

Impact of the Facebook on Parent-Child Relationship in the African Context: the Zimbabwean Experience

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Abstract

This study sought to determine the impact of the Facebook on child-parent bonding and parental authority over their children's activities in Zimbabwe. A descriptive survey design was used to assess the impact of the Facebook on the parent-child relationship. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and observation checklists. Snowball sampling was employed to study 50 families in 2 urban centres of Harare and Chinhoi. The study established that parents have become strangers to their children, bonding has been lost, household chores are ignored and most basic norms and values have been neutralised by the Facebook culture that has developed among children and adolescents. Parental control of what children should learn and do has been overtaken by the Facebook. This study recommends that access to face book should have parental supervision. In order to bond with their adolescents, parents need to check their parenting styles which can be appropriate for this sensitive group (adolescents)

Key words: Facebook, adolescents, social network, parental authority

1. Orientation and background information

Zimbabwe, as a patriarchal nation, recognizes the importance of parent-child bonding, control of children's activities and the preservation of the *ubuntu / unhu* (personhood / humanity) values (Hunt and Colander, 1987). Listening to elders talking, one would hear them comment that such and such a child is well groomed, has the correct character '*ane unhu*' (Chakuchichi and Zvaiwa, 2010). The implication would be that the individual has been well groomed into a holistic or complete being. Nziramasanga (1999:62) asserts that '*ubuntu/unhu* is a concept that denotes a good human being, a well behaved and morally upright person characterized by qualities such as responsibility, honesty, hospitality, justice, trustworthiness, hard work, integrity, a cooperative spirit, solidarity, devotion to family and the welfare of the community.'

Among the various functions of the family that range from biological, physical care, physiological, educational to economic, it is the duty of the parents to ensure that appropriate values are imparted to their children. Akunga (2009) cites the CRC (Article 5) that indicates that the family has a role to provide 'in a consistent manner with the evolving capacities of the child appropriate direction and guidance for the child in the exercise of the rights recognised in the convention. This can also include access to appropriate social networks that would not infringe the development of the Africanism (especially Zimbabwean identity) in the child. Continuous interactions with children create some form of connectedness between the parent and them, but it seems the gap between parents and their children is widening by the day with the advent of the Facebook. Most teenagers and adolescents are always glued to their cell phones chatting with friends on the social network.

With the liberalisation of trade in Zimbabwe, many Chinese enterprises have mushroomed in the cities availing affordable cell phones with internet facilities. Also, the availability of ecommerce facilities and the emigration of most people to the diaspora (who send gifts home), have led many teenagers and adolescents to find themselves in possession of cell phones that have internet facilities and access to the Facebook. It is estimated that 8 out of 10 children in each household own a cell phone with internet facility as well as a very functional facebook account.

Before the Facebook era, parents used to raise their children with the help of the community and the extended family. These were trusted in grooming children within the specifications of their cultural requirements. Boys would be trained and counselled at the 'dare' (where men and boys would sit in the evening after work to discuss issues), while women and girls stayed at home preparing food. Various life skills would be imparted to these young people to become responsible adults who could manage their own families in future. The young people would pay attention to whatever was taught at the 'dare' (boys) or in the house (girls) and obey all instructions

given to them. The children belonged to the community, which was responsible for making the rules and safeguard the norms and values of that society (Chakuchichi and Zvaiwa, 2010). Whoever in the community asked any child to do a task would be obeyed without questioning or rewards expected. Their biological parents would not even question the child's loyalty to the other adult. It was very permissible for a child to be reprimanded for wrong doing by any adult who witnessed such misbehavior without the biological parents' knowledge and the child would accept the reprimand or punishment without any rebellion. Thus they were 'everybody's children'.

2. Overview of Facebook

Facebook provides a formatted web page into which each user can enter personal information, including gender, birthday, hometown, political and religious views, e-mail and physical addresses, relationship status, activities, interests, favorite music and movies, educational background and a main personal picture. After completing their profile, users are prompted to identify others with whom they have a relationship, either by searching for registered users of Facebook or by requesting their contacts to join Facebook. Once someone is accepted as a "friend," not only the two users' personal profile but also their entire social networks are disclosed to each other. This allows each user to traverse networks by clicking through "friends' profiles, so that one's social network snowballs rapidly across people and institutions (Walther *et al.*, 2008).

Facebook profiles also include two types of messaging services. A private system, which is very similar to a webmail service, and a public system called "The Wall," where "friends" leave comments to the owner of the profile that can be viewed by other users. Usually, "The Wall" contains short messages that reflect sentiments (e.g. I miss you), common activities between friends, or call attention to external websites or events.

To keep users updated about their social circles, Facebook has two features: "News Feed", which appears on the homepage of each user, and "Mini-Feed", which appears in each individual's profile. "News Feed" updates a personalised list of news stories throughout the day generated by the activity of "friends" (e.g. Zebbron added Westlife to his favourites, Allen changed her status to "married", etc.).

Among the most popular modules users can incorporate to their profiles is "Facebook Groups," which allows users to create and join groups based around common interests and activities. The "Groups" application displays each individual's groups as well as groups their "friends" have joined recently. Thus, an important share of the civic and political impact of Facebook should occur within groups developed by users and organizations. (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2008).

3. Parenting styles and the effects on children

Various parenting styles can determine whether parents and their children bond well or not. Some parenting styles can be too strict or too liberal that children may not grow into the expected adults that would perpetuate the identity of their cultural identity.

3.1 Authoritarian parents

These are strict parents. They are extremely demanding, highly controlling and not responsive to a child's feelings. These parents set strict rules to try to keep order. They expect their orders to be obeyed and do not encourage choices or options. They have low levels of sensitivity and expect their children to agree with their decision (Anti-Drug, 2007). The children of authoritarian parents tend to associate obedience and success with love. However, some children display more aggressive behaviour outside the home and others may act fearful or overly shy around others (Maccoby, 1992). While developmental experts agree that rules and boundaries are important for children to have, most believe that authoritarian parenting is too punitive and lacks the warmth, unconditional love and nurturing that children need. They are also believed to demonstrate passive hostility (Baumarind, 1983).

Such parenting styles are common among African and Asian communities where children are not expected to question parental authority (Latiff and Maunganidze, 2001). It is the 'do as I say, not as I do' type of relationship between parents and their children. When considering the issue of disorders, one can classify children brought up this way falling under over-controlled behaviour which may not allow them to benefit from social networks that may enable them to access even educational materials. In such scenarios one could wonder if children under such a parent would be able to possess a cell phone or take their cell phone to school, ignore household chores when on Facebook or develop close friendships with their parents. Passive hostility would lead to wrong use of the Facebook such as viewing pornography and any other socially unacceptable material.

3.2 Permissive parents

Such parents are accepting and warm but give up most control to their children. They do not set limits, and allow children to set their own rules, schedules and activities (Anti-Drug, 2007). In addition, children raised by permissive parents are regarded as lacking self-discipline and social skills (Bahr and Hoffman 2010). In a recent study, permissive parenting was linked to under age alcohol use; teens with permissive parents were three times more likely to engage in heavy drinking. Researchers also suggest that permissive parenting is linked to other risky behaviours such as drug use and other forms of misconduct (Aiger, 2010). The author adds that such parenting results in an inability to regulate emotions, a lack of persistence in the face of challenge and defiant and anti-social behaviour. When children raised under such parents get the chance of chatting on the Facebook, would they actually be able to differentiate between good and harmful stuff shared on the Facebook? Gandari, Gwindi, Kanjanda, Mutswanga and Marufu (2010) describe children growing under such a parent having under-controlled behaviour which may result in the child having disruptive behaviours. The authors cited Gibbons (1975) as explaining that delinquency results when children exhibit under-controlled behaviour. With the Facebook at play, such adolescents would seem not to stop accessing even the pornographic materials on the social network.

3.3 Authoritative parents

The parents with an authoritative parenting style establish rules and guidelines that their children are expected to follow. This parenting style is democratic, and is considered by Aiger (2010) as a mixture of permissive and authoritarian parenting styles. Authoritative parents are responsive to their children and willing to listen to questions. When children fail to meet the expectations, these parents are more nurturing and forgiving rather than punishing. Children with authoritative parents generally have higher self esteem, are independent and healthy (Anti Drug, 2007). They learn to accept responsibility, make wiser choices, cope with change, and are better equipped to succeed in a workforce. In addition, the children of authoritative parents are less likely to engage in risky problem behaviours, such as drug and alcohol use or sex or violence.

3.4 Uninvolved parenting style parents

Uninvolved parents are characterised by few demands, low responsiveness and little communication. While these parents fulfill the child's basic needs, they are generally detached from their child's life. In extreme cases, these parents may even reject or neglect the needs of their children. Frail (2010) cited Dr Tynes asserting that with such a parenting style, it would not be surprising to find that adolescents would do as they liked. All sorts of undesirable material from social networks would be accessed without parental guidance and this could become detrimental to the children's life.




4. The impact of parenting styles on Facebook use by children

Authoritarian parenting styles generally lead to children who are obedient and proficient, but they rank lower in happiness, social competence and self-esteem (Maccoby, 1992). Such parents can restrict children on frequency of Facebook use and the children are obedient. However, they can be obedient because they fear punishment from parents. Hence they are unhappily and unwillingly fulfill the desires of their parents.

Permissive parenting do not set limits, and allow children to set their own rules, schedules and activities. Thus, when it comes to facebook use, such parents fail to control the children. Children are allowed to use facebook as frequently as they want. These children are more likely to experience problems with authority (e.g school teachers) and tend to perform poorly in school.

Uninvolved parenting styles adversely affect child development. When it comes to face book use they are not restricted. They can access information on drugs, sex and Satanism from people whom they befriend on Facebook. These children tend to lack self-control and have low self-esteem.

The main goal of this study was to determine how the Facebook has influenced parent-child relationships in the Zimbabwean context. It is against this background that this study sought to answer the following research questions:

-  To what extent has Facebook impacted on parent-child bonding?
-  How much control do parents have over their children's activities on Facebook?
-  To what extent does the Facebook assist adolescents learn African values?

5. Methodology

In order to solicit for the required information the research adopted a descriptive research design. The design represents a broad category of techniques that need questioning as a strategy to elicit information. It gave description of how things are, starting the state of the art on Facebook issues and parenting styles. The design takes the qualitative approach which is massive use of words in description of concepts. The descriptive design enabled to discuss cases of parenting and Facebook in the African social context.

5.1 Sample

The sample of the study comprised 50 parents and 25 adolescents who had cell phones with internet facilities, laptops, desktops and who accessed internet cafes. This made a total 75 participants. Snowball, which is a non-probability technique, was used in this study. Participation was voluntary and participants were told that they were free to withdraw from the study at any moment.

The majority of parent respondents (54%) were female (see Table 1). The 30-39 years age group covered 60% of the respondents, while the 40-49 age group was 40%. The urban respondents dominated with 84% while the rural respondents took only 16% of the sample, 84% indicated their children accessed Facebook on their cell phones and most of them (96%) subscribed to Facebook. The age groups that responded to the questionnaires indicate that most of them have one adolescent in the home. Considering the age range of most respondents; 30-39 years may still be in the child bearing age and have more young children than adolescents in the home.

5.2 Instruments

Two questionnaires, one for parents and the other for children, were designed. These were given to 50 selected parents and 25 children using the “give and return” method. Thus 100% return rate was realised. It was relatively quick and easy to administer as well as to analyse information collected.

5.3 Research procedure

The researchers identified parents with children who are adolescences (13-21years old) who use facebook. These parents would refer the researchers to other parents with children of the same characteristics (age and facebook user). The adolescents were also selected using the snowball technique where one adolescent would identify other adolescents who are facebook users. Snowball sampling is a method used to obtain knowledge through previous acquaintances. Snowball sampling uses recommendations to find people with the specific range of skills that has been determined as being useful.

5.4 Ethical issues

Permission from the Department of Social Services, the Ministry of Education and the participants to carry out research and take part in the study, respectively, was obtained. Participation was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point. All participants in this study were assured anonymity and confidentiality in the study. Participants were assured that data collected in this study would be used for purposes of this study only.

Table 1: Background information for respondents.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total
Parents			
Gender			
Male	23	46	
Female	27	54	100
Age of Respondents			
30-39	30	60	
40-49	20	40	100
Area of residence			
Rural	8	16	
Urban	42	84	100
Number of adolescent children			
One(1)	20	40	
Two(2)	10	20	
Three (3)	10	20	
More than three	10	20	100
How do they access internet facilities?			
Cellphone	42	84	
Laptop	3	6	
Desktop	2	4	
Internet café	3	6	100
Which social network do(es) your child(ren) subscribe to ?			
Facebook	48	96	
Twitter	2	4	
Netlog	0	0	
LinkedIn	0	0	100
Adolescents			
Gender			
Male	11	44	
Female	14	56	100
Age of Respondents			
15-17	6	24	
18-21	19	76	100
Access to internet Facilities			
Cellphone	21	84	
Laptop	4	16	
Desktop	0	0	
Internet café	0	0	100
Social network subscribed to			
Facebook	23	92	
Twitter	1	4	
Netlog	1	4	
LinkedIn	0	0	100
Who do you live with			
Both Parents	19	76	
Mother	4	16	
Father	1	4	
Relative	1	4	100
Who are you close to			
Mother	14	56	
Father	8	32	
Female relative	1	4	
Male relative	1	4	100

6. Responses

The results of this study were presented thematically using the research questions as shown below. In order to provide adequate answers to the study, respondents were asked to respond to questions from questionnaires driven from research questions by rating their responses on a three point Likert scale which was: D=Disagree, U=Undecided, A=Agree for each statement.

Table 2 below shows that 70% of parents from both rural and urban areas indicated that their adolescents resented their own African values due to admiring those they learn on Facebook. This is also shown by the majority of 66% who indicated that their adolescents' indecent dressing and foreign values they practise seem to have been learnt as a result of the communications on Facebook. Fifty four percent of parents suspected viewing of pornography on Facebook. The majority of these were female respondents, maybe because they are the ones who spend more time with the adolescents at home. The parents also indicated that these adolescents resent visiting their rural home. This is shown by 48% positive response to the assertion. Table 2 also shows that although a rift could have been created between the parents and the adolescents (58% alluding that they have limited interactions with adolescents), this was not all that serious as indicated by the majority, 36% disagreeing with the assertion while 28% agreed to the assertion. Adolescents were indicated as having a tendency of ignoring orders from parents when on Facebook. This is shown by the 80% response on the assertion by parents. The frequency of 56% shows that when reprimanded by parents, the adolescents take it as abuse. Some parent subjects supported their adolescents' subscription to Facebook indicating that adolescents can learn a lot from all over the world (78%) and they use the social network for educative purposes (52%). The majority of the parent respondents (96%) showed that they even knew and allowed their adolescents to take the cellphone to school. On the other hand the majority (72%) of the same parent subjects showed they were vulnerable to lack of control of their adolescents.

Table 2: Parents' Responses on the influence of the Facebook on child-parent relationships in the African context in Harare and Chinhoyi.

Question	Response						
	D	%	U	%	A	%	Total
1. Since opening a facebook account, my adolescent child(ren) and I have limited interactions	15	30	6	12	29	58	100
2. Facebook is corrupting my adolescent child(ren) with foreign values	10	20	5	10	35	70	100
3. When I assign chores to my adolescent child(ren), they do not respond promptly when switched to the Facebook	7	14	3	6	40	80	100
4. I wish I would have much control over my adolescent(s)' interactions on the Facebook	6	12	8	16	36	72	100
5. I suspect my adolescent(s) child(ren) usually view pornography on Facebook	10	20	13	26	27	54	100
6. Girls seem to have learnt indecent dressing through the Facebook	10	20	6	12	33	66	100
7. Adolescents no longer cherish their African norms and values due to the influence of the Facebook	6	12	9	18	35	70	100
8. The adolescents no longer value visiting the rural home as a result of resenting their African values due to Facebook influence	21	42	5	10	24	48	100
9. The Facebook has created a rift between me and my adolescent(s), we are not close at all	23	46	9	18	18	36	100
10. Reprimand has been turned to abuse by the adolescents due to the negative information shared on the Facebook	8	16	14	28	28	56	100
11. Although the Facebook has its own negative effects on my adolescent(s), there is a lot to learn from all over the world	6	12	5	10	39	78	100
12. My adolescent(s) use(s) Facebook to get educative information	16	32	8	16	26	52	100
13. I control my adolescent(s)' interactions on the Facebook	23	46	3	6	24	48	100
14. My adolescent child(ren) do(oes) not take the cellphone to school	11	44	2	8	12	48	100

Table 3 shows that 72% of the adolescent respondents do not share their communication on facebook with their parents, and 80% are not free to share information about their intimate relationships with their parents. This could mean that the adolescents feel they need their privacy and have issues they cannot share with parents which can be shared with friends. It could also be an indication of lack of closeness between the parents and their adolescent children or it could be due to the Zimbabwean values that such issues are for the aunts (father's sisters) (Gombe 1985). On the issue of sharing information on African values on Facebook, 36% of adolescent subjects showed that they do share some information on African values on the social network. Although their assertion could be contradictory to the 60% response indicating that they learn to dress indecently through Facebook interactions. One would wonder if their sharing of African values does not include dress code in their indigenous context.

Table 3: Adolescents' Responses on the influence of the Facebook on child-parent relationships in the African context in Harare and Chinhoyi.

Question	Response						
	D	%	U	%	A	%	Total
1. On Facebook we do not share issues on our African norms and values	9	36	9	36	7	28	100
2. The dress code that is regarded as indecent in our culture is learnt through social networks	5	20	5	20	15	60	100
3. I would not want my parent to be my friend on Facebook	6	24	1	4	18	72	100
4. There are issues I cannot share with my parent especially intimate opposite relationships	5	20	-	-	20	80	100
5. Visiting the rural home is not interesting	16	64	-	-	9	36	100
6. We sometimes view pornography on social networks	10	40	3	12	12	48	100
7. Most of the time I prefer chatting with my friends on Facebook	4	16	2	8	19	76	100
8. Household chores are a bother and less interesting than chatting with my friends on Facebook	8	32	3	12	14	56	100
9. Subscribing to and accessing Facebook makes me connect world wide	1	4	3	12	21	84	100
10. I usually use Facebook for accessing information on my school work	10	40	3	12	12	48	100
11. My parents/guardians control my access to social networks	17	68	2	8	6	24	100
12. I carry my cellphone to school with my parents permission	11	44	3	12	11	44	100

7. Discussion

The findings show that most of the parents are permissive in their parenting, although they sometimes feel they need to control their adolescent activities. The age range of the parent respondents was between 30 and 49 years and this could indicate the crop of parents that have adopted what they call the 'modern' or western values. Or it could be the effect of multi-culturalism whereby the education system that these parent subjects have gone through has paved way for acculturation. This is explained by Mpfu (2002) cited by Mutswanga (2010:12) that "--acculturation modifies and transforms their values and beliefs about their culture---". Thus individuals tend to forget their own values and adopt what is common within the environment. Another contributing factor to faulty parenting styles could be the misinterpretation of the child rights, which African parents have adopted from the western world without considering their own context and the responsibilities that go with them (Gwembire *et al.* 2012).

In the Zimbabwean cultural context, it is taboo for children to discuss intimate relationships with their parents, especially their mother or father. It is the duty of the paternal aunts, maternal uncles and grandparents or family friends (sahwira) to discuss such issues with the child (Gombe, 1985). This tradition could also have contributed to creating some rift between some children and their parents although some parents could just be negligent to do their part in raising their children leaving the duty to electronic media. The 'automobile era' (Adams, 1980),

whereby parents work far from home and leave early for work then come home late could also be a contributing factor to faulty parenting styles. This has been due to the economic hardships that have dominated the industrialised world. Parents seem to have resorted to providing material love to their children, including the fancy cellphones with internet facilities so as to occupy the later. This seems to have led to the rift created between the parent and the adolescent. Most parents have lost control over activities of their children including relationships they enter into (especially choice of marriage partners).

Lastly, the study sought to find out if adolescents would become good and responsible citizens of Zimbabwe, with this loss of coordination with the custodians of culture. It was indicated that most of the respondents alluded to losing the traditional values that make them Zimbabwean through values learnt from the Facebook. Resenting household chores, viewing pornography, indecent dressing and losing interest in visiting the rural home where all custodians of culture are found, show that the future generation might lose their real identity. Good citizens are known to respect their culture, work hard and value their own identity (Gwembire et al., 2012) and this seems to be lacking in the adolescents studied.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study have shown that facebook is the common social network that most adolescents subscribe to, and can be accessed on their cellular phones. These are private gadgets that parents can have no control over hence anything from harmful to good can be accessed. With some parents indicating that they do not control what their adolescents access on the social network, the indication that they do suspect viewing of pornography as well as the indication by the adolescents themselves that they sometimes access such material confirms parents' fears that Facebook has negatively influenced their relationships with adolescents. The fact that most adolescents have indicated that they would not prefer their parents as Facebook friends, resentment of household chores due to Facebook access and the assertion that indecent dressing is as a result of what is learnt on the social network indicate a gap in parent-child relationships.

This study thus concluded that:

- the Facebook has really stolen the relationship that used to exist between parents and their children;
- adolescents do not have a clue of their own cultural values;
- parents are failing to control their children's activities as was done in the past by African parents ; and
- parenting styles leave a lot to be desired.

The study recommends that parents need to avoid scapegoating through the facebook when they fail to exercise their parenthood and they should make an effort to revisit their African values that give continuity to their species which may vanish forever. Access to face book should be allowed with some education on the good and bad aspects of accessing anything on the internet. In order to bond with their adolescents, parents need to check their parenting styles which can be appropriate for this sensitive group (adolescents).

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