Youths, Social Media and Gender-Based Violence: An Emerging Trend in Nigeria?

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT

The revolution in information communication technology has created boundless opportunities for media users. With the advent of mobile technology devices and the growth of social media platforms, endless access has been provided for the youths not only to consume media but also to make media and share it more easily and quickly. However, increased access to media consumption and creation has its latent consequences, one of such is gender-based violence. This paper investigated social media orchestrated gender-based violence among youths in Nigeria, using a combination of methods - content analysis of reported cases in the media and in-depth interview of victims. Findings reveal a dangerous pattern of social media orchestrated gender-based violence among youths. This calls for media literacy education for Nigerian youths on the need to use social media critically and cautiously.

Introduction

Out of the one hundred and fourty million Nigerian population, the youths (ages 10 -24 years) comprise one third (NPC, 2006). Equally, this youthful population is highly literate. Statistics show that Nigeria's youth (15 -24) literacy rate stands at 78.15% (World Bank, 2010). The implication of this high youth literacy rate is the propensity for high usage of Information Communication Technology (ICT). Thus, Nigerian youths just like their counterparts in other climes are increasingly adapting to the digitally savvy lifestyle and are socially connected on line. Many of them have taken advantage of the boundless opportunities offered by the internet to reach millions of each other with amazing targeting possibilities based on age, gender, business, interests, etc. According to the Internet World Stats: Usage and population Statistics (2013), Nigeria internet population stands at 45 million. This data places Nigeria as Africa's biggest internet market. Similarly, Facebook Statistics (2010) show that Nigerian Facebook users increased from 99,720 in 2008 to 569, 180 in 2009 and 1, 718,000 in 2010. In 2011, Nigeria had a total of 3.7 million Facebook users, ranking 37th position in the world and third in Africa (Egypt and South Africa ranking first and second) (Tooki, 2011). However, as at October, 2012, Nigeria had 6.5 million Facebook users, overtaking South Africa to become second in Africa next to Egypt (Techloy, 2012). These figures must have doubled by now with the present ease of availability, accessibility and affordability of information communication technology (mobile phones, ipads, personalized internet access, etc.). Although, Africa still has the world's lowest Internet penetration rate at 13.5 per cent (Internet World Stats: Usage and population Statistics, 2013) nevertheless, Nigeria presently ranks 122th position globally, in the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU's) Information Communication Technology Development Index (2012). This shows that Nigeria's Information Communication Technology is developing at a very fast pace.

This easy and quick access to media consumption has also brought with it new forms of challenges to the youths. Having unhindered access to the media, demands developing the ability and capacity to negotiate media contents. However, a majority of youths due to the exuberant and adventurous nature that characterized this phase of human development, maybe lacking in this skill. Hence, their exposure and susceptibility to media contents that depict violence, unhealthy sexual practices and attitudes is highly likely. This creates a big challenge for some youths, who may translate their media experience to real life experience. Gender-based violence is one of such translations. Gender-based violence is an umbrella term for any harm that is perpetrated against a person's will and that has a negative impact on the physical or psychological health, development and identity of the person. It is rooted in the gendered power inequities that exploit distinctions between males and females, among males and among females. Although not exclusive to women and girls, gender-based violence principally affects them across all cultures and the violence may take physical, sexual, psychological, economic or socio-cultural forms (Minerson *et al,* 2011).

In Nigeria, gender-based violence is endemic. However, it is under reported due to stigma, shame and other socio-cultural factors that inhibit women from discussing incidence of violence. Thus, with the upsurge in gender-based violence in recent times, the emerging dimension of social media orchestrated violence will further exacerbate the situation, and thus warrants an investigation, in order to throw more light on the phenomenon, which is what this paper aims to do.

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Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts an eclectic theoretical approach. Social learning and radical feminist theories serve as underpinnings for the paper. Albert Bandura's (1962) Social Learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Thus, when youths are exposed to media contents that depict violence, unhealthy sexual practices and attitudes, they model these behaviours in real life and social media serve as one of the avenues of contacting their unsuspecting victims. On the other hand, radical feminist theory explains, why women are often the victims of gender-based violence. The patriarchal ideology, which posits male superiority and dominance and women's inferiority and subservience in all spheres of life, creates inequality between men and women, thus predisposing women to all forms of subjugation and exploitation by men (Giddens, 2001; Morgan, 1975). Gender based violence is one of the ways of expressing such dominance.

Social Media

Social media are media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social dialogues. They support the democratization of knowledge and information and transform people from content consumers to content producers (Idakwo, 2013; Kietzmann, *et al*, 2011). Social media is participatory and open, thus allowing for the emergence of media communities with high connectedness to other sites. Social media comprise of various forms such as –

- **Social networks** – which are sites that allow people to build personal web pages. Examples, Facebook, myspace, Bebo, etc.
- **Blogs** – which are on-line journals with entries appearing with the most recent first.
- **Wikis** – which are sites that allow people to add content to or edit the information on them, acting as a communal document or database. Examples, Wikipedia, online encyclopedia, etc.
- **Podcasts** – which are audio and video files that are available by subscription. Example, Apple iTunes.
- **Forums** – which are sites for online discussion on shared interests and topics.
- **Content Communities** – which are sites which persons of common interests share particular kinds of content. Most content communities are formed around photos and videos. Examples, flicker, YouTube
- **Microblogging** – which are networking sites that are combined with blogging, where small amounts of content are distributed among users. Example, Twitter (Mayfield, 2008).

Social media are elements of the new media and have become the highest activity on the internet in present times. According to Experian Marketing Services (2012), 91% of today's online adults use social media regularly. This makes the use of social media the number one activity on the web. Similarly, Nielsen (2012a) observes that people continue to spend more time on social networks than any other category of websites, accounting for 20% of their time spent on personal computers and 30% of their mobile use time. Smith et al (2012) observe that in 2012, more than one billion people were active users of Facebook each month, similarly, 32% of all internet users used Twitter (Honigman, 2012). Nielsen (2012b), also observes that twitter users send one billion tweets every two and half days, while Instagram users upload fourty million images everyday (INSTAGRAM, 2013) and Facebook users share 684,478 pieces of content every minute and YouTube users upload fourty-eight hours of new video every minute (James, 2012).

This rapid growth of social media activities is indicative of its entry into mainstream culture and its integration into the daily lives of many people. Analysts observe that social media have brought some benefits to the society. For example, they promote increased communication with friends and families; familiarize people with valuable computer skills; and allow contact with people from around the world. However, they further observe that social networking sites expose people especially children to predators, increase vulnerability to computer viruses, lower worker productivity, and promote narcissism and short attention spans (ProCon, 2013).

Youths and Social Media

The targeting possibilities created by social media have afforded youth's opportunities to network with friends, business associates and strangers. Pew Internet Project Surveys (2010) of social media and young adults and Norton Online Family Report (2010) reveal the following about youths' usage of information communication technology and social media.

Young Adults and Use of Information Communication Technology
- 93% of teenagers go online.
- 69% of teens have their own computer.
- 63% of teen internet users go online every day.
- 27% of teens use their phone to get online.

Young Adults and the Usage of Social Media
- 73% of teens are on social network.
- 86% of teens on social network comment on a friend's wall.
- 83% comments on a friend's picture.

- 66% send private messages to friends.
- 55% of teens have given out personal information to someone they don't know including photos and physical descriptions.
- 15% have sent nude photos or videos of themselves.

These statistics must have doubled by now as the growth rate of activities on social media tends to be on a very fast pace, every, minute, hour and day.

In Nigeria, there are no available statistics on the usage of social media by the youths. However, it has been observed that on the average, young people spend 12 hours daily, engaging in some forms of media use, particularly texting, pinging, chatting, music, surfing the net and social networking, while a third of them use social media in the bathroom (Uduma, 2013). According to Dr Agber (Head, Theatre Arts Department, University of Abuja) research has shown that access to pornography in Nigeria has increased, especially within underage children, as parents in most cases have no control over the media contents accessed by their children (cited in Uduma, 2013).

Youths, Social Media and Gender-Based Violence

As earlier explained, gender-based violence is an umbrella term for any harm that is perpetrated against a person's will and that has a negative impact on the physical or psychological health, development, and identity of the person. Violence is a means of control and oppression that can include emotional, social or economic force, coercion or pressure, as well as physical harm. It can be overt, in the form of physical assault or threatening someone with a weapon; it can also be covert, in the form of intimidation, threats, persecution, deception or other forms of psychological or social pressure. The person targeted by this kind of violence is compelled to behave as expected or to act against her/his will out of fear (Minerson *et al,* 2011). Gender-based violence in its various forms is endemic in communities around the world. It cut across class, race, age, religion, etc. However, the revolution in information communication technology in present times has presented perpetrators new avenues of expressing gender-based violence.

Social network platforms constitute one of such avenues. Participation in social network platforms requires the submission of personal information. Although, some sites allow users to control what content the public can access, in order to allow for some degree of privacy, nevertheless many users do not make use of such tools. For instance, Bennet (2012) observes that 25% of Facebook users do not use any type of privacy controls, while a majority of them post risky information online, without giving due diligence to privacy and security concerns. Consumer State of the Net Analysis Report (2010) observes that 52% of adult users of social networks such as Facebook and MySpace have posted risky personal information online, while many have not used their service's privacy controls to protect themselves. The report also observes that 23% of the users of Facebook, the largest social network, either didn't know that the site offers privacy controls or chose not to use them. Based on this ignorance, findings of the report reveal that

- 38% of adult social network users had posted their full birth date, including year.
- 45% of those with children had posted their children's photos and names.
- 8% had posted their street address.
- 3% had disclosed when they were away from home.
- And an estimated 5.4 million online consumers submitted personal information to e-mail scammers during the past two years, prior to the report.

This indiscreet divulging of information about oneself has opened up social media users to a variety of online and real life dangers. The Consumer Report (2010) shows that a projected

- 1.7 million online households had experienced online identity theft in the past year,
- While an estimated 5.1 million online households had experienced some type of abuse on a social network.

With regard to young adults, Pew Internet Project Surveys (2010) statistics reveal that

- 29% of teens have posted mean information, embarrassing photos or spread rumours about someone.
- 29% have been stalked or contacted by a stranger or someone they don't know.
- 24% have had private or embarrassing information made public without their permission.
- 22% have been cyber pranked
- 56% have been target of online harassment.
- 21% have received nude pictures or videos from others and about half of them admitted they were pressured to do so.
- 41% have experienced some form of digital dating abuse including checking in multiple times a day, reading messages without permission, pressurizing others to respond to messages or spreading rumours (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr, 2010).

Also a study of middle school students in America by Hinduja et al (2009) show that 17.3% of middle school students have been victims of cyber bullying, while National Crime Prevention Council (2009) observes that victims of such bullying often experienced a drop in grades, decreased self-esteem, and other symptoms of depression.

Social Media and Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

Although gender-based violence is endemic in Nigeria, it is nevertheless, underreported due to stigma, shame and other socio-cultural factors that inhibit women from discussing incidence of violence. However, the media frequently report cases of violence perpetrated against women and girls by family members, friends, religious leaders, etc., when such cases are brought to the open. In recent times, there have been reported cases of gender-based violence perpetrated by acquaintances and friends met through social media. Such violence includes rape, sexual assault, theft, kidnapping and murder. Below are some case examples -

Case 1
Cynthia Osokogwu, a 25 year old postgraduate student of Nasarawa State University, a daughter of a retired Nigerian Army General and a business woman was murdered on July 22, 2013 in a hotel by friends she met through a social network site (facebook). Echezona Nwabufor (33years) and his cousin Ezekiel Eloka (23years) (both undergraduates of Nigerian Universities) lured Cynthia from her base in Nassarawa State to Lagos, for the purpose of stealing her money. Cynthia owned a fashion boutique and was engaged in frequent travels abroad to purchase goods for sales. Her friends aware of this information through their Facebook interactions wanted to steal her money but ended up killing her as attested to by their confessions below –

> '*We met her on the Facebook on our Blackberry. We invited her to come to Lagos to buy goods at cheap prices. When she got to Lagos, we took her to a hotel in Festac. We thought she had a lot of money, but she said she didn't have any money. We gave her Reflon tablet in her Ribena drink. After this, we slept with her for 12 hours in that hotel. We discovered that the tablet did not work quickly on her. We then attacked her, tied her up and used Cello tape to cover her mouth. After that, we beat her to tell us where she kept the money. When we didn't get any money from her, we tied her mouth and strangled her and then we abandoned her in the hotel and fled'* (culled from Esene, 2012).

They further confessed that Cynthia was their sixth victim as they specialized in luring unsuspecting young women and robbing them of their possessions before killing them (Esene, 2013).

Case 2
Arthur Obiora, a 26 year old unemployed graduate of Igbinedion University Okada and the Centennial College, Ontario, Canada, pushed down his Facebook lover Nkiruka Akabuogu, from a multi-storey building over a disagreement on sex. Obiora met 21 year old Nkiruka Akabuogu, a Linguistics student of the University of Lagos, on Facebook (barely a week earlier) and invited her to go clubbing with him. From the club, they moved to Obiora's house, where Obiara demanded for sex. On Nkiruka's refusal, he tore her dress and thereafter pushed her down from the third floor of the storey building. Nkiruka fell unconscious and sustained multiple injuries, including a fractured pelvis (Vanguard Newspaper, Nov. 9, 2012).

Case 3
Oludoyi Bamidele Samuel, an undergraduate student of Kogi State University was lured by a friend (Michael) he met on the social media site (Facebook) from his base in Enugu to Warri, to be kidnapped by his collaborators. Bamidele is the only son of his parents and his parents are wealthy. Michael, his Facebook friend aware of this privileged background plotted how to abduct him and make some money. He invited him over to Warri to attend a fictitious birthday party. On arrival at Warri, Bamidele was abducted by Michael's collaborators. His kidnappers demanded for a five million naira (N5m) ransom from his parents, meanwhile Bamidele never informed his parents about his visit to his Facebook friend (Esene, 2013).

Case 4
A beautiful young girl was killed by her boyfriend due to a social media orchestrated relationship. The boyfriend brutally killed her for allegedly cheating on him. The girl had started a close online relationship on Facebook with a man who resides in the USA. Their relationship blossomed into intimacy, causing the man to pay her a visit in Nigeria. The Nigerian boyfriend found out about the relationship and confronted the duo in the hotel where they met. A fight ensued between the two guys. However, when the lady later visited her boyfriend, he butchered her to death (Pot of Africa, 2013).

Case 5
This case is an in-depth interview with Miss Y, a 23 year old, 400 Level undergraduate student of the University of Lagos. Miss Y shared her experience as a victim of information communication technology orchestrated gender-based violence. Excerpts of the interview -

> '*During my pre-degree (Diploma), I exchanged my telephone number with a female classmate. Shortly, she started texting me romantic messages such as* **'I want to kiss you', 'you are beautiful', 'you are sexy', 'you have lovely eyes', 'you have beautiful breasts'**. *When I did not respond to her romantic allures, she started using different phone numbers (without caller identification) to send the messages. Each time I attempted calling the numbers, they were switched off.*
>
> *Without my knowledge, she told some of our classmates that I was a lesbian and have been sending love messages to her. I was ignorant of this until one of my classmates confronted me about it. I was embarrassed and lost for words, I then showed her and some other classmates the text messages she had been sending to me. They accosted her and she*

came to confront me in class that I was lying against her. This incident did not stop her from sending me the romantic text messages, as she continued. Then later she started bullying me, also through text messages. However, when she sends bullying texts, she used her regular phone number. Such texts read **'you are a bitch', 'you are molesting me for lesbianism',** *etc. She kept telling people I was molesting her for lesbianism. She also send me threats messages such as* **'I will kidnap you, gang rape you and fuck you through your anus', 'my people will come to school, beat you up, video you and put you on YouTube'.**

I was so scared that I stopped attending lectures for two weeks. When I was absent from classes, she noticed and sent me messages such as **'I missed your pretty face in class'.** *I kept changing my phone number so as to deny her access, but she always got to know my new number. I was traumatized and felt in-secured anytime I was in school. I felt like dropping out of school, as I constantly felt people were looking at me as the lesbian girl. It is prayers that encouraged me and saw me through. Sometimes, she will stop sending the messages for a month or two, then she will resumed again. Although she could not proceed to the 200 Level with me, since she did not meet the cut off marks, she hangs around in school all the time.*

She found out about my boyfriend, got to meet him and dated him for some time. She used his picture to open a Facebook and twitter accounts as if he was the one that opened them. She posted damaging things about me as if it is my boy friend doing so, such as **'I fuck (mentions my name)'.** *She also used a fictitious name to follow me on my twitter account. She impersonates me to chat with my friends on Facebook. She opened an e-mail account in my name and writes fictitious mails to herself as if am the one writing them.*

To really tarnish my image, she opened a twitter account with my name and photograph. And all she twitted were vulgar sexual messages such as **'I suck your pussy',** *etc. She had about 178 followers and messages and about 81 of them were lesbians. I was not aware of this, until one of my friends alerted my attention. I had to send a mail to twitter in the US to lodge my complaints. I filled a form online through their support system. I was asked to fax my international passport to them for identification. On identification, twitter removed the account from the web. When she noticed the account has been removed, she opened other accounts in my name but without my picture. When I complained again to twitter, they said there is nothing they can do since many people can bear the same name. I then reported the case to Sabo Police station, and they said it was a case of impersonation and threat to life. I was directed to report the case to Unilag Security post, which I did. The case is still on and the security says anytime she comes to school I should alert them to arrest her. For sometimes now, I have not seen her in school and so she has not been arrested. It has been five years now since she started harassing me'.*

These cases show that social media orchestrated violence is present in Nigeria. However, the pattern is not defined as the analyses show male versus male violence (case 3) and female versus female violence (case 5). However, a majority of the analyzed cases (1, 2 and 4) are violence perpetrated by male against females. This conforms to the traditional pattern of gender-based violence, which is often perpetrated by males against female victims.

Conclusion

The rapid growth of social media activities confirms their entrant into mainstream culture and integration into the daily lives of today's generation. The boundless opportunities offered by social networking sites for creative expression and contact with people from around the world, make them attractive, exciting and compelling. Thus, individuals without requisite skill in negotiating media usage and content, could be easily carried away and so divulge much information. Meanwhile, Social networking sites have no ability to authenticate the information provided by account users, thus there is no way to verify that people are who they claimed to be. This makes non cautious users of social media easy prey to online predators, which mask their true identities to take advantage of such users.

While surveys have been conducted in other climes to show the usage and negative impact of social media on users, Nigeria lacks such surveys. Thus, the prevalence and incidence of social media orchestrated crimes such as gender-based violence are hidden and invisible, except when brought to the open by media reports. However, media reported cases are few and are usually on extreme cases in which the incidence could no longer be masked by both the victims and perpetrators. There may be many more victims of such violence who are suffering in silence, as the analysis of case 5 has shown. Thus further researches are needed to unravel the magnitude of social media orchestrated gender-based violence among the youths in Nigeria.

Since social media has become part of today's culture (and with immense benefits), the paper makes the following recommendations to aid the effective use of social media by youths without becoming victims to predators.

Tips for Using Social Media

- See social networking sites as another way of connecting with people that you know, such as fellow students, professionals, families, colleagues at work, friends, etc. Thus, be cautious about who to connect with and who to avoid.
- Be cautious about befriending strangers. This is because there is no way for you to verify that the strangers are actually who they claim to be.
- Build online networks with people you also interact with face-to-face, such as colleagues at work, friends in school, etc.
- Mind the information you share. Do not share personal and confidential information with strangers as they may be predators, who are just looking for the right opportunity to take advantage of your personal data.
- Keep your personal profile accessible only to family and friends.
- Take maximum benefit of the privacy settings provided by the social media platforms. Use strong passwords and privacy settings to restrict access to your profile, etc.
- Privacy on the social media is not as secured as it is presented, so avoid posting anything on social networking sites that you would not want to share publicly.
- As there is no time limit to access the social networking sites, as well as the fun while using them, it is always better to set a time limit for yourself.
- Talk to your parents or significant others when facing any negative consequences from using social networking sites.

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