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SOCIAL NETWORKING AS A SOURCE OF LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper investigated the impacts of social networking as a source of literacy development among out-of-school children in Nigeria. In doing this, literature relevant to out-of-school children in Nigeria and social networking was reviewed, within which the essence of the present investigation was underpinned. Again, reasons were advanced concerning the increasing out-of-school population in Nigeria. Then, the paper further highlighted literacy development in the context of social networking on the basis of previous empirical claims, thereby establishing the positive impacts of social networking on learners' literacy development, involving both in-school and out-of-school children. Finally, the paper explored specific functional social networking facets that could bridge literacy gaps among out-of-school children, such as via the potentials of such technologies to educational resources; potentials to provide literacy practice and feedback; the potentials to provide social support and motivation; and the potentials to provide personalised learning and adaptability. Based on these accounts, it was concluded that social networking could be a valuable tool for bridging literacy deficits among the out-of-school population in Nigeria.

Keywords: Social Networking, Literacy development, Out- of -School Children

Introduction

In its aim to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, the fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) provides a scalable framework for educational development. With its robust targets and indicators, SDG 4 departs from its precursor, the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG 2), as it broadens its focus to include learning across multiple levels, from pre-primary to adult education, while also identifying various stakeholders: teachers, institutions and governments as partners in the effort to achieve quality and inclusive education for all (Adams et al., 2016). Despite well-documented progress in the pursuit of these targets, several barriers, such as historical, political, economic or technical factors, have hindered significant success, especially in some countries. Nigeria exemplifies this challenge, with 20 million children, including youth, out of school (World Bank, 2022).

More worrisome is the fact that despite Nigeria's legal and institutional framework, disbursement of funds, loans and educational policies, the country continues to be home to the highest number of out-of-school children in the world (Akorede et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2022). The country's Basic Education Statistics established the number of out-of-school children aged 6 to 11 at 10 million, and an estimate of 10.2 million in 2022 (Nigeria Digest of Education Statistics, 2022). Additionally, if the secondary school-aged children are included, the out-of-school population reaches an estimate of 20 million (UNESCO, 2023). Narrowing down to the northern part of the country, the out-of-school phenomenon is even more prevalent, with a sharp 15% decrease in primary school enrolment in the northern geopolitical zones compared to the southern regions (Idris et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

Nigeria, with a population of over 200 million people, faces a significant literacy crisis. According to Ahmed (2022), Nigeria is characterised by a 31% illiteracy rate. This is equivalent to 62 million people being illiterate out of the over 200 million population. This phenomenon has posed a great challenge to the economic sustainability of the country (Ahmed, 2022). Implicitly, this has severe consequences for the country's economic development, health, entrepreneurial sector, security, social stability, and individual well-being. Traditional education systems have failed to reach many of these children, particularly in the northern parts of the country where access to schools is limited (Ahmed, 2022).

Nigeria and the Burden of Out-of-School Children

One of the social problems facing the world is how to encourage parents to send all their children to school. Encouraging school enrolment has been identified as important because when children do not attend school, it affects their well-being as well as overall conduct. Northern Nigeria is of particular interest because of the growing instances of out-of-school children in the region. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2022) says that Nigeria's rate of out-of-school children has reached an alarming proportion because one in every five out-of-school children in the world is from Nigeria. UNICEF notes further that 10.5 million children of school age who are Nigerians have not attended school. This situation portends danger because the majority of Nigeria's population is of school age. This assumption is supported by the National Bureau of Statistics (2017) demographic survey, which shows that most of Nigeria's population is between the ages of 0–14. This means that greater attention needs to be paid to the young population, especially those who are disadvantaged. Northern Nigeria has a peculiar problem because the UNICEF (2021) says that 47 % children from the area are out of school. Ayoko (2022) identifies five (5) reasons for the increasing number of out-of-school population in the northern part of Nigeria to include the following:

i. Lack of Parental Awareness

The majority of parents, especially those living in rural areas, have no basic understanding of the need to enrol their children on school. Most of them believed that since Western education comes from the white man, it is evil. This notion is very common in northern Nigeria (Alexander, 2008). To them, anything Western is looked upon with disdain and in contradiction to the traditional practices. The very few that allow their children to go to school were threatened and compelled to have them withdrawn. This accounts for the outrageous number of out-of-school children in that part of the country. However, a lot needs to be done to clear this misconception. One of such measures is an intensive public enlightenment campaign by relevant stakeholders, massive sensitisation on the necessity of schooling.

ii. Low Economic Status

Economic status is considered the position of an individual on a socio-economic scale, which measures such factors as education, income, types of occupations and place of residence (Mosby 2009). Similarly, parents' economic status is seen as the standing of a person or group in a community or society based on education, occupation, and income, which is often used as a benchmark for investigating health profiles (Akorede, 2024; Blueprint, 2021). Deji (2022) noted that deprivation of basic social amenities at home posed a serious challenge to the child's intellectual development, which can lead to dropping out of school in search of these amenities. Yoau (2000) identifies parents' educational background and students' cognitive ability as significant predictors of children's educational attainment. The various studies mentioned above point to the fact that the provision of social amenities by the parents helps significantly in the child's intellectual development and retaining the child in school. Similarly, there is a relationship between parental educational background and students' academic attainment. Educated parents know the value of education and can do whatever it takes to ensure that their children are educated (Ajala, 2012; Sani et al., 2024).

iii. Non-Affordability of School Fees

The current economic difficulties have manifested in the various dimensions of human endeavour. A low-income earner could not adequately cater for the needs of his household. The difficulty of maintaining a family on a low income affects children's education (Abdulbaqi et al., 2024; Adegboyega, 2019). It is important to note that the ability of the parents to shoulder the needs of their children plays an important role in a child's

educational development. Similarly, Akpan (2000) noted that poverty and access to education cannot be separated. He observed that in Nigeria, where a large portion of the population falls below the poverty line, the rise in the population of the core poor has created conditions in which many Nigerian families cannot afford to send their children to school. When the economy is strong, low-income earners will be able to take care of their families adequately. This means the child's schooling needs will be well catered for, blocking any available chances of dropping out. However, the effects of a weak economy extend to the low-income earner, making it difficult for him to cater for the schooling needs of his child, which may cause dropout.

iv. Meagre Budgetary Allocation

Budgetary provision allocated to education is very meagre (Adegboyega, 2019). The allocation cannot cater for the mandatory monthly salaries of teachers, apart from instructional materials and other provisions for the welfare of the teachers. No adequate funds for the training and re-training of teachers. This development implies that the education of primary school pupils is seriously affected. This is because no adequate chairs and tables, no instructional materials and even no extracurricular activities to attract the child's attention to school. With this scenario, the child is not in any way encouraged to continue schooling (Ajala, 2012).

v. Lack of Accessibility to Allocated Funds

To utilise allocated funds constitutes a major setback in the educational development of the child. After the necessary budgetary allocation, it takes a very long time before the actual budget is passed into law (Adegboyega, 2019). It is not the allocation of the funds that matters, but the accessibility of the funds, which, most of the time, makes project implementation impossible. It is therefore pertinent to note that to be able to implement the outlined projects, there must be easy accessibility to the allocated funds.

Concept of Social Networking

Socialisation has been around long before the invention of new technologies, and the development of new technologies transformed socialisation into a new system in society. The transition to the technological era saw or brought about the advent of the Internet as well as social networking. The advancement in technology has made it easier for people, especially young people, to have access to the Internet and thus social networking, with which they interact with friends (Ibrahim, 2012). Social networking has revolutionised the way social interaction takes place. It is a process by which people socialise online. Through social networking, people seek and enjoy the companionship of others online. It supports the sharing of information and services. These social networking sites have become an integral part of modern life, with millions of Nigerians using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, among others. While social networking has its drawbacks, it offers diverse opportunities for literacy development. This paper explores the impact of social networking as a source of literacy development among out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Social networking constitutes interactive, digitally-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation or sharing/exchange of information, ideas, career interests, and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. Social networking has emerged as a term frequently used and variously defined as different types of communication platforms and electronic ways of interacting. According to Mojeed (2022), social networking is the technology that facilitates social interaction, makes possible collaboration, and enables deliberations across stakeholders. Going by this view, social networking includes such tools as electronic blogs, audio/video tools like YouTube, internet and chat rooms, cellular and computer texting, and social networking sites (SNSs). Rosen in his study in 2011 found out that in terms of daily use of all social media collectively, those born between 1965 and 1979 (Generation X) consumes approximately 13 hours of social media per day; those born between 1980 and 1989 (Net Generation) consumes approximately 19 hours of social media per day; and those born between 1990 and 1999 (IGeneration) consumes approximately 20 hours of social media per day; and finally Generation Z born from the year 2000 to date who are also called ‘digital natives’ whose daily hours are believed to be digitally inevitable (Ali, 2022).

Types of Social Networking Sites

Most children are familiar with social networking sites like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and LinkedIn. These platforms help learners connect with friends, families, and brands. They encourage knowledge-sharing and are all about personal, human-to-human interaction. Users can share thoughts, curate content, upload photos and videos, form groups based on interests, and participate in lively discussions (Maya, 2015). They are built around the users and everything important to them and their social circles. In a study, Investopedia (2014) categorises the social networking sites as follows:

a. Image Sharing Sites

Visual content like images, infographics, and illustrations captures young learners' hearts, eyes and imaginations. Social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat are designed to amplify the power of image sharing. Learners create, curate, and share unique images that spark conversation and speak for themselves. A picture can be worth a thousand words to learners.

b. Video Hosting Sites

YouTube revolutionised the way we watch, create, and think about videos (Maya, 2015). It transformed the medium into something accessible. Recent improvements in technology and connectivity have helped videos go the rest of the way. Video hosting platforms like YouTube and Vimeo help creators put together content and share it on a platform optimised for streaming. This accessibility makes video a super important medium. For example, YouTube videos have been an important source of second and foreign language learning (Zakaria & Birikorang, 2018).

c. Community Blogs

Sometimes an image or a post is not complex enough for the message a user has to share, but not everyone on the internet wants to run a blog from a self-hosted website. Shared blogging platforms like Medium and Tumblr give people a space to express their thoughts and help connect them with readers (Zakaria & Birikorang, 2018). These community blog sites provide an audience while allowing plenty of room for customisation and self-expression. A user can use blogs to develop his/her voice, get some readers, and get clear about his/her vision.

d. Discussion Sites

While most of us have seen many a heated discussion happen on Facebook, discussion sites like Reddit and Quora are specifically designed to spark a conversation. Anyone is free to ask a question or make a statement, and this attracts people with shared interests and curiosities. Thus, like Facebook and Instagram, users tend to ask thought-provoking questions that can be instrumental to literacy development.

Literacy Development

Out-of-school children face significant barriers to literacy development, including a lack of access to educational resources, poverty, and social inequality. Social networking has become a ubiquitous part of modern life, with millions of Nigerians using platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This social networking has the potential to bridge literacy gaps among out-of-school children. Essentially, being literate is a term used to describe a wide range of different learning behaviours, ranging from the skill to act on reading and writing to the knowledge of some related body of literature (Bormuth, 2003). Coiro (2003; p.460) confirms, "the nature of literacy is rapidly changing as new technologies emerge." Regardless of the many mismatches concerning the definition and scope of literacy, Lankshear and Knoebel (2008) maintain that whatever literacy is, it has something to do with reading. They strongly opine that literacy is deeply rooted in some practices primarily involving reading and writing. Nevertheless, literacy development, literacy instruction and literacy acquisition in modern times have gone beyond the traditional notion of reading and writing to occupying abilities to manipulate multimedia (Van Daal & Sandvik, 2012). These new technological avenues to communication include the various Instant Messaging applications (IMs) that have emerged by virtue of the internet. Vural (2015) reveals that social media, also known as Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter,

Instagram, MySpace, YouTube, WeChat and IMO, have all famously gained roots in the daily lives and practices of the children we have in our classrooms and out of classrooms today.

Previous Studies on Literacy Development and Social Networking

Relatively, a huge number of factors have influenced literacy development over the years. Even before the advent of technology, various skills and abilities needed to read and write were still highly manipulated either by external or internal factors. Nevertheless, as individuals and societies pass through changing times (digital age/technological era), their conventional way of viewing literacy is modified, hence their literacy skills. For instance, the mass usage of the internet, especially with Social Networking Sites (SNS) and social media practices such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype and many others, has gained ground in the everyday literacy lives and skills of young people (Vural, 2015). The positive and negative impacts of social media are evident throughout all literacy skills. Writing mistakes such as wrong grammar are often rampant in pupils' writing because pupils see social media platforms as digital communities where Standard English Usage is irrelevant (Sani & Bature, 2014; Sarkar et al., 2015). Young ones are often fond of using smileys, emoticons, and phonetic replacement games learned from and used on social media platforms to prove points in formal writings (Craig, 2003; Sani & Bature, 2014). Coiro (2003) opines that internet reading is mentally challenging because online texts contain certain features and hyperlinks which may require additional processing of comprehension skills on the part of the reader. This means the contents and materials read on digital online platforms improve users' comprehension skills. Adams (2011) and Craig (2003) maintain that instant messaging and certain social media features promote reading and fluency skills among young people. This means that social media and social networking sites in general can positively affect on reading fluency skills of learners. From the above empirical observation, it is evident that the social networking sites are essentially instrumental to young people's ability to read and write, whether in-school or out-of-school reading and writing phenomenon (Sarkar et al., 2015). What remains, however, is the particular empirically-based interface between social networking and literacy development of out-of-school children. This shows that research on the subject of literacy development vis-à-vis social media influence is not conclusive. This therefore shows that more research is needed in the same direction.

Bridging Literacy Gaps through Social Networking Among Out-of-School Children

This section is an exploration of empirical claims on the specific interfacing factors between social networking and literacy development among out-of-school children. This is examined under three major subheadings as follows:

a. **Access to Educational Resources**

1. Online tutorials and videos: Social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter can provide access to educational tutorials and videos on various subjects, including literacy (Hobbs, 2017).

2. E-books and digital libraries: Social media can connect out-of-school children to e-books and digital libraries, providing access to a wide range of reading materials (Kirsch & Guthrie, 2017).

3. Educational apps and games: Social media can be used to promote educational apps and games that focus on literacy development, such as Duolingo, Reading Eggs, and ABCmouse (Wouters et al., 2013).

b. Literacy Practice and Feedback

1. Online reading and writing groups: Social media can facilitate online reading and writing groups, where out-of-school children can practice their literacy skills and receive feedback from peers and mentors (Black, 2008).

2. Interactive quizzes and assessments: Social media can be used to create interactive quizzes and assessments that provide immediate feedback and help out-of-school children track their progress (Shute, 2008).

3. Peer review and feedback: Social media can enable out-of-school children to share their writing and receive feedback from peers, promoting literacy development and critical thinking (Topping, 1996).

c. Social Support and Motivation

1. Online mentorship programs: Social media can connect out-of-school children with online mentors who can provide guidance, support, and motivation to develop their literacy skills (DuBois et al., 2011).

2. Literacy communities and forums: Social media can facilitate online communities and forums where out-of-school children can connect with others who share similar interests and goals, promoting social support and motivation (Gee, 2004).

3. Recognition and rewards: Social media can be used to recognise and reward out-of-school children for their literacy achievements, providing motivation and encouragement to continue learning (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

d. Personalised Learning and Adaptability

1. Adaptive learning technologies: social media can be used to promote adaptive learning technologies that adjust to the individual needs and abilities of out-of-school children (Ritter et al., 2017).

2. Personalised learning plans: Social media can facilitate personalised learning plans that cater to the unique interests, goals, and learning styles of out-of-school children (Kuh et al., 2014).

3. Real-time feedback and assessment: Social media can provide real-time feedback and assessment, enabling out-of-school children to track their progress and adjust their learning strategies accordingly (Shute, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper investigated social networking as a source of literacy development among out-of-school children in Nigeria. The study concluded that social networking could be a valuable tool for bridging literacy development deficits among the out-of-school population in Nigeria. The paper showcased the potential of social networking to provide out-of-school children with access to educational resources, opportunities for literacy practice, and social support.

Suggestions

i. **For Policymakers**: Government should provide subsidised data for educational websites, funding for community digital-literacy centres, or public-private partnerships to create literacy content in local languages (Hausa, Fulfulde) on platforms like YouTube.

ii. **For Educators/NGOs:** Educators should create a moderated, WhatsApp-based reading group for OOSC, or NGOs should focus on training community mentors to guide OOSC in using platforms like Quora or Medium for learning.

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