

The African youth and communicative behaviours in digital spaces

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As digital media platforms have become ubiquitous in all aspects of media consumption (Kaempf, 2018; Ren et al., 2024), there is abundant evidence that media consumers, particularly young people, are moving away from media to digital media (Kemp, 2021). This is demonstrated by the over 40% of Africans who use the internet regularly (Kamer, 2022) and the significant portion of news, advertising, and entertainment consumed on digital platforms (Rao & Nagaraj, 2022). Digital platforms also serve educational purposes (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2022), as many educational institutions have deployed digital technologies to complement other modes of educational instruction (Anderson & Rivera Vargas, 2020).

Additionally, digital platforms serve as an important and foremost opportunity for networking among young people (Koch, & Miles, 2021; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020), self-expression and self-presentation (Guo, 2015), the pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities (Pano & Gjika, 2020), and political engagement and civic action (Hao et al., 2014), particularly for young people.

The 2023 edition of the Trends in Media and Communication Conference (TiMC) provided a forum for researchers and practitioners in communication to convene and discuss current developments in young Africans' use of digital spaces, particularly as regards their communicative behaviours. Having positioned itself as a preeminent platform for sharing scholarship on emerging trends in communication and media within the African continent, this edition of the conference discussed the theme, "The African youth and communicative behaviours in digital spaces". The conference accepted over 50 papers from scholars and practitioners in Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Iran, Latvia, Turkey, and the United States of America among others. Over 100 conference participants

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engaged in scholarly reflections on how African youth are using the communicative freedom that digital spaces provide to create economic opportunities to counter their high unemployment. Participants also deliberated on how young people leverage and also navigate challenges confronting their online communication endeavours. As well, they considered trends developing around the production, consumption, and moderation of extremist content in African digital spaces. Specifically, the accepted papers responded to questions including but not limited to: 1) What dynamics play out in constituted online communities and how are the youth taking advantage of digital spaces construct and express their personal and social identities and for their social and economic benefits? 2) How aware are digital users of existing cyber policies, and other regulatory policies and how do they affect user engagement and content creation on social media platforms? and 3) What role do digital platforms play in promoting civic engagement and activism among African youth and how does gender influence participation and representation in digital technology?

This special issue of the Ghana Social Science Journal is the product of conference. Some thoughtful contributions were received. Five articles that passed a stringent double-blind peer review process are included in this special issue in which you will read the work of Adjotor and Ayim-Segbefia titled, "Attraction, retention, and satisfaction in social media use: Are there age differences between Ghanaian youth and the elderly?". The authors challenge conventional assumptions about age-related behaviours and patterns in social media usage. Despite the common association of social media with young people, their research revealed that the elderly— 60 years and above—were becoming more involved in the modern digital sphere. Their comparative analysis of the digital behaviours of Ghana's Accra youths and the elderly reveals important factors influencing social media use and contradict long-held preconceptions about age-related online behaviours. In light of their findings, Adjotor and Ayim-Segbefia recommend that intergenerational connection efforts be promoted, to create a helpful online community.

Epepe and Emejulu also provide a systematic review of the role of critical literacy as a countermeasure to misinformation in the social media age, utilizing the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and the Message Interpretation Process (MIP) model as analytical framework. The authors report that critical literacy, which encourages critical thinking and well-informed skepticism relevant to establishing power dynamics and decreasing inequality, enables people to more successfully identify and challenge false information. While they find that the majority of reviewed studies were position papers, they believe that the effectiveness of critical literacy interventions identified in the studies makes a case for more comprehensive and extensive programmes, such as incorporating literacy into public awareness campaigns and educational programs to lessen the spread of misinformation.

In social media entrepreneurship: Youth participation, evolving business norms, and communication strategies, Adjotor and Dadzie explores the shifts that social media has brought about within Ghana's business landscape and the impact on youth-led Small

and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Using a mixed-methods approach and focused on 138 online firms owned by youth entrepreneurs aged 15 to 45 years, he found that online enterprises are unlocking opportunities and deploying diverse communication strategies to grow and sustain their businesses. Instagram emerged as the predominant platform for youth social media entrepreneurship. Adjotor also found that some of the propellers for online entrepreneurship include stricter regulations and unfavourable interest rates, while the ready availability of capital encourages the youth to pursue conventional business models. To create an environment that easily supports both online and hybrid business models, Adjotor calls for a thorough review of statutory business legislations.

Duncan Ofori explores the use and impact of digital platforms on Spanish language learning among University of Ghana students. Grounded in the notion that learning a foreign language necessitates constant practice and interaction, she investigates how students use digital platforms to improve their foreign language acquisition. The study explores the extent to which students use tools such as FluentKey, Audio Lingua, Padlet, and common social media platforms to practice Spanish and connect with other learners and native speakers worldwide. The survey conducted revealed that although digital platforms offer beneficial opportunities for cultural exposure and language practice, students' levels of engagement varied. Other important findings are highlighted in the study.

Omotayo and Tosan's study on awareness and use of virtual assistant (VA) technologies by postgraduate students of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria found that most of the students were aware of VAs and used them for various purposes but mainly for general knowledge, work-related tasks, and entertainment. Among the characteristics that attracted participants to VA technology were the opportunity to multitask while leveraging the technology's capabilities of personalised communication and immediate feedback.

The above scholarly contributions, spanning entrepreneurship through digital technologies, the use of digital technologies for language acquisition, the role of critical literacy in countering misinformation and the use of VAs by postgraduate students, are significant contributions to the literature by illuminating the ways in which Africans, in particular, are utilising the affordances of digital technologies and their communicative behaviours in digital spaces.

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