hours and above. It was also found that while 44.3% of the students use social networking sites on daily basis, 19.1% and 36.6% use it rarely and sometimes respectively. This is an indication that social networking has become part and parcel of the students as many of them have incorporated it into their daily routine. The cross-tabulated data reveals that while female students spend more time on social networking sites than their male counterparts, students in their first year spend more time on networking in the virtual environment than those in their final year, an indication that the time spent on the social networking sites changes as the students continue their degrees (See Table 2). The data also revealed that majority of the students (53%) started using SNS before coming to the university while 37.8% started using while in the university. This data therefore is an indication that there are also many secondary (high) school students who use SNS, many even join before coming to the university.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF USERS AND PATTERN OF USAGE

Sex of the Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Male	104	39.7
Female	143	54.6
No Response	15	5.7
Total	262	100.0
Level of the Respondents		
100	120	45.8
400	110	42.0
No Response	32	12.2
Total	262	100.0
When the Respondents joined SNS		
Before coming to school	141	53.8
While in school	99	37.8
No response	18	6.9
Total	262	100.0
How Often Respondents Use SNS		
Daily	116	44.3
Rarely	50	19.1
Sometimes	96	36.6
Total	262	100.0
Amount of Time Spent on SNS		
30 minutes to 1 hour	93	35.5
1 hour to 2hours	70	26.7
2 hours and above	77	29.4
No response	19	7.3
Total	262	100.0

TABLE 2: CROSS TABULATION OF TIME SPENT ON SNS

How much time do you spend on SNS				Level of respondents			Total
					100	400	
30 mins. to 1 hour	Gender of respondents	No response		0	2	6	8
		Male		3	16	18	37
		Female		4	19	25	48
		Total		7	37	49	93
1hour to 2hours	Gender of respondents	No response		1	1	1	3
		Male		4	10	13	27
		Female		4	20	16	40
		Total		9	31	30	70
2hours and above	Gender of respondents	Male		6	20	6	32
		Female		6	28	11	45
		Total		12	48	17	77

TABLE 3: FREQUENCY OF USAGE OF SNS

Level of Respondents.	How often do you access your networking site			Total
	Daily	Sometimes	Rarely	
No Response	14	10	4	32
100 level	62	23	32	120
400 level	40	46	14	110
Total	116	79	50	262

## b. WHICH SNS IS USED?

No doubt, the use of social networking sites has become pervasive among Nigerian students. From the data gathered, 77.9% make use of one social networking site or the other (See table 1). However, the most popular social networking sites among the students is facebook with 50.8% users. This shows that among 10 university undergraduate students who use SNS, 5 will likely be facebook users. Though worldwide, facebook and MySpace compete in terms of number of users but this study revealed that facebook is far more popular than MySpace in the study area. In fact, 2go which is hardly mentioned in the list of popular SNS even has larger users (18.7%) than MySpace.

TABLE 4: SNS USED

SNS Used	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	133	50.8
Twitter	23	8.8
2go	49	18.7
YouTube	22	8.4
MySpace	3	1.1
BB Messenger	18	6.9
Others	24	9.2

#### c. SNS ACCESS POINTS

In developing countries, combination of factors has made it difficult for individuals to have access to the Internet facilities. In order to surmount the difficulties of access, Internet users resort to different Internet access points depending on their needs, their economic strength, intended privacy and comfort. Hence, this study evaluates the possible SNS access points. From the study, the data revealed that mobile phones provide the greatest access to social networking users. Though Sairosse and Mutula (2004) assert that cybercafés are becoming the most preferred Internet access point because they are open for long hours, are more economical, provide technical assistance to users, and their flexibility but Internet connectivity in Nigeria according to Kolawole (2008), has been greatly boosted by mobile phone service providers through the use of General Packet Radio Service (GPRS). This may explain why majority of students (59.5%) access the SNS through their mobile phones while 25.2% access SNS through cybercafé. Other Internet access points identified were personal computer (modem), the School Wireless Network, and MTN Universities Connect (an electronic library provided by the MTN Foundation, a social responsibility arm of MTN Nigeria, one of the leading telecommunication company).

TABLE 5: STUDENTS' SNS ACCESS POINTS

SNS Access Points	Frequency	Percentage
Mobile Phone	156	59.5
Cybercafé	66	25.2
Personal Modem	39	14.9
School Wireless Network	27	10.3
MTN Universities Connect	17	6.5

#### d. REASONS FOR USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

From the Uses and Gratification perspective, students may not use social networking sites if such does not gratify certain needs. While most of the media uses are categorized into information, education, surveillance, entertainment, this study found that the most important uses of social networking sites is 'social connection' which is pronged into two – 'connect with existing friends' and 'connect to new friends.' This finding is in congruence with previous studies. For instance, Golder, Wilkinson and Huberman (2007) found that messaging within online networks is done to maintain and build social ties across distances. Also, Lampe, Ellison, Steinfield (2006) and Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2006) all found that SNS is used to learn about old friends and reconnect with relations, and this use was rated higher than other uses. Through social connection, students create and develop social identity, develop intimacy and tackle some social problems like boredom, isolation, loneliness and other social and psychological issues. Other uses that command great attention of the sampled students is social escapism (25.6%), academic purpose (15.3%), being in tune with trend (11.5%) and online dating (4.5%). Recent studies reveal that Social Networking Sites have not reached their full potential in terms of academics and intellectual purpose but this current study reveals that if SNS is well developed and intellectually-inclined applications are integrated into the virtual environment, it can, to a large extent, enhance the engagement levels of students. It is also believed that by using SNS for social connection, students can build intimacy and self-identity, after all self-disclosure enhances personal identity and intimacy (Buhrmester and Prager, 1995). Students, through social networking, can therefore build self-confidence, discuss personal, emotional and academic issues with those they share close ties.

TABLE 6: STUDENTS' REASONS FOR USING SNS

Reasons for using SNS	Frequency	Percentage
Connect with existing friends	103	39.3
Connect to new friends	78	29.8
Social escapism	67	25.6
Academic purpose	40	15.3
Communication (sharing and getting information)	3	1.1
Economic purpose	9	3.4
To be in tune with trend	30	11.5
Online dating	12	4.5

#### e. PERCEIVED NEGATIVE EFFECTS

From the open-ended question asked about students' perceived negative effect of social networking, most respondents (37.4%) mentioned time wastage as one of the dangers of social networking. Though Gross and Acquisti (2005), in their study of information revelation and disclosure within the virtual environment, it was found that only 1.2% of users change the default privacy setting, and less than 0.5% of users change but the current study found that 13.4% considered privacy as an issue. Other issues mentioned were addiction which could equally lead to time wastage. Health implications like having few hours sleep and visual impairment were also mentioned by 3.1% of respondents (See table 6).

TABLE 6: STUDENTS' PERCEIVED NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SNS

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Invasion of Privacy	35	13.4
Time wastage	98	37.4
Addiction	32	12.2
Social Vices	32	12.2
Meeting bad friends	17	6.5
Health implications	8	3.1

#### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt social networking has become an integral part of daily routine of an average student. Considering the quantum of time spent by students each day on social networking sites, school administrators and educational institutions should be more creative by using the right applications for the advancement of education instead of treating it as a platform where trivial issues are discussed. Many students now belong to one virtual community, an avenue where an individual can garner outrageous number of friends – those they have ever met, those they may one day meet face-to-face and those they may never meet for life. Thus, most students use social networking sites as a means of connecting with those they have met before and those they have not met or may never meet. Thus, it can be argued that social networking is an extension of face-to-face communication, a very important tenet of mediamorphosis which stresses the coexistence of the new and old media without necessarily abolishing the old patterns of relationship. Another important use of SNS is to ease and chase away

boredom or what can be more aptly described as social escapism. Though this study does not compare social networking with face-to-face communication, but it nonetheless provides useful insights about how the face-to-face communication is metamorphosing or reinventing itself by coexisting with interactions and relationships within the virtual domain. Hence, while social networking does not only allow us to connect with those we have never met before, it has also further boosted face-to-face communication by providing avalanche of possibilities and serving as platform to reconnect with those we have shared close affinity, those we have in the past, met face-to-face.

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