



THE INFLUENCE OF AGE AND SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION STYLE OF PEOPLE IN OWERRI METROPOLIS

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication played a vital role among the primitive people as they strive for survival and social cohesion. With the upsurge of modern social media, this vital aspect of man is jeopardised. Interpersonal communication which encouraged a face-to-face encounter is gradually being replaced with a certain mechanical pattern of communication. This tells on the quality of interpersonal communication between youths and adults in many places including Owerri metropolis. This study, relying heavily on a survey method, intends to find the link between age and social media usage and how this has affected the interpersonal communication pattern of the youths between the ages of 18 and 35 years and older adults between the ages of 60 and 75 years using residents of Owerri metropolis as a case study. It first affirmed the truth of the domestication and technological determinism theories as it relates to the rapid changes that occur on our interpersonal communication pattern occasioned by the rise of technologies and social media. Finally, it exposed that more youths within the metropolis prefers the social media while the adults still cling to the face-to-face pattern of communication. The consequences of this disparity in communication pattern is seen as more youth are deeply engrossed in communicating with their pals in many social media networks, while the adult ones are left without quality time for companionship and care.

Keywords: Communication, interpersonal communication, social media, technology, interaction.

Introduction

The phenomenological structure of man's existential constitution presents us with a being, man, who inherently is communicative in nature. This conscious extrusive experience reveals the truth of that being destined to relate with his kind. From this philosophical stance, we must affirm that at the ontic level, communication becomes not merely an activity but an essential attribute of man's very essence. Thus, from the most primitive forms of expression to the contemporary sophisticated systems, the drive to connect with others underscores man's existence. This intrinsic need for interaction have continuously shaped man's identities, societies and cultures. In recent times, the advent of social media has revolutionized the landscape of interpersonal communication often introducing complexities in the dynamics of interpersonal communication, often altering the depth and quality of interactions between the youths and the elderly.

The current Data reportal reveals a significant disparity in social media use between youth and older adults. Youths, particularly those aged 18-34, dominate social media platforms, with a substantial proportion of users falling within this age range. For instance, on Instagram, about 72% of users are aged between 18-34, while on platforms like Facebook Messenger, approximately 66% of users are within this same age bracket. In contrast, older adults, particularly those aged 60 and above, represent a much smaller percentage of the user base, with less than 16% on Instagram and 17.2% on Facebook Messenger (DataReportal, 2024). The significant disparity in social media use between youths and older adults seem

to have exacerbated a certain kind of communication gaps. Younger individuals who primarily use digital platforms have developed communication styles, preferences and norms that are vastly different from those of older adults who are less engaged with social media. This divergence leads to a breakdown in effective interpersonal communication, and weakens the bonds needed to maintain a cohesive family and community relationships.

Interpersonal communication played a vital role among the primitive people as they strive for survival and social cohesion. Primitive societies relied heavily on face-to-face interactions, as these were the primary means of conveying information, coordinating activities and building relationships. Oral traditions and direct conversations were crucial for the transmission of cultural knowledge and societal norms (Finnegan, 2012). The immediacy and personal nature of these interactions allowed for nuanced communication, where tone, body language and facial expressions played a significant role in understanding and responding to messages. The tail end of the twentieth century in Nigeria witnessed an accelerated importation of technological gadgets. The dawn of the fourth republic plunged Nigerians into an experience of the ‘new media’ of which the social media is part of. From the data presented above, we see a paradigm shift from the old ways of communication to new ones. This sporadic shift has led to unintended consequences among people of different age brackets, resulting in noticeable changes in interpersonal communication styles. Although a certain level of interaction still exists between these age groups, the depth and quality of such communication have significantly decreased. This decrease constitutes a researchable problem in the field of communication studies and a problematic to the philosophical quest of what it means to be human in a rapidly evolving digital age.

The problem raised above makes one to question:

1. Is exposure to and usage of certain social media platforms identifiable with certain age brackets in Owerri metropolis?
2. What accounts for the overt disparity in social media use between youth and older adults in Owerri metropolis?
3. Do you think that the social media use has influence on interpersonal communication style among people of different age brackets in Owerri metropolis?

Therefore, understanding communication as an intrinsic part of human existence is crucial. Thus, this study aims at assessing the impact of social media usage on interpersonal communication. It is within this context that this study, using the survey method, sets out to investigate the influence of social media usage on interpersonal communication among youths and older adults, focusing on the Owerri metropolis as a case study. It seeks to understand how social media has altered the dynamics of these interactions, particularly in terms of the generational divide. It is believed that this academic endeavor, on the field of communication, will shed some light on the essence of human connectedness; and finally offer a phenomenological perspective that enriches our understanding of contemporary communication dynamics.

Conceptual Clarification

i. Communication

The ordinary man limits communication to the act of speaking. Yet abundant literatures traced back the origin of the word to Latin and French. Etymologically, the word ‘communication’, comes from the Latin word “*communicare*” and translates in French as “*communicacion*”, which means “to share” (Smith, 2020). This idea of communication as act of sharing, drawn from the etymological standpoint, suggests its very essence as a process that transcends monopoly. It suggests a process marked by commonness, intentionality, consciousness and reciprocity. Owing to the above, communication is understood primarily as process of sharing information from one person to another (Olasinde 2014).

ii. Interpersonal Communication

Prior to the 1960s, only a modest amount of research was completed under the label of interpersonal communication (Open Textbook for Hong Kong, 2016). It was only from 1960 that scholars adopted communication as the central term because they wanted to study it as a significant and unique aspect of human behavior. Hence much work has been done in attempts to break down interpersonal communication into a number of elements in order that it can be more easily understood (SkillsYouNeed, 2022).

Whereas communication, in general, includes any use of symbols to represent meanings, interpersonal communication refers more specifically to communication that occurs between people and creates a personal bond between them. Breaking down the two parts: ‘inter’ and ‘personal’, we can have a clearer insight into the very essence of interpersonal communication. The ‘inter’ part of the word highlights how interpersonal communication connects people. In interpersonal communication, one person’s actions both affect and reflect another person’s actions. The second part suggests that the subject under discourse is also ‘personal’. This does not mean that interpersonal communication involves private topics or that it only occurs in close relationships. Rather, it means that one’s unique qualities as a person matter during interpersonal communication (Solomon & Theiss, 2013).

Traditional definitions of interpersonal communication stressed direct, face-to-face interaction between individuals as that which have been foundational to human relationships and society. Scholars such as Solomon and Theiss (2013) affirm that a dyad is a common setting for interpersonal communication, because each partner in the interaction is free to focus her or his attention exclusively on the other. Beyond the dyadic outlook, one can communicate with a group of people in ways that are personal and connect everyone involved. In this stance, we can see interpersonal communication as that sharing between people who are personally connected with each other.

iii. Social Media

Social media refers to online platforms and applications that enable users to create, share and interact with content, as well as to connect and communicate with others. These platforms facilitate social networking, information sharing, and collaboration through features such as posts, comments, likes, and private messaging (Chiemela et al., 2015). Examples include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The term social media was first used in 1994 on a Tokyo online media environment, called Matisse (Bercovici in Aichner et al, 2021). It was in these early days of the commercial Internet that the first social media platforms were developed and launched. Over time, both the number of social media platforms and the number of active social media users have increased significantly, making it one of the most important applications of the Internet (Aichner et al, 2021). Currently, the social media has become a global tool for communication in families and beyond.

Theoretical Clarification

i. Domestication Theory

The domestication approach considers both the practical and the symbolic aspects of the adoption and use of technologies, showing how these two elements- the meanings of things, and their materiality, are equally important understanding how technologies become part of everyday life (Ayotunde, 2012). Hence, this theory operates using four basic principles: Appropriation, Objectification, Incorporation and

Conversion. When new technologies are acquired (appropriated), men in the society physically incorporates it into their living space (objectification); and gradually integrates it into their daily routines and practices (integration). With time these adopted technologies in turn influences their patterns of interaction within the family and affecting the society at large (conversion).

This theory provides a framework for understanding how social media, as a new technology, is not only adopted but also integrated into the daily lives of different age groups, leading to shifts in communication patterns. In the light of the above theory, the research offers an insight into how people of different age brackets appropriate the social media. Youths tend to adopt these platforms more readily, incorporating them into their lives as essential tools for communication and self-expression. Older adults, on the other hand, seem slower in appropriating these technologies. As social media becomes a part of the physical and symbolic environment, it influences the way individuals, especially younger users, perceive and interact with older adults and the world around them.

ii. Technological Determinism Theory

For Nagel (2012), the Technological Determinism Theory offers a causative link between technology and communication pattern in a society. Under this theory, we view technology as the driving force of culture in a society that determines its course of history. On this Marshal McLuhan in 1964 affirmed the ability of new technologies to drive human interaction and bring about social change. This theory focuses on the possible influence of the social media on its users, organizations and society with respect to their patterns of communication (Igyuve & Obagwu, 2020; Owe et al., 2023). Landon Winner, in Asemah et al (2016), identifies two hypotheses for this theory:

- i. The technology of a given society is fundamental influencer of the various ways a society exists.
- ii. Changes in technology are the primary and most important source that leads to change in the society.

Based on the above hypotheses, Igyuve and Obagwu (2020) conclude that technology influences the various choices that men make in the society. Therefore, a changed society can be traced back to changed technologies.

The research examines how social media, a modern technology, has significantly altered the way people communicate. According to Technological Determinism, these changes in communication are not merely coincidental but are a direct result of the pervasive influence of the social media. The theory suggests that as new technologies like social media emerge, they reshape how individuals interact, leading to shifts in communication styles, especially between younger and older generations.

Research Methodology

This study adopted quantitative survey research design due to its suitability for the study. The survey was used to generate quantitative data by eliciting random reactions in the form of opinions (Onyebuchi et al., 2023) from people living within Owerri metropolis targeting majorly youths within the ages of 18 to 35 years and adults within 65 to 75 years. The population size of the people living in Owerri Metropolis is estimated at 1,022,922 (World Population review, 2024). It was from these that 1,022,922 people the researcher generated the sample size. The Wimmer & Dominick online sample size calculator was employed at a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. According to the online sample size calculator, the sample size for this study is 385. Applying the multi-stage sampling technique the population was further divided into two categories based on the age brackets identified above. The

category A is identified as youths within the ages of 18 to 35 and category B is identified as adults within 50 to 75 years. Due to the scope of this topic, indices such as location, occupation and gender differences among the population sample was not considered in the distribution of the questionnaire. People were then randomly selected across the city to form the respondents of the study bearing in mind the two categories presented above.

A questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire has a total of 15 items including the bio-data and the psychographic data. The psychographic data will be structured in a closed-ended format basically in Likert scale and binary questions. Few questions within the questionnaire were left open-ended. The instrument was structured to generate responses from respondents’ personal experiences.

Results

A total of 385 copies of the questionnaire were distributed. A total number of 370 (96.1%) were returned and usable, while 8 (2.1%) were not usable and then 4 (1.8%) were not returned. The analysis shows that the return rate is high.

Table 1: Return of questionnaire

Frequency	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Returned and usable	370	96.1
Not usable	8	2.1
Not returned	7	1.8
Total	385	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The response from both categories A and B was equal. Though it was discovered that most of the unused and unreturned data came from category B. Reasons behind this is still unknown.

Table 2: Frequency of the Questionnaire Used based strictly on the Categories Above

Items	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Category	A	192	51.9
	B	178	48.1
	Total	370	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The analysis of the demographic data of the respondents was not presented. Though it was factored into the questionnaire but the scope of this research work delimited it narrowing the scope to the two categories A and B. Yet the Psychographic data retrieved from respondents, after thorough analysis, provided answers to the research questions that informed this work.

Research Question One: Is exposure to and usage of certain social media platforms identifiable with certain age brackets in Owerri metropolis?

To answer this questions, items 3 - 5 on the questionnaire were analyzed.

Table 3: Respondents' responses on whether the exposure to and usage of certain social media platforms is identifiable with certain age brackets in Owerri metropolis.

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	346	93.5
No	18	4.9
Can't say	6	1.6
Total	370	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 3 above revealed that exposure to and usage of certain social media platforms are identifiable with certain age brackets.

Table 4: Respondents' responses on who amongst the different age brackets uses the social media more often.

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Youths	362	97.8
Older Adults	0	0
Can't say	8	2.2
Total	370	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 4 above revealed that social media use within Owerri metropolis is more rampant among the youths than the older adults.

Research Question Two: What accounts for the overt disparity in social media use between youth and older adults in Owerri metropolis?

To ascertain the reasons behind the overt disparity in social media use between youth and older adults in Owerri metropolis, three critical indices were investigated: The preferred use of either internet-enabled gadgets or simple button phones, level of income, and level of education. These factors provide a comprehensive lens through which the differences in social media engagement can be understood. To answer this questions, items 6 - 9 on the questionnaire were analyzed. This time, analysis was done according to the categories.

Table 5: Respondents' responses on their preferred type of gadget for Category A

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Internet Gadget	192	100
Button Phone	0	0
Any	0	0
Total	192	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 5 above revealed that youths in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 18 to 35 years prefer to use internet-enabled gadgets than simple button phones.

Table 6: Respondents’ responses on their preferred type of gadget for Category B

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Internet Gadget	69	38.8
Button Phone	109	61.2
Any	0	0
Total	178	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 6 above revealed that a higher number of adults in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 50 to 75 years prefer button phones than internet-enabled gadgets.

Table 7: Respondents’ responses on their level of income for Category A

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	10	5.2
Middle	45	23.4
Low	137	71.4
Total	192	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 7 above revealed that youths in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 18 to 35 years are predominantly low income earners.

Table 8: Respondents’ Responses on their level of income for Category B

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	9	5.1
Middle	98	55.1
Low	71	39.8
Total	178	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 8 above revealed that majority of older adults in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 50 to 75 years are either middle or low income earners.

Table 9: Respondents’ Responses on their level of education for Category A

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	102	53.1
Middle	76	39.6
Low	14	7.3
Total	192	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 9 above revealed that a good number of youths in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 18 to 35 years have attained at least higher or middle level of education.

Table 10: Respondents' Responses on their level of education for Category B

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	65	36.5
Middle	75	42.2
Low	38	21.3
Total	178	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 10 above revealed that a good number of older adults in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 50 to 75 years have attained at least higher or middle level of education.

Research Questions Three: Do you think that the social media use has influence on interpersonal communication style among people of different age brackets in Owerri metropolis?

To answer this questions, items 12 - 13 on the questionnaire were analyzed.

Table 11: Respondents' responses on their preferred medium of communication for Category A.

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Face-to-Face	24	12.5
Social Media	112	58.3
Any	56	29.2
Total	192	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 11 above revealed that youths in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 18 to 35 years prefer the use social media more than face-to-face communication.

Table 12: Respondents' Responses on their preferred medium of communication for Category B.

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Face-to-Face	96	53.9
Social Media	66	37.1
Any	16	9
Total	178	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 12 above revealed that older adults in Owerri metropolis within the ages of 50 to 37 years prefer the traditional face-to-face than communication than the use of social media.

Table 13: Respondents' responses on whether social media use has influence on the interpersonal communication style among people of different age brackets in Owerri metropolis.

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	352	95.1
No	12	3.2
Can't say	6	1.7
Total	370	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis of data from table 13 above revealed that a good number of people in Owerri metropolis affirmed that social media use has influence on the interpersonal communication style among people of different age brackets in Owerri metropolis.

Discussion of Findings

The study conducted in Owerri metropolis highlights a significant generational divide in social media usage between youths (ages 18 to 35) and older adults (ages 50 to 75). This divide shows a broader societal trends, where younger generations are more engaged with digital platforms, while older generations remain more rooted in traditional communication methods. The findings herein underscore the importance of understanding how these differences impact interpersonal communication, particularly in a rapidly digitalizing world.

The data shows that 93.5% of respondents agree that the exposure to and usage of certain social media platforms is identifiable with specific age brackets. This suggests a clear association between age and the type of digital platforms used. Youths tend to gravitate towards more modern and interactive platforms while older adults either avoid these platforms altogether or limit their use of them.

A striking 97.8% of respondents indicated that youths are the predominant users of social media in Owerri metropolis. This finding aligns with global trends, where younger populations are more immersed in digital environments. The absence of older adults in this digital space may be attributed to several reasons. Three possible reasons were considered and researched upon: The preferred use of either internet-enabled gadgets or simple button phones, level of income, and level of education.

One of the key reasons for the disparity in social media usage between youths and older adults is the preference for different types of gadgets. Youths in Owerri metropolis overwhelmingly prefer internet-enabled gadgets, which provide easy access to social media platforms. In contrast, older adults tend to prefer simple button phones, which are less conducive to social media engagement. This technological preference reflects not only a comfort level with certain devices but also a broader resistance or indifference to newer forms of communication among older adults.

Income levels also play a crucial role in determining social media usage. The study reveals that although many youths in Owerri metropolis are low-income earners, this does not significantly hinder their access to and use of internet-enabled devices. This could be attributed to the increasing affordability of smartphones and data plans, as well as the prioritization of social connectivity by younger generations, even when faced with economic challenges. On the other hand, older adults with middle or average income levels may have the financial means but lack the interest or perceived necessity to invest in such gadgets.

Education is another critical factor influencing social media usage. The study shows that most youths in Owerri metropolis have attained at least a middle or higher level of education, which likely contributes to their comfort with and reliance on digital platforms for communication. Education not only provides the technical skills needed to navigate these platforms but also fosters a mindset that values connectivity and information sharing, which are central to social media culture. In this same vein, the study reveals that 21.3% of older adults as against 7.3% of the youths are still classified at the low level of education. Thus, this low level of education among older adults amount to a limited digital literacy, especially if their education did not cover computer or internet use. This educational divide results in a lack of confidence or interest among older adults in exploring social media, thereby contributing to the observed disparity.

The study's findings underscore how social media usage contributes to the generational divide in communication preferences and practices. An overwhelming number of 95.1% of the respondents

affirmed the overt influence of the social media usage on interpersonal communication. While younger generations are integrating social media into their daily lives, older adults are not, leading to a potential disconnect between the two groups. This divide has implications for intergenerational relationships, as differing communication styles have led to a setback on interpersonal communication.

Thus, social media usage has widened the gap between the two generations. The convenience and speed of social media make younger ones more likely to rely on them. Similar to the research conducted by Yul (2023), the excessive reliance on social media in daily life reduces their real face-to-face communication opportunities, and further aggravate the alienation and loneliness from the older adults; having a negative impact on interpersonal relationships. These elderly ones in the category B, are most likely to be neglected due to their absence in these social platforms and their non-preference of the trend occasioned by the technological shift. This culture of negligence and indifference is quite disturbing as the younger ones become more and more detached and alienated from the older population who needs their time and their care.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The preference for social media usage among youths indicates a shift in communication norms, where digital interaction is increasingly seen as the norm rather than the exception. This evolution in communication practices has both positive and negative implications. While it allows for greater connectivity and the exchange of ideas, it also raises concerns about the potential loss of deeper, more meaningful forms of communication that are often associated with face-to-face interactions. Within this study it has been discovered that the rise of social media usage provides people more ways and opportunities to socialize (relate), but also brings new social problems and challenges. These glaring problem is the growing culture of negligence meted upon the elderly by the youths who prefer spending all their times on social media platforms. It is understandable that man is a being meant to communicate both at the intra and above all at interpersonal level. At this second cadre, he transcends the self as he shares himself with others. This important aspect of his existence must be allowed to phase-off. It is based on the above that this study offers the following few recommendations:

- i. Efforts should be made to encourage intergenerational communication and understanding. This can be achieved through community programs, workshops, and initiatives that bring youths and older adults together. By facilitating face-to-face interactions, both generations can learn from each other, reducing the sense of neglect felt by older adults and fostering mutual respect.
- ii. To bridge the generational gap in social media usage, it is essential to provide digital literacy programs tailored to older adults. These programs should focus on teaching them how to use social media platforms, navigate the internet safely, and connect with family and friends online. By doing so, older adults can become more integrated into the digital world, reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing their social connections.
- iii. Youths should be encouraged to strike a balance between their online and offline interactions. Educational campaigns, both in schools and online, can raise awareness about the importance of maintaining meaningful face-to-face communication, especially with older family members. Emphasizing the value of interpersonal relationships can help mitigate the negative effects of excessive social media use.

In conclusion, the study reveals a shifting communication pattern in Owerri metropolis between the youths and the older adults, shaped principally by age and technology (social media). The findings highlight the need for a balanced approach to communication that respects the preferences of both younger and older generations. By fostering inclusivity and understanding in communication practices, society can ensure that the benefits of digital communication are shared by all, while also preserving the

value of traditional, face-to-face interactions. This balanced approach is essential for maintaining strong and effective interpersonal relationships in a rapidly changing digital world.

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