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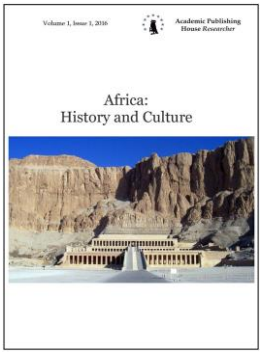
Published in the Slovak Republic
Africa: History and Culture
Has been issued since 2016.
E-ISSN: 2500-3771
2018, 3(1): 28-30

DOI: 10.13187/ahc.2018.1.28
www.ejournal48.com



Is Internet a Family Divide Tool in Africa?

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Abstract

Historically, African societies are communal and value family bonds. Thus, anything that seems to impair the function of communal bonding is traditionally classified as a 'taboo' or 'nuisance.' With the inception of technological means of communication like social media, little is known about how these technologies affect the family bond in Africa. This paper seeks to briefly identify possible gaps in Africa vis-à-vis the concept of technological means of communication and how they have affected existing human communication and psychosocial health. This paper has implications for research and psychosocial health of Africans.

Keyword: Africa, communication, family, history, psychosocial health, social media, values.

1. Main

Africa values human relations, communal living, family, parenting and personal interactions (Ofori, 2016). In the past, African families and communities serve as places to provide love, security, belongingness and identity (Avoseh, 2001). Globally, the invasion of current and new technological gadgets, applications and software in the society have had a drastic turn, both positive and negative on the life of the people. One of the major areas to be affected is the pattern of communication among families (Kaplan et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2011).

Communication in the family is a very essential tool that keeps the family bonded. Families that have very good and structured communication system, who are able to express their feelings, opinions and ideas well, enjoys healthy and stronger relationship among themselves (Grotevant et al., 1985). Communication has been under many transformation and development over the years as the inception of internet has increasingly paved way for more recent methods of communication despite distance, location and time.

The Internet Users Statistics (2018) reveals that among 1,287,914,329 people in Africa, internet users as at the year 2000, accounted to 4,514,400. However, this figure in 2017 increased to 453,329,534 people. Similarly, the trend is comparable to specific countries in the continent. Ghana for example, with a population of 29,463,643 recorded in 30,000 internet users in 2000 while increasing to 4,900,000 people in 2017. Also, Kenya, with a population of 50,950,879 in 2018 has a fast growing internet penetration of 85 % with 7,000,000 Facebook users in 2017.

According to study by Drago (2013), modern technology has gradually become a basic way people communicate. In effect, it has progressively taken the place of face-to-face communication that takes place between individuals which is most preferable in indigenous African cultures. According to the study's results, approximately 92 % of respondents agreed to the assertion that technology negatively affects face-to-face communication. However, 1 % of them disagreed while

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the rest neither agreed nor disagreed to this idea. Consequently, regarding the use of modern technology among family members, divergent views have been reported by several authors.

Among Chinese families in Hong Kong, traditional methods of communication were seen as the most preferred for family communication and better family happiness. Though 94.85 % of 1,502 adults preferred face-to-face communication, younger people were more accustomed to the use of mobile phones and social media sites (Wang et al., 2015). Like modern day Asia, the scope of preferable communication route might be changing with respect to age cohorts in Africa. Correspondingly, other demographic changes apart from age may also affect the likelihood of Africans opting more for technological routes of communication, instead of traditional face-to-face method. For example, among 1,322 American parents, ICTs for parent-child communication was more likely to increase as children grow up (Rudi et al., 2015). Bolton et al. (2013) expounds that one may feel like they are communicating physically even though, in reality, they are a distant apart.

Notwithstanding the benefits received from the use of technology and social media in communication, Tillema et al. (2010) argue that face-to-face communication seems to be no longer vital in maintaining social contacts in these virtual arena. What is troubling is the fact that cultures with value for communal living and physical presence during communication like Africa may need to be sacrificed in the process of recent technological advancement. Again, the question still remains; how much of face-to-face communication is valued in Africa, especially among young people? According to Madell et al. (2007), young people preferred social media to direct face-to-face communication due to the greater control it offers them. Although this may sound positive, the notion of losing control in face-to-face communication could also be an indication of dysfunctional self-esteem, self-awareness and assertiveness (Bianchi et al., 2005; Sheldon et al., 2016).

In conclusion, technology has come to stay in Africa and its benefits in relation to communication is numerous. However, the traditional face-to-face interaction among families and friends cannot be sacrificed. In addition, as concerns about mobile phone addiction and cyber bullying becomes alarming globally (Bianchi et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2009; Yahner et al., 2009), much has to be told regarding current causal relations among psychosocial health, social media usage and Afrocentric values in Africa (Asante, 2017).

2. Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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