Social media and the society: A case study of WhatsApp in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

This paper is a descriptive and explanatory survey that seeks to establish what Zimbabwean youths are really doing when they spend a lot of time on social media particularly the messaging platform WhatsApp. Questionnaires and focus group discussions were used as research instruments over a group of 150 respondents drawn from a population of university students in Chinhoyi, a small town in Zimbabwe. The paper shows that though WhatsApp has brought an affordable communication platform, it has become subject to abuse by those who take advantage of its distinct features. Its ability to offer one on one chats and one too many chats in real time has made it become a platform of choice in communicating all sorts of information that range from being useful, insulting, abusive; to outright jokes and absolute trivia, hoaxes and porn.

Keywords: social media, whatsapp, virtual communication platforms, virtual societies and social networking sites.

1. Introduction

Social media, and in particular the messaging application WhatsApp, has become highly pervasive in Zimbabwe. This has led various authors to interrogate what people really do on these platforms for example Malleus and Muchena (2015) examine student cell phone use on one Zimbabwean university campus, using questionnaire data from 179 volunteers, answering the research question "What are students on campus doing with their cell phones to meet their needs? This present research seeks to further this research question by particularly focussing of the application WhatsApp. The study will seek to answer questions like why does it seem that every youth is on WhatsApp and what exactly does every youth do on WhatsApp in Zimbabwe. A look at Zimbabwe's social media landscape seems imperative before these questions might be answered; Zimbabwe has a mixed bag of media systems. The country does not have social media law that regulate conversations that take place over the Internet (van der Bank and van der Bank, 2014). This means that content shared via social media is not subjected to any laws as is the case with content from mainstream media. This is primarily as a result of the complexities involved in policing the Internet which is the platform on which social media rides on. Facebook, twitter and WhatsApp seem to be the most prevalent social media platforms in Zimbabwe. WhatsApp seems to be more accessible to many Zimbabweans because it is easy to use on the weak internet provided by mobile phone operators. According to Church and de Oliveira (2013: 352), WhatsApp is a cross-platform instant messaging application for smartphones. It uses the Internet to send text messages, images, videos, user location, audio messages to individuals or groups in real-time at no cost and of late, making calls. As a result, it has become so popular that it handled over 10 billion messages per day. Since the adoption of multiple currencies in Zimbabwe in 2009, the mobile phone penetration rate has been rising. As of 30 June 2015, Zimbabwe had 11 949 741 active mobile subscribers (POTRAZ 2015: 6). Subscription to the Internet on which WhatsApp rides on stood at 5 648 922 (POTRAZ 2015: 11). This has meant that the majority in both rural and urban areas are now connected in one way or the other. Coupled with the availability of broadband Internet connectivity across the country, people with smart phones are now able to connect to various social network sites on the go. Due to its affordability, WhatsApp has become the site of choice for Zimbabweans both at home and in the Diaspora. It is now common that when one boards a commuter omnibus or any other form of public transport they find the majority of passengers fixed to their mobile phones. Family time and normal interpersonal communication has been transformed as people prefer chatting with friends in the virtual chatting sites. As stated by Giddens (2009: 728), there is a fear by sociologists that the spread of the Internet technology will lead to increased social isolation and atomisation as people spend much less time with family and friends. Most of their time is spent in the cyberspace. Physical contact is reduced making personal relations suffer thus weakening the fabric of social life. The question that comes to the fore is 'what are these youths doing on WhatsApp and kind of content are they

sharing that keeps them so involved with their phones?' The present study seeks to provide insights that will respond to this question.

According to Beebe and Masterson (2003: 46), human communication comprises what people say, how they say it and to whom they say it. This means that what people say depends on the environment in which they are. Thus people are bound to change the way they communicate in relation with the environment at any given time. As a result of the high patronage on WhatsApp, there have been several pitfalls for various people through usage of the social network site. Whilst others use it to communicate with their friends and relatives in various places, others have used it to circulate hoaxes. Several people have been pronounced dead along them popular sungura musician Alick Macheso. In October 2015 another false message claimed that a bus from Maranatha Primary School had been involved in an accident when the school did not have a bus as described in the message. On the third of December 2015 parents with children who learn at Mutare Boys High School were sent into panic mode when someone circulated a message claiming that a bus carrying their kids from school had been involved in an accident and fifty-nine students had lost their lives. However, nothing of that sought had happened. For two consecutive years (2014 and 2015), winners of the Miss Zimbabwe beauty pageant have been dethroned after their nude pictures have been 'leaked' on WhatsApp. Marriages have been broken as a result of one partner or both who have been cheating have been caught either after their pictures and or videos in compromising positions or in the nude have 'leaked.' It is in this light that the study seeks to establish what youths really do on whatsapp so that one gets an empirically informed picture of the situation and not depend on various media discourses.

5. Research methods

The authors undertook a survey in Chinhoyi, a small town in the north of Zimbabwe, focusing on undergraduate university students. Proceeding from a qualitative approach, the research was a descriptive and explanatory survey. This design was suitable because it was seen as ideal for the purposes of describing and explaining what the respondents use the whatapp platform for. Leedy (1997) offers one advantage of the descriptive survey design when he says it 'describes what we see, hence reveals the actual picture of a situation through the emerging trends from the study'. In other words in using this descriptive survey, the researchers tried to be as objective as possible, meaning that the study wished to develop an understanding of how people think or act and at the same time identifying causal influences on their attitudes and behaviour. In order to get unsolicited and liberal opinion, the researchers used self-administered questionnaires to ensure that they were responded to on time. This made it suitable for this kind of research as it focuses on issues which are personal in nature. Out of a total of 80 questionnaires distributed, all were returned, completely filled by respondents who were confident of the privacy that the questionnaire assured them. Focus groups discussions (FGDs) were also employed to gauge and establish what people do on whatsapp. FGDs are a good way to discuss a specific topic of interest. The strength of FGDs is that participants are allowed to agree or disagree with each other so that the researcher gets an insight into how a group thinks about an issue, the range of opinion and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variation that exists in a particular community in terms of beliefs, experiences and practices. Focus group discussions allowed the respondents to share with the researchers their comprehensive thoughts on how the use of WhatsApp has impacted on society in terms of content shared and interaction in general. The advantages derived from focus groups were that respondents came up with their own views which added to the knowledge the researcher had gained from earlier stages. Respondents also encouraged each other to speak up their minds thus creating a friendly environment to share views and opinions.

6. Findings and Discussion

The research showed that forty-five percent of the respondents were male whilst fifty-five were female. Seventy percent were Christians, twenty-five percent believed in African traditional religion with five percent catering for other minority religions in as far as this research was concerned. The respondents according to age groups and marital status are as shown in figures below:
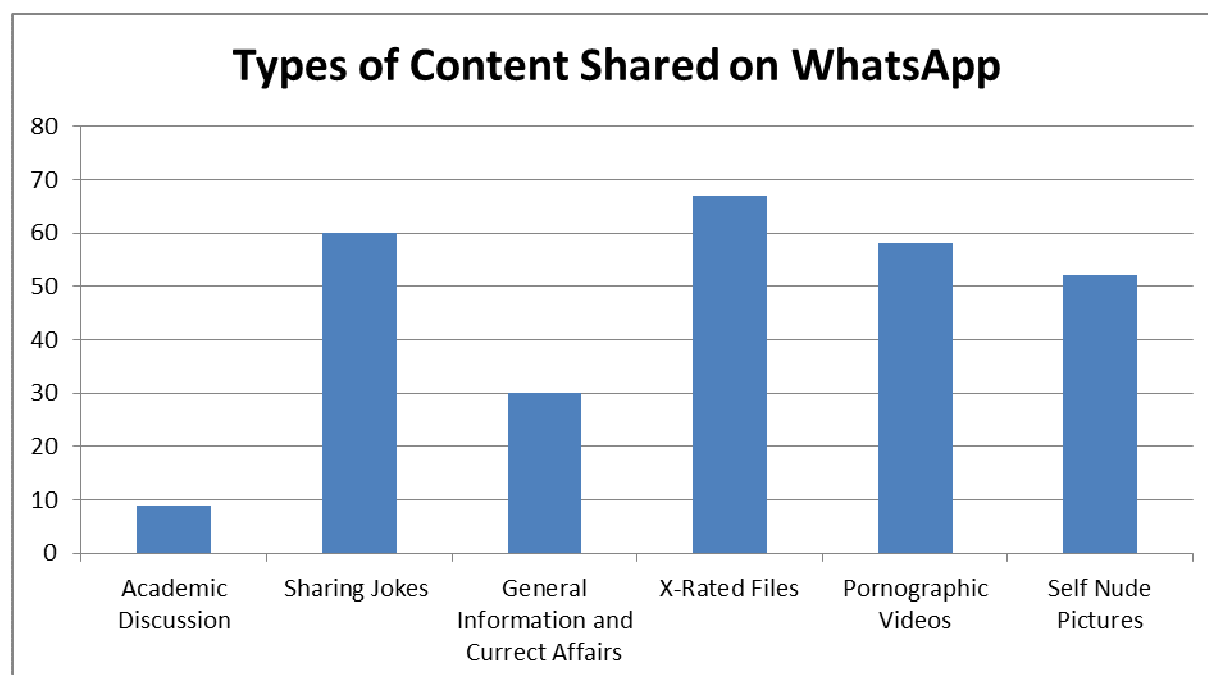
Respondents According to Age Groups			
Age Group	18-23 years	24-29 years	30-35 years
Number of Respondents	20	37	43

Respondents According Marital Status				
Marital Status	Single	Married	Divorced	Widowed
Number of Respondents	29	45	20	06

Of these respondents, eighty percent are on WhatsApp and twenty percent are not and the majority of these are in the 30-35 years age group. The table below shows the daily average usage of WhatsApp by respondents:

Average Time Spent On WhatsApp Daily			
Range	Light User (Below 2 Hours)	Moderate User (2-4 Hours)	Heavy User (Above 4 Hours)
Number of Respondents	30	45	25

The graph below shows the types of content that these users share either as groups or in personal discussions:

The results above show that there is a high patronage of WhatsApp among the youths. This is evidenced by eighty percent of respondents being registered on the social network site. A notable result of this research is the prevalent communication of obscenities by respondents. These come in the form of text messages, images, audio and video files. This is contrary to Christian and traditional African values.

Despite the respondents being university students, they share very little content that is academic at nine percent. Their exchanges are dominated by information of an intimate. It is because of such kind of content that has made people to spend much of their time on the social networking site. This has come at a cost to both their performance at work and home. Of note are the intimate connections that no longer exist in society. This brings credence to fears that were once forecasted by sociologists that the growth of the Internet will reduce physical interaction within a society as well as within the family setting (Giddens, 2009:

728). This is evidenced by times that are spent by people on the social networking site.

The research also showed that the bulk of the content shared particularly videos and images are of a sexual nature. The issues discussed either by individuals or in groups are about intimacy. These are issues that were previously considered as taboo according to African values that are observed in Zimbabwe. Thus social media has socialised people differently than what the previously acclaimed engines of socialization do. This is mainly because communication on WhatsApp is more of a closed circuit channel which unlike radio, television or a voice call can be heard by those in the vicinity. Thus this liberty is taken advantage of by the majority of users of the application. As a result, WhatsApp has created a society that has its own values, norms and mores. Social construction according to Gergen 1985) are perspectives which believe that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences. Therefore, those who are in the virtual society of WhatsApp have created their own society in which those outside their 'universe' can term to be society that breaks taboos. To them it is normal to have no holds barred discussions on any topic. It is for this reason that any issues can be discussed even with strangers who they have not met physically. Their society has accepted such a life.

7. Conclusion

The paper has shown that though WhatsApp has brought an affordably communication platform, it has become subject to abuse by those who take advantage of its distinct features. Its ability to offer one on one chats and one too many chats in real time made it become a platform of choice. However, what is worrying on it on it is the rampant communication of hoaxes and pornographic material. And in keeping with malleus and muchena who contend that 'students use cell phones on campus to meet instrumental and social needs, with the Internet the most useful function, and voice calls being the least useful. Cell phone use was seen as positive, but with disruption and distraction identified as negative. Connection with family and friends off campus and enactment of multiple identities with different needs were found to be important", this article has shown that the advent of WhatsApp has ushered in a new citizen who is not much into voice calls, but is connected to others not through face to face interaction but through social media, to create what other scholars have called a virtual society. Other scholars have noted that cyberspace bullying (see Samapassa-Kanyinga and Hamilton 2015) has become a problem on these social networking sites (SNSs) but this does not seem to be much of a problem in the use of WhatsApp in Zimbabwe. Future research would do well to look at the ills and benefits of other SNSs like facebook and twitter that also seem to have sunk deeper roots in Zimbabwe.

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