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GLOBALISATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA IDENTITY FORMATION

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Abstract

With advances in information and communication technology, social interactions among people of diverse backgrounds and integration of regions across the globe have assumed a new dimension. Distance and time are no longer constraints to communication. While globalisation is conceptually integrating, for instance, Africa with the rest of the world, the use of the social media technology is contextually providing platforms for social interactions among Africans and between Africans and the Western world. This new order of integration and interactions has provided Africa with such opportunity of keeping pace with global development but at the cost of losing identity by following the seemingly evolving globalised crowd that encourages the culture of commonness in a new reconstructed digital space. The provision of mechanism for user profile and personalisation within the social media technology framework allows for identity formation within the context of its construction and negotiation but the intrinsic influence of globalisation on Africa has resulted in overlapping identity, especially for Africans in diaspora. This qualitative research study examines the narratives around the implications of globalisation and social media technologies on Africa identity formation.

Keywords: Globalization, Social media, Technology, Culture, Intercultural communication, Cultural identity, Identity formation.

Introduction

The world is changing rapidly as a result of new digital technologies which have revolutionised opportunities for and the nature of networking and communication (Edmonds, 2012). Thus, globalisation provides platforms for social interactions among Africans and between Africans and the Western world. The time and space compression caused by the convergence of social media and globalization creates a universal cyberspace in which new cultural identity is emerging in different virtual communities.

Chen (2010) argued that globalization is a dialectically dynamic process, which is caused by the pushing and pulling between the two forces of cultural identity and cultural diversity, or between localization and universalization. Social media is also the main force accelerating the trend of globalization in human society (Chen, 2007). The globalization trend has led to the transformation of almost all aspects of human society. For instance, socially and culturally, globalization has changed the perception of what a community is, redefined the meaning of cultural identity and civic society, and demanded a new way of intercultural interaction (Chen & Zhang, 2010).

It is essential to understand how different populations use digital technologies and social media in order to explore their potential to improve social interaction and identity outcomes. Social media is crucial in the process of developing a global identity, because it provides exposure to people, events, and information from all over the world. However, they also maintain a local identity that is distinctive (Navarro, 2007). It was argued that local cultures change in response to globalization. Most people manage to adapt to the changes and develop a bicultural or hybrid identity that provides the basis for living in their local culture and also participating in the global culture (Erikson, 2001).

Slater (2002) discussed the performative aspects of identity online; that is, you become what you type. He argues that social media provide spaces within which people can perform whatever identity they choose and create new and multiple identities inconceivable in offline worlds (Slater 2002). Today's youth experiment especially Africa with different identities, or 'dynamic and shifting constructions and presentations of self' (Coiro et al. 2008, 526), through Web-enabled authorship in the form of homepages, blogs, and online Social Network site (SNS) profiles (Steinkuhler 2008). Stern (2007) described how Africans use online authorship to work out their personal beliefs, challenge cultural assumptions and navigate complex relationships. Within Social Network site (SNSs), the creation of online personal profiles and the formation of social networks impact directly on the expression of identity and how identity is performed and reinforced. Williams (2008) argued

that the social media has the potential for creative disclosure within a safe outlet for self-expression which bereft Africans their cultural value

Distortion within the African Nations as a Result of Social Media and Globalization Realities

Rapid development of social media has been the main force accelerating the trend of globalization in human society during the last few decades. With its distinctive and unique nature, the social media has enhanced human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level. Through this convergence, the mutual enhancement of social media and globalization has led to the transformation of almost all the aspects of human society. Social media being considered “social” is not only because of its successful integration in the form of the traditional interpersonal relationship and mass media, but also because of its social functions that enable individuals to equally control messages in interpersonal media as well as allows them to control messages within the social environment (Crosbie, 2002).

The convergence of social media and globalization brings about at least six social experiences for human beings, including social textual experiences, social ways of representing the world, social relationships between users and social media technologies, social conceptions of the biological body’s relationship to technological media and social patterns of organization and production (Grant & Kelly, 2009). These experiences will inevitably challenge the traditional formation and definition of social or cultural identity.

The social cultural identity formed by social media may not change the traditional meaning of cultural identity as a unique product through interaction in a specific group context, which gives members a sense of belongings to the group, but it will directly challenge the traditional attributes of cultural identity, namely: temporality, territoriality, contrastivity, interactivity, and multiplicity (Belay, 1996). Social media, especially Facebook, blogs, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and the iPhone have enabled people from every corner of the world to represent themselves in a particular way and stay connected in cyberspace. It is obvious that the flexibility of information presented and shared in the social media will directly affect, either positively or negatively, the development of intercultural relationships in the virtual community through the creation of a network of personal connection (Steinfeld, & Lanmpe, 2007).

Moreover, Elola and Oskoz (2009) found that in foreign language and study abroad contexts, the use of blogging not only showed a positive effect on the development of intercultural relationships, but also increased the degree of participants’ intercultural communication competence. In addition to

intercultural relationships on a personal level, social media also helps to establish international business relationships (Jackson, 2011).

Characteristics of Social Media

Zhang, (2010) argued that social media functionally allows people to interact with multiple persons simultaneously with the ability to individualize messages in the process of interaction. Kelly (2009) highlights five distinctive characteristics social media enjoys: digitality, convergency, interactivity, hypertextuality and virtuality.

First, digitalization is the most prominent feature of social media. Social media or digital media dematerializes media text by converting data from analog into digital form, which allows all kind of mathematical operations. Social media also makes it possible for a large amount of information to be retrieved, manipulated, and stored in a very limited space.

Second, Social media converges the forms and functions of information, media, electronic communication and electronic computing. The convergence power of social media can be easily demonstrated by the emergence of the Internet in terms of its powerful function embedded in computer information technologies and broadband communication networks. This also leads to the industry convergence displayed by the constant merger of big media companies and the product and service convergence evidenced by the successful connection and combination of media's material, product and service in the media industry.

Third, there is the interactive function of social media, i.e. interactions between users and the system regarding the use of producing and reproducing the content and form of the information during the interaction. In addition, the interactivity of social media makes the interaction among different networks and the retrieving of information through different operational systems, both available and convenient. The freedom in controlling the information endows social media a great power in the process of human communication.

Fourth, the hypertextuality of social media brings forth a global network centre in which information can freely move around and spontaneously interconnect. This global network phenomenon has begun to rebuild a social life experience for human beings, which in turn will lead the transformation of economic activities, cultural patterns, interactional styles, and other aspects of human society (Castells, 2000).

Finally, the cyberspace formed by social media allows people to generate virtual experience and reality. The invisible cyberspace not only induces a gap between reality and virtuality, but also effectuates the free alternation of one's gender, personality, appearance, and occupation. The

formation of virtual community that crosses all the boundaries of human society definitely will challenge the way we perceive reality and have traditionally defined identity (Jones, 1995). With these distinct features, social media pushes the trend of globalization to its highest level in human history.

Steger (2009) argued that globalization refers to the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space. In other words, globalization is social processes in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and people become increasingly aware that they are receding (Waters, 1995). It involves the expansion, stretching, intensification, and acceleration of social activities in both objective/material and subjective/human consciousness levels, or different levels of human society, including the entire world, a specific nation, a specific industry or organization, and an individual (Govindarajan & Gupta, 1997).

The powerful impact of globalization, enhanced by the advent of social media, is revealed in its dynamic, pervasive, interconnected, hybridized, and individually powerful attributes (Chen, 2005; Chen & Zhang, 2010). Globalization increases individual power in the social media society, which pluralizes the world by recognizing the ability and importance of individual components. Together, the dialectically dynamic, universally pervasive, holistically interconnected, culturally hybridized, and individually powerful characteristics of globalization enhanced and deepened by the stimulus and push of the emergence of social media has led to revolutionary changes in people's thinking and behaviors, redefined the sense of community, and restructured human society.

The impact of the integration of Social media and globalization can be summarized into five precise effects, namely, a shrinking world, the compression of time and space, close interaction in different aspects of society, global connectivity, and accelerated local/global competition/cooperation (Chen & Starosta, 2000). In other words, boundaries of human societies in terms of space, time, scope, structure, geography, function, profession, value, and beliefs are swiftly changing and transforming into a Social pattern of similarities and interconnectedness.

Nevertheless, although the interdependent relationship of social media and globalization is evident, the specific connection between the five distinctive characteristics of Social media (i.e., digitality, convergency, interactivity, hypertextuality, and virtuality), and the five manifest features of globalization (i.e., dialectically dynamic, universally pervasive, holistically interconnected, culturally hybridized, and individually powerful), remain a valuable research topic for scholars to further pursue.

The Impact of Social media on Intercultural Communication

Social media may also produce a negative impact on intercultural communication. For example, Qian and Scott (2007) found that revealing too much personal information in blogs, especially negative information about one's friends, employer, and others, tends to jeopardize or cause problems in establishing constructive human relationships intraculturally and interculturally. McEwan and Sobre-Denton (2011) argued that computer-mediated communication can promote and develop virtual cosmopolitanism and virtual third cultures. The authors indicated that through the construction of third culture space, a social, hybrid culture is created, in which interactants from differing cultures are able to gather cultural and social information, build online communities, and form intercultural relationships.

Bagdasaryan (2011) challenges the idea of cultural globalization. He argues that despite external economic pressures, societies tend to preserve their individual identities and cultural values eventually determine the economic direction of the countries. This doesn't mean that societies will not be impacted by the globalization trend. However, there are more profound elements in national cultures, which resist the uniformity derived from economic and political ideologies. On the one hand, intrinsically, the Social culture hatched from Social media creates a continuity gap between traditions and innovations within a culture. Before the emergence of Social media, according to Bagdasaryan (2011), traditions and innovations in human society co-existed in a dynamically synchronized way, but the speed and impact of the Social media resulted in the inability of traditional values to keep pace with the Social cultural values produced by Social media. This cultural gap has caused difficulty in understanding or communication between generations and among people in the same culture.

Social media also extrinsically breeds communication gaps between different cultural and ethnic groups. The fragmented nature of social media has switched traditional cultural grammar, cultural themes, or cultural maps to a social pattern, resulting in the loss of traditional cultural logic. The rearrangement or restructuring of cultural patterns, or worldview, demands that members of a culture realign their communication behaviour within their own community, and to learn a social way of interaction with people from differing cultures. Social media fosters a social culture in human society, in which the degree of ambiguity and uncertainty has been reshuffled and has reached its highest point, especially in the process of intercultural communication. How to readjust to this social

situation and smoothly achieve the goal of mutual understanding for people from different cultural groups in this chaotic stage of cultural change becomes a great challenge for the practical need of interaction in daily life and research in the scholarly community. It is under this circumstance that more scholars are becoming involved in the investigation of the relationship between social media and intercultural communication (Allwood & Schroeder, 2000; Pfister & Soliz, 2011; Shuter, 2011).

Social Media and Cultural Identity

The convergence of social media and globalisation brings about at least six social experiences for human beings, including social textual experiences, social ways of representing the world, social relationships between users and social media technologies, social conceptions of the biological body's relationship to technological media and social patterns of organization and production (Lister, Dovery, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009). These experiences will inevitably challenge the traditional formation and definition of social or cultural identity. In other words, the use of social media is shaking the root of cultural identity by weakening or strengthening the intensity of the relationship between people and community (Hampton & Wellman, 1999; Singh, 2010).

The time and space compression caused by the convergence of social media and globalization creates a universal cyberspace in which social cultural identity is emerging in different virtual communities.

The social cultural identity formed by social media may not change the traditional meaning of cultural identity as a unique product through interaction in a specific group context, which gives members a sense of belonging to the group, but it will directly challenge the traditional attributes of cultural identity, namely, temporality, territoriality, contrastivity, interactivity, and multiplicity (Belay, 1996). More specifically, cultural identity fostered by social media is no longer a product of historical development (i.e., temporality) confined in an avowal process of people in a geographical place (i.e., territoriality). It may still be a distinct collective consciousness based on the members' sense-making process (i.e. contrastivity).

In sum, social media continues to establish different kinds of social communities without the limit of time and space, which makes cultural identity more dynamic, fluid, and relativized, and imposes austere challenges to the autonomy and stability of cultural identity (Tan, 2005; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2010). The impact of social media on cultural identity has become one of the issues intercultural communication scholars are most concerned about (e.g., Chen & Zhang, 2010; Cheong & Gary, 2011; Chiang, 2010; Wang, Huang, Huang, & Wang, 2009; Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009; William, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009).

The Impacts of ICT and Globalization on Identity Formation

Contemporary consideration of the status of identity has been greatly facilitated by the spread of information technologies (Castells 1997; Turkle, 1997; Poster, 2001). In some cases, the diffusion of a technology developed in an external society has dramatic consequences on our way of life and culture. When a new technology is introduced, we usually consider the artifact itself: its appearance, utility, popularity, aesthetic and cool features; because media compels people to do so. Social changes and identities are influenced if not determined by technological innovations because technology is more than a machine and can very well convey information and embody social and cultural dimensions that shape society. MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) affirms that the prevailing way of thinking about technology is still technological determinism that acknowledges a one-way relationship between technology and society in which technology causes social change and impacts on people. Moreover, substantive theory of technology argues that technology is not a good, bad, neutral or apolitical tool (Ellul, 1964; Heidegger, 1977), instead, it is embedded with values and ideologies shaping people's consciousness (Postman, 1993), and constitutes a new type of cultural system that restructures the entire social world as an object of control (Pacey, 1992). Therefore, technology can bring substantial changes to culture along with it and that manipulates the way people communicate both at the material and virtual levels and also how they see the world.

Conclusion

The new order of social media integration and interactions has provided Africa with such opportunity of keeping pace with global development but at the cost of losing identity by following the seemingly evolving globalised crowd that encourages the culture of commonness in a new reconstructed digital space. It is fair to assume that with the rapid development and expansion of globalization, the dominance of a prevalent culture and the ensuing consequences are inevitable. At the same time it is irrefutable that such dominance will result in cultural disorders and upheavals in value systems, especially in the African countries, which ultimately will manifest in an identity crisis in these states. Scholars in developing societies must come up with reasonable and practical solutions to this problem and not only preserve and protect their identity, but also provide means to integrate into the globalization process.

This paper examines the provision of mechanism for user profile and personalization within the social media technology framework that allows for identity formation within the context of its construction

and negotiation but the intrinsic influence of globalisation on Africa has resulted in overlapping identity, especially for Africans in diaspora.

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