Young People and The Digital Age: An Investigation of The 'Sociability' of Teenagers In Lusaka.
(Conference ID: CFP/519/2017)

Mrs. Brenda Bukowa

bukowab1@yahoo.com

University of Zambia and

Mosi-O-Tunya University of Science and Technology

Abstract

Young People's online media consumption in Lusaka, Zambia has grown with the establishment of ICT clubs in schools and the integration of ICTs into the education curriculum. The Zambia Information and Communication Technology Authority (ZICTA) in its 2015 survey notes that 89% of people in urban areas are active users of the Internet. ZICTA adds 71% access internet and social media through mobile phones and of the number, the highest age group of users is young people aged 15-18yrs. This paper aims at discussing the concept of 'digital sociability' and its influence on the lives of young people. A purposive sampling method is use in the study of 120 young people drawn from six schools in Lusaka. The study found that the mobile phone was significant in accessing social media platforms. The study results indicate that social media has changed ways young people communicate. The study highlights new ways in which young people communicate and the risks and opportunities therein. This study makes a scholarly contribution to the body of knowledge by giving evidence to understand the role that mobile phones and social media play in the sociability of teenagers online. Research on Internet Studies in Zambia has mostly concentrated on policy framework development and on a global scale literature leans more to presenting western (UK/US) perspectives. This study therefore, presents a global south perspective which is grossly under researched.

INTRODUCTION

Debate in the field of mobile communication and social media has been rife and has informed literature in media and communication research. Labelled as a digital era or an informational age, the early 1990s and the advent of the Internet in Africa brought with it both an excitement and perceived challenging trajectory for contemporary societies. This has led researchers to gain a better understanding of the workings of the Internet. Global interest to explore this field of research has been necessitated to some extent due to the spread in mobile phones which have resulted due to their huge leap in the mid-nineties. In Zambia, online media consumption has largely been pointed to the growth in the use and affordability of mobile communication infrastructure (Mambwe, 2014). This surge and debate has been strengthened with the use and access of mobile communication and most especially, smart phones. Giovanna (2014) argues that the shift from mobile phones to smartphones which integrate mobile communication, social media has expanded the scope of communication. This he adds has opened up new communication avenues for young people. ZICTA (2015) notes that the biggest single consumers of the internet in Zambia are young people aged 15-24years. This paper, investigates young people's internet use and its influence on their 'sociability'.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Lusaka, Zambia. An explorative qualitative study was conducted incorporating focus group discussions. The study adopted purposive sampling as a sampling method. A total of six (6) schools within Lusaka namely, Roma Girls Secondary School, Kabulonga Boys Secondary School, Matero Boys Secondary School, Matero Girls Secondary School, Twin Palm Secondary School, and Munali Secondary where sampled purposively as subjects of research because they have ICT clubs established in their structures, they have learners aged 15 to 18 years, they are publicly funded (this will important in achieving a level playing ground in terms of knowledge gaps as only public schools have government funded ICT clubs. The demographic representation of the schools picked as samples also was desirable as they were composed of low, medium and high-density population areas. This therefore provided a well-balanced and population sample.

Sample size and recruitment procedure

This study incorporated a total of six In-depth interviews with six teachers, one from each school. FGDs were conducted at six schools. Two FGDs were conducted at each School. Each FGD consisted of eight to ten participants. This translated into FGDs with approximately 96 to 120 participants from all the six schools. This sample size, by any measure, is within accepted levels for a qualitative study such as this one. Therefore, it was a sound basis upon which the findings and conclusions drawn upon in this study is both sound and conventionally accepted.

Recruitment process

Respondents for the study were recruited based on the following characteristics:

i). Aged between 15 and 18yrs.

ii) Enrolled and attending school in Lusaka, District

iii) Member of the school ICT club,

iv) Conversant with the use of the mobile phone or tablet to access the Internet and social media

v) Willing to participate in the study and the parents, guardians or teachers must give consent for the individual to participate in the study, and;

The study results were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The Nvivo programme was used in coding results. Four stages of data coding and analysis were used. i) open, ii) focused, iii) analyzing and organizing data iv) theory building through a process of linking codes to concepts to categories to theory.

Results

Overall, the study found that online media consumption by young people had both negatives and positives. The study found that young people use online resources for exchange of school related material and carrying out virtual study groups for sharing of ideas and views. The study further found that online media consumption by young people in Lusaka had an influence on; Academic performance, Social Development, Level of participation, and Access to internet. Access to mobile phones had a bearing on the Popularity of Social Media Sites, which then had an influence on the Risk and opportunities online, and a further bearing on their privacy online.

Discussion of Results

Academic performance

The study found that the hours spent online correlate with the academic performance in secondary schools. The respondents indicated that the exposure to the internet was both negative and positive. They indicated that they used the internet to arrange for social meetings with peers around school related issues. They however also indicated that long exposure to the internet was negatively related to their academic performance because they spent long hours online engaged in issues that were not directly related to school.

Social Development

The study found that young people's long hours of exposure had a direct or related influence on the social and development of the young people. Young people spoken to said they found themselves increasingly spending time in secluded places online more often speaking to a long list of friends but physically feeling left out. The study discovered that the feeling of loneliness resonated with young people more significantly than the feeling of belonging to a physical group.

Level of participation

The study found that young people thought that the internet and social media provided a conducive environment to participatory efforts. The research found that many teenagers are better able to communicate with their peers over issues that involved their day to day lives. It was however noted that young people are more interested in communicating information bordering on entertainment and sports (for males) and fashion for females.

Access to internet

The study found that the mobile phone is the most popular gadget of choice for access of Internet and Social Media in Lusaka. The study found that of the 120 pupils from 6 secondary schools sampled, the most popular mobile phone brand was a Samsung run using Android. Only 3 of the sampled students used a gadget with IOS used to run iPhone. The study found that even if the secondary schools had computer labs established by the government, students preferred to use the mobile phone. This is confirmed by statistical data as ZICTA which shows that only 3% of the population consistently access internet using computers. The respondents insisted that the phone was more flexible in use and they had no supervision from their teachers and school authorities. They indicated that the phone was a preferred communication tool because it was cheap to access and use. They indicated that their parents bought the phones for them. A few however, indicated that they bought the phones using their money. Despite there being a moratorium on phone use within schools, the sampled students still had access to these gadgets outside school hours and this sat well with the research as it did not flout any regulations as provided for by the schools. This further meant the question of ethicality of the research was taken care of. And as ZICTA already noted elsewhere in this discussion, that a smart phone was the most accessible method for internet use within this demographic group from which the sample was drawn (the young people aged 15 - 24). It therefore meant a controlled environment such as schools was fertile ground to access and engage them.

Popularity of Social Media Sites

The study found that the most popular social media platform of choice was WhatsApp followed by Facebook. The study recognizes that the use of a sample of 120 is not adequate enough to

generalize the findings to the rest of Zambia. Therefore, the study makes a case that WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform of choice among secondary school going teenagers in Lusaka.

Risk and opportunities online

The study found that the internet poses possible risks and opportunities. Respondents indicated that encountering pornography, bullying/being bullied, sending/receiving sexual messages ('sexting') and going to offline meetings with people first met online where some of the dangers that they encounter online. They however indicated that opportunities online out weighted the dangers they are exposed to online.

Conclusion

Mobile phones are an important tool for access of Social Media platforms. The study results indicate that social media has changed ways young people 'socialise' in Lusaka. The study has highlighted new ways in which young people communicate and the risks and opportunities therein.

The study found that online media consumption by young people had both negatives and positives. The study found that young people use online resources for exchange of school related material and carrying out virtual study groups for sharing of ideas and views. The study further found that online media consumption by young people in Lusaka had an influence on; Academic performance, Social Development, Level of participation, and Access to internet. Access to mobile phones had a bearing on the Popularity of Social Media Sites, which then had an influence on the Risk and opportunities online, and a further bearing on their privacy online. I must be emphasized that although teens have embraced countless tools for communicating with one another in Lusaka, their widespread engagement with social media has been unprecedented and continues to grow.

REFERENCES

[1]   Arbrechtslund A (2008) Online Social networking as Participatory Surveillance available at www.uic.edu/htbln/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index-php/fm/article view/ 2142/1949 [date accessed?]

[2]   Allen, Matthew. (2009) Tim O'Reilly and Web 2.0: The economics of memetic liberty and control.

[3]   Communication, Politics and Culture 42 (2): pp. 6-23.

[4]   Boyd, Danah. (2007) "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life." MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume (ed. David Buckingham). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

[5]   Burgess J. and Green J. (2009) YouTube: Digital Media and Society Series. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[6]   Buckingham D. (ed) Youth Identity and Digital Media. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press pp: 1-26

[7]   Boyd, Danah. (2007) "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics

[8]   in Teenage Social Life." MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital

[9]   Media Volume (ed. David Buckingham). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[10]   Carlsson U. (ed) (2010) Children and Youth in the Digital Media Culture Nordicom University of Gothenburg

[11]   Castells M. (2010) The Rise of the Network Society United Kingdom, Blackwell Publishing Limited

[12]   Castells, M. (1989) "The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban Regional Process" Wiley Blackwell Publishing

[13]   Castells, M. (1996) "The Power of Identity: The Information Age, Economy, Society and Culture" Wiley Blackwell Publishing

[14] Castells, M. (2000) "Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society" British Journal of Sociology, Volume 51, Tavistock Publications

[15] Castells, M. (2000) "The Rise of the Network Society: Economy, Society and Culture v.1: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture" Wiley Blackwell Publishing

[16] Chigona, W., Beukes, D., Vally, J., & Tanner, M. (2009). Can mobile Internet help alleviate social exclusion in developing countries? Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries,
36(7), 1–16

[17] Creeber G. and Martin R. (2009) Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media Bershire, England. Open University Press

[18] Christopher, O. (2007) The look at me generation, the American spectator. Available at www.spectator .org/archives/2007/03/the-look-at-me accessed on 23rd June 2016

[19] O'Keeffe etal (2011) The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families Pediatrics Apr 2011, 127 (4) 800-804; DOI: 10.1542/peds.2011-0054