



Digital Displacement: Assessing the Impact of Smartphones and Social Media Usage on Face-to-Face Peer-Interactions among Youths in Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rapid evolution of digital media has transformed interpersonal communication, creating new opportunities for social connection while raising concerns about the quality of face-to-face interactions. Although social media platforms enable emerging adults to maintain relationships across physical distances, intensive smartphone-mediated engagement may also reduce direct interpersonal interaction and contribute to psychosocial challenges.

Objective: This study examined the relationship between smartphone-based social media use and face-to-face peer interactions among emerging adults at Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria.

Method: The study adopted a mixed-method research design, employing methodological and data-source triangulation to investigate smartphone-based social media use and face-to-face peer interactions among emerging adults. However, the specific sample size, sampling procedure, data collection instruments, and analytical techniques were not provided in the abstract supplied.

Result: The findings suggest that, rather than consistently strengthening interpersonal connections, social media use may displace face-to-face interactions among some young people. The study further identifies potential associations between patterns of social media use and psychosocial concerns, including loneliness, anxiety, and depression. These findings highlight the need to examine how digital communication practices shape the quality of peer relationships and the psychosocial well-being of emerging adults.

Conclusion: Although social media offers opportunities for maintaining interpersonal relationships, its use may also create challenges for direct peer interaction and psychosocial well-being. The implications of digital engagement therefore depend partly on how young people integrate online communication into their everyday social relationships.

Unique Contribution: The study foregrounds the relationship between smartphone-based social media use and face-to-face peer interaction, drawing attention to the potential social and psychosocial implications of digital communication among emerging adults.

Key Recommendation: Media literacy education should be strengthened to promote responsible social media use, healthy digital habits, and balanced engagement in online and face-to-face communication. Educational institutions and relevant stakeholders should also encourage awareness of the potential psychosocial implications of excessive or unbalanced social media engagement.



Keywords: Social media, smartphone use, face-to-face interaction, emerging adults, loneliness, psychosocial well-being

INTRODUCTION

The new media, which has given birth to digital communication, has popularised what many call 'social media' to the detriment of the well-being of many in the society. The researcher prefers to qualify social media with the adjective 'new', thus 'new social media' as all media is social. Man has been born to live in a community and Christian theology has maintained that man, who shares in divine nature, is made to live in the community, just as his creator lives in a community: the community of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God had said: 'And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small.' (Genesis 1:26).

Aristotle, one of the reputable philosophers once said that man is created to live in a community and he who cannot live in a community is either a god or a beast. Community living provides the opportunity for its members to interact and learn and create through social intercourse. Social interactions are therefore vital for the growth of any society thus media, both old and new, is supposed to facilitate social interactions. The old media played a prominent role in this respect. When the transistor radio was not yet common, families clustered around the home of a member in the community who had one transistor radio in the village to listen to the news, and in the process asked about the welfare of other members in the community, shared news of happenings around the community, the state and the nation at large. By bringing the members of the community together, the radio created an atmosphere for face-to-face networks, promoted friendships that served many for a long time, friendships that made them to come to the aid of those in need, consoling them in times of griefs and celebrating with them during festive periods. This scenario was also created when intellectual elites gathered around newsstands in cities and towns where newspapers and periodicals were sold. Friendships developed in such places had lasting effect.

On the other hand, the new social media, promoted by the new media of communication, allows its users to have thousands of 'faceless-friends', unfortunately, people who would not likely come to their assistance when they are in need or difficulty, their posts may have thousands of views and likes, but when a demand for assistance in life threatening situations is made, of all the thousands of friends, one may hardly come to their aid materially or financially. It is therefore crystal clear that the replacement of face-to-face communication by digital communication has the potential of causing catastrophic damage to the values that human communication is supposed to create- networking with the aim of building a better world.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Communication is aimed at building societies. The traditional mode of communication which promoted physical contacts, when opinion leaders gathered in villages, market squares and places of worship, provided a conducive atmosphere that encouraged face-to-face interface, when friendships were created and nurtured, the spirit of collaboration created through which societal problems were solved and individuals helped in terms of difficulty. With the introduction of the modern media of communication, most especially the social media, which has



witnessed the advancement and emergence of mass communication, the same principle was followed, the media brought people together. Unfortunately, media platforms that go by the nomenclature - social media, seem to act in contradiction to what they claim to promote, social cohesion and mobilization. Instead of bringing people together, they keep people far apart, this leads to apathy when the so called social media friends are in difficulty. This state of being has caused a lot of ill health such as depression, mental health disorders, low self-esteem, low attention span, among the youth. This state of affairs has negative consequences, the youth lack the patience to commit time to study, develop friendships that will lead to working together for the growth of a nation, as well as the human collaboration needed for the advancement of the society. In other words, the new social media of communication has been very instrumental in promoting loneliness through the use of technology created by the human person which has been used to alienate the human person from his counterparts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The social capital theory has been used for the study. The theory posits that social networks, relationships, norms of reciprocity, and trust are valuable resources that individuals and groups can use to achieve mutual benefits, share information, and facilitate cooperation. It explains how the structure and quality of one's connections influences his access to opportunities. Three foundational sociologists shaped the understanding of this concept: Bourdieu (1986), viewed social capital from an individualistic perspective. He defined it as the actual or potential resources linked to durable networks of mutual acquaintance and recognition, which individuals can mobilise to gain wealth, status, or power. Coleman (1988): Focused on the functional aspect of social capital. He argued that networks create obligations, expectations, and information channels that act as a public good, making society and organizations function more efficiently.

Putnam (1995, 2000): Took a collective approach, applying the theory to communities and democracies. He emphasized generalized trust, civic engagement, and community norms, categorizing relationships into two main types. Bonding Social Capital implies building strong, close ties between similar people (e.g., close family and friends) that provide strong emotional support but can become echo chambers. Bridging Social Capital: This implies a weaker, broader ties between diverse groups (e.g., acquaintances, professional networks) that are crucial for sharing new information and creating broader social cohesion.

The theory is relevant to the work because social media users aim at building social capital on the digital space that is of benefit to them.



CONCEPTUALISING OPERATIVE WORDS

Social Media

According to Burgess and Poell (2017) social media technologies are those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection. Margetts (2015) defined social media as internet-based platforms that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content, usually using either mobile or web-based technologies.

The study defines social media as web-based applications that provide corporate and individual users with the opportunity of creating, editing, and sharing content with the intention of getting feedback, comments, and contributions from consumers on issues of concern to the user as well as issues of public interest.

New Media: Refers to digital, interactive forms of communication and content that rely on computers and the internet.

Smartphone: A smartphone is a handheld mobile device that combines a cellular phone with a small computer. It runs on an advanced operating system, allowing one to browse the internet, use Global Positioning System (GPS) navigation, capture high-quality photos, and download millions of third-party software applications.

Digital Replacement: Refers to the theory that time spent on apps like Instagram, X (Twitter), or TikTok replaces face-to-face interactions. It suggests that as people engage more in virtual worlds, they substitute real-world community building with superficial online connections.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Pope Leo IV, addressing children during summer camp in the Vatican Summer Camp for children of employees, encouraged children to use technology responsibly. He acknowledged the benefits of technology but stressed that it should not take the place of real human relationships. He encouraged the children to spend time together as people rather than through devices. The Pope said: ‘When a family is together it is not enough for everyone to sit there looking at their own phone. It is important to learn how to talk, to have conversations, and to enjoy one another’s company.’ Speaking particularly to the elderly children, Pope Leo warned that many applications are deliberately designed to keep users engaged for long periods of times... They try to make us dependent on this technology.’ The Pope encouraged them to develop both their human and spiritual lives by cultivating relationships, seeking God in prayer, and avoiding forms of dependence that can limit their freedom. He urged the children to think for themselves as he gave an instance when he employed the services of GPS navigation systems that led him in the wrong direction. He said: ‘It is much better to learn to think for ourselves and develop the critical ability to know where we are going in life.’

Goon Lynn Mwuese. (2026), worried about the loneliness experienced by the youth, the need for human companionship and collaboration, writes under the caption: ‘The Pain of Loneliness - A Truth God Spoke before Science confirmed it’. She observes:



‘It is not good for man to be alone, that statement was not casual... it was a revelation of design.

Loneliness is not just silence around you; it is noise within you. It is waking up and having no one to truly share your thoughts with. It is carrying victories with no one to celebrate with... and battles with no one to lean on.

‘And here is the deeper truth: the human person was not created to function in isolation. Science now confirms what God already knew. When a person is lonely, the body releases stress hormones like cortisol in excess. Over time, this weakens the heart, the immune system, and even the mind. Loneliness doesn’t just affect emotions; it slowly drains life itself. The brain interprets prolonged isolation as danger. That is why loneliness can feel like physical pain, because to your body, disconnection is a threat to survival....

‘There is no shame in desiring companionship. There is no weakness in wanting to be loved. There is no failure in trying again. The real danger is pretending you don’t need anyone... when your heart, your body, and your very design says otherwise. Loneliness is heavy, but it is also a signal. A reminder that you were created for a connection, for love, for partnerships. You were never created to walk this life alone.’

Lee, Stewart & Oxenstierna (2025) provides reasons for the ban of social media use by children in Australia. The reasons include: ‘Distorted feelings about body image, and low self-image... some law makers cite rising rates of hopelessness and loneliness among children as other issues.’

Taking into cognizance the need for offline interface by children, the UK Government (2026) reveals: ‘We’re working across government to make sure children have access to safe, offline spaces where they can make friends, connect with people who share their interests, and take time to study and grow. This is about reducing harm, improving wellbeing and giving young people more time for a healthier childhood.’

A study has found that a control group, who voluntarily deactivated Facebook accounts for one month, reported small, but significant, improvements in levels of well-being, levels of happiness, and life satisfaction. Users who deactivated accounts also self-reported lower levels of depression and anxiety compared to the control group (Allcott et al., 2019)

Living Health (2024) reports that a longitudinal cohort study of U.S. adolescents aged 12–15 (n=6,595) that adjusted for baseline mental health status found that adolescents who spent more than 3 hours per day on social media faced double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of depression and anxiety

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a mixed-method research design, employing both methodological and data source triangulation to investigate the impact of smartphone social media usage on face-to-face peer interactions among emerging adults in Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria. Primary qualitative data were gathered through three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), each consisting of five participants aged 30 to 40. The first group members were the students of the Peter Gierlich Youth Leadership Academy, Gboko, Benue State; the 2nd group was made up of the youth



around the community and the third group was made up of parents of the children in the area. The aim was to access the sociability of the new social media and face-to-face communication, in other words, to access which type of communication facilitates social values. The researcher administered three questions that were discussed extensively. The questions administered were:

1. From the viewpoint of your use of social media platforms and face to face communication, which of the two promotes genuine and quality communication?
2. From your experience with online and offline friends, which type of friends are willing to help you when you face life challenging situations?
3. Are you satisfied with who you are in reference to the people you watch on the social media?

These small, interactive sessions were designed to capture the nuanced, lived experiences, peer dynamics, and shared perspectives of this specific demographic in their own words. To contextualise and validate these field findings, the study incorporated extensive secondary desk research using academic library databases and verified internet sources.

RESULTS

Question 1: From the viewpoint of your use of social media platforms and face to face communication, which of the two promotes genuine and quality communication?

The discussants were of the view that face to face communication is the one that facilitates genuine and quality communication, communication that builds empathy with the users. According to the discussants, one may have thousands of friends on the new social media but there may not be any connectedness or bond established with the users who may be indifferent to him in times of need. While one may have few offline friends that may be willing to support him in times of life's challenging moments as well as celebrate with him during festive periods.

A discussant blamed social media influencers who have created the impression that help must pass through them before it reaches those who need it in the society. Some of the social media influencers they named include Very Dark Man, Terver Atu, Lucky Udu and Ukan Kurugh. The discussants were also of the strong opinion that many people do not want to help those who go online seeking for help when in difficulty because of fraudsters.

So, it is mainly those who know the help-seeker outside of the social media that may help, and the percentage of those who help in such a situation is nothing to write home about all because those who do not know the person in real life may think that he is faking. One of the participants said he was very sick and sought help online but nobody helped, it was an offline friend whom he contacted that rendered him assistance swiftly.

Despite the gloomy picture they narrated, a discussant shared a positive experience. According to him during the COVID-19 lockdown, he belonged to a group called 'Yafiance-Connect' on Facebook and he once posted on the group that he had not eaten that day for lack of resources and a member credited his bank account with Two Thousand (N2,000) Naira only for him to buy food, for which he was very grateful.



Question 2: Impact of social media on genuine and quality conversation

Social media leaves much to be desired in the aspect of genuine and quality conversation. For the sake of seeking for likes and views, many people post material that is devoid of ethical consideration, it is worth knowing that communication is meant to build up a community, unfortunately, some users of the social media make fake and sensational posts to attract traffic while others make post to create division in a community. In the course of the discussion, an instance was given of a foreigner who was killed in a community that had a sour relationship with the one the deceased came from. And without establishing the reason why the stranger was killed, posts were flying on the digital space informing the netizens of the killing. The discussants saw the action as unethical as genuine communication has the intention of promoting unity and collaboration and not division.

On quality conversation, they were of the view that social media has promoted shallow conversations. For instance, meal times are traditional times when families discuss issues, but in the contemporary society, which has witnessed the emergence of the new social media, families hardly engage in such quality conversations at meal times as members eat with one hand and try to communicate with social media friends on the other hand thus leaving no room for quality family conversations. This scenario is equally applicable in other sectors of life, be it at the interpersonal communication levels, in board meetings, in staff rooms, etc, people are always attending to social media, an attitude that impedes the quality of real life conversations. Unfortunately, many have not developed the culture of initiating real life communications when they are in groups!

Question 3: Whether the youth are satisfied with who they are

A discussant said he was not. He wanted to be more because when he connects to the social media he realizes that most of his peers are far above him, they wear fine cloths, drive in posh cars so he feels that they are swimming in wealth while he is suffering, this makes him disappointed and depressed. A member told the story of a child who asked his father why the father is not rich as many of the parents he watches on the social media are rich and happy.

DISCUSSION

The implications of the findings are discussed below:

Stolen Childhood

The digital space has contributed to stealing the childhood of children, childhood is the time the neophyte has the opportunity of getting initiated into the society. He undergoes this process by associating and learning from the significant others who may include his parents, peers, teachers and school mates. In such encounters, he is able to balance real life experiences with ideals under the direction of the significant others. For instance, in the ideal world human beings are supposed to be rich and take care of all their needs as most social media texts portray. However, in the real world, people struggle to make ends meet, that is to say that in the real world not all men are rich. A child who has not learnt this essential lesson through lack of interaction with the



significant others will not be able to develop the necessary skills needed to relate with others in the real world. This is thus a reason behind the desire of the UK Government (Gov.Uk. 2026) to create safe offline spaces where children can make friends, connect with people who share their interests, and take time to study and grow. The Pope also encourages children not to let technology take the place of real human relationships.

Killing of Creativity

The Pope has brought up a critical issue that has negative consequences on this generation, that is, the killing of creativity. It is a situation whereby we depend on technology to do almost everything for us. In the days before the introduction of electrical calculators in the classrooms, pupils and students in primary and secondary schools developed high mathematic and arithmetic skills. Unfortunately, the calculator has killed those natural gifts in many of the children, now if a child is asked to sum up 10 and 7, he goes for an electric calculator. Before the introduction of the GPS Navigation system, city dwellers mastered geographical locations and could trace almost any part of a city they were living in, today, without the GPS, many people cannot move in cities they live in and this leads to the death of creative thinking faculties. Relatedly, as Pope Leo has rightly observed that many applications are deliberately designed to keep users engaged for long periods of times and thus make us dependent on technology. It is true that communication industries gain mainly from the data one consumes, so creating appetizing programs that would naturally glue the user to the screen is a way of squeezing money from the user through data consumption. By doing so the user is unable to have time to think for himself creatively in order to solve his problems and the problems of life and by application, the problem of his community thus adding value to his life. It is not surprising that there is high rate of unemployment in our age because people are mortgaging their right to think and being creative to the communication technology.

Apathy Towards Human Suffering

Africa, being a poor continent, the monetization policy of some social media companies such as Facebook, TiTok and YouTube have been portrayed as goldmines whereby users can easily become rich. This deceptive trend has pushed many young men and women to create social media accounts with the high expectation of earning money to solve their existential problems. Against this background they are quick to send friend requests to users, quick to like and comment on the posts of other users, all done with the intention of raising their engagement matrixes for the sake of getting paid and thus escaping from the jaws of poverty. So, if one has a thousand of likes and friends and is thinking that in times of life challenges, those friends can come to his aid, he is daydreaming.

Low Self-Esteem

The youth of today who are immersed in the social media culture try to measure their relevance and importance with the amount of friends, likes, and comments made on their social media walls. Such validates them and make them important and when such likes, comments and views start diminishing, they start felling downcast, they start feeling low in spirit of which the lack of



engagement may be caused by their failure to post meaningful content as they have not developed their creative skills and an adage has it that one cannot give what he does not have.

Short Attention Span

Exposure to social media content has contributed significantly to short attention span by users, who are predominantly the youth. For competition purposes, content creators have resorted to creating short messages to catch users' attention. A video clip, for instance, that is more than two minutes may not interest viewers. As they want to get a gist within the 1st 30 seconds and then move on to other contents. This kind of conditioning has negative consequences – children find it extremely difficult to concentrate on long tasks such as reading or paying attention in the class – it is negative influence because good things take time to achieve.

Loneliness and Depression

Social media alienates the youth from real life living, cutting them away from interactions with people in real life situations, an experience that makes them feel lonely and gradually leads to depression that may create suicidal ideation in them.

CONCLUSION

The study has acknowledged the goodness of social media which has facilitated instant communication. However, it has taken a look at its negative side which is the disconnecting of users from real life issues, thus creating social and health related issues such as loneliness, anxiety and depression.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Families and institutions should aim at using the social media responsibly.
2. Government policies should include the teaching of media literacy skills in our various institutions of learning.
3. Non-governmental organizations and faith based religious groups should advocate for the responsible use of the social media.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

The study was conceived and conducted by the sole author and has critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used [NAME OF AI TOOL/SERVICE] for [SPECIFIC PURPOSE, e.g., language editing, grammar correction, readability improvement, or formatting assistance]. The author(s) carefully reviewed, revised, and verified all outputs generated by the tool and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript content.

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