



The Impact of Social Media on Ghanaian Youth: A Case Study of the Nima and Maamobi Communities in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

Social media has been widely adopted in the twenty-first century, with high enthusiasm among youth around the world. Research on new media practices in Ghana has been described as wide open, with very few studies focusing on youth social media use. The main objectives of this study were to investigate the extent of social media use and the purposes, access, and challenges of its use by the young people of Nima and Maamobi, two suburbs of Accra, Ghana. One hundred fifty youth ages 11–19 and five adult Internet café attendants participated in the study. The findings revealed patterns of young people’s social media use consistent with similar studies of youth in other countries, with high use among the youth in these two economically and educationally disadvantaged communities. The study revealed the need for young people to have a greater awareness of the risks of social media use. The conclusions include recommendations for nationwide education of youth in Ghana about responsible use of social media, with policy and educational interventions led by multiple stakeholders, including school and public libraries and government agencies, to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of social media use among Ghanaian youth.

Introduction

Social media has been widely adopted in the twenty-first century, with strong enthusiasm among youth. The latest statistics from the Pew Internet Project report indicate that 89% of U.S. Internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 use social media.ⁱ Statistics on teens’ use of social networking sites in Ghana are not available, but 2014 statistics on African Internet usage released by Internet World statistics reveal that approximately 1,630,420 Ghanaians are using Facebook.ⁱⁱ This is about 6.6% of the total population of 24,658,823.ⁱⁱⁱ This paper reports on a survey conducted in 2014 with 150 youth ages 11–19 from two neighborhoods in Accra, Ghana.

The survey was conducted at five Internet cafés, and an adult operator from each café was also included in the study. Utilizing the Uses and Gratifications theory for framing, the research examined youths' purposes of social media use, as well as their access to social media, how social media use supported their developmental needs, and problems they encountered in using social media. The author finds that use and access patterns among these youth are largely similar to research reported from other countries.

A Short Profile of Nima and Maamobi

Nima and Maamobi are twin communities in the Ayawaso East constituency of Accra. This constituency is located within the eastern part of the Accra Metropolitan Area of the Greater Accra Region of the Republic of Ghana. The two suburbs have been categorized by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) as low-income and non-indigenous (dominantly migrant) areas. The populations of Nima and Maamobi are 69,044 and 49,812, respectively. Most inhabitants are engaged in informal businesses such as trading. Their living environment is characterized by poor drainage, inadequate housing, and haphazard development. Buildings include poor-quality material such as mud walls, zinc roofing sheets, and untreated timber.^{iv} A report by the Earth Institute Millennium Cities Initiative describes the two suburbs as illegal squatter settlements rapidly undergoing physical and social decay. The report further indicates a high prevalence of both organized and petty crime, leading to stigmatization of residents, especially young people.^v

Statement of the Problem

Social media offers young people several benefits and opportunities, including access to information, extended social networks, social skills practice, identity expression, informal learning opportunities, interest-based groups, development and maintenance of friendships, and fun.^{vi} Social media has been described as an important part of a young person's life and a platform for experimentation, creative self-expression, and identity formation.^{vii}

The increased use of social media, or social network sites (SNS), by youth across the world has several risks and consequences. They include privacy concerns such as sharing too much information, posting of false information about themselves or others, exposure to fraudsters and marketers, and addictions to Internet or social media use that might impact negatively on their social, psychological, and emotional well-being.^{viii} Other possible negative outcomes are exposure to cyber-bullying; allowing others access to personal information; exposure to inappropriate content, sexting, and outside influences of third-party advertising groups; and sleep deprivation, which can lead to low academic output.^{ix}

In Ghana one major concern about Internet use, including use of social media, is cyber fraud, locally known as *sakawa*. Cyber fraud includes using stolen credit cards to make online purchases, conducting online dating scams, and luring contacts to participate in money transfers.^x

In spite of the prevalent use of social media by young people across the world, few studies have investigated social media use by youth in Ghana, with most of the research focused on issues of national policy and access.^{xi} Thus there is a need for youth-centered research on social media use to address this knowledge gap.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What is the extent of social media use by the youth of Nima and Maamobi?
- What are the purposes for which they use social media?
- How do they access social media?
- What problems do they encounter in the use of social media?

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the knowledge about social media use by youth in Ghana. The findings inform government and other stakeholders about trends in young people's social media use and problems associated with use and suggest measures to promote effective and responsible use of social media among youth while mitigating the risks associated with its use.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by Uses and Gratification theory, which suggests that people actively choose their media based on their needs. In other words, people's choice of media is highly influenced by their needs and the gratifications or satisfaction they get by using these media.^{xii} Five main categories of needs have been identified based on the social and psychological functions of mass media. They include cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and escape and diversion needs.^{xiii}

This study adopts Uses and Gratifications theory as a theoretical framework for the following reasons:

- It has previously been used successfully to examine the underlying reasons for media use to satisfy particular needs.
- It has previously been used successfully to understand consumers' motivations and behaviors in the use of traditional media such as TV and radio.

Researchers are currently using this theory to examine the extent of use, motivations, and gratifications for the exponential use of new media including social network sites (SNS).^{xiv}

A number of studies have applied Uses and Gratifications theory in investigating social media use. For example, Whiting and Williams identified ten uses and gratifications related to people's social media use: entertainment, communication, expression of opinions, surveillance/knowledge about others, information sharing, relaxation, social interaction, information seeking, pastime, and convenience. The theory has been applied by Karimi et al. to compare the motivations for use of SNS by higher-education students from Iran, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and South Africa.^{xv} Other work has shown that motivations for joining SNS include keeping in touch with friends, getting to know more people, networking, finding academic course information, and meeting people with mutual interests.^{xvi}

Literature Review

Definition of Terms

Social media are “forms of electronic communication (as web sites for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos).”^{xvii} A closely related phrase is social network site (SNS), which is defined as “a networked communication platform in which participants (1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that can consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; (2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and (3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.”^{xviii} In this paper, the terms “social media” and “social network sites” are used interchangeably. Some of the most popular SNS include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google+, Tumblr, Instagram, Flickr, Vine, Meetup, Ask.fm, meet me, Snapchat, vk.com, Tagged, Classmates, MySpace, YouTube, Picasa, the Student Room, the Math Forum, CyWorld, LunarStorm, WhatsApp, Skype, Yahoo Messenger, MSN Messenger, and so on.^{xix}

Trends in Youth Social Media Use

A Pew Research Center report from 2013 finds that Facebook is the most preferred social media platform of young people in terms of numbers of registered users.^{xx} A 2015 Pew report indicates that 71% of U.S. teens ages 13–17 use Facebook. Other social media sites used by this demographic group are Instagram (52%), Twitter (33%), Google+ (33%), Vine (24%), and Tumblr (4%).^{xxi} Some studies have reported a more recent decrease in the enthusiasm of young people’s use of Facebook as a result of increasing adult presence, the stress of managing their reputations on Facebook, and excessive sharing of content by their friends.^{xxii}

Young people in America use social media sites for many and varied purposes, including posting profiles, videos of themselves, relationship statuses, personal interests, and comments on friends’ content; sharing personal information such as birth date, e-mail address, school name, cell phone number, pictures, and so on. Additional purposes include keeping in touch with friends, developing contacts, consuming content (such as watching music video and advertisements), browsing through profiles, exploring self-identities, sending instant messages or text messages, and joining groups.^{xxiii}

Another recent Pew Research Center report finds that the majority of U.S. teens (92%) post their real names to their Facebook profiles, followed by posting their interests (84%), birth dates (82%), relationship statuses (62%), and videos of themselves (24%).^{xxiv}

Another U.S. study explored the use of SNS as a source of information for teens. It investigated the question-asking-and-answering practices of 158 high school students on popular social networking sites. The findings revealed that the participants asked questions to satisfy 28 categories of information needs. The majority of the questions (76%) were school related, suggesting that social media can be a major source of information for answering the questions teens care about, especially school-related information.^{xxv}

A study by Boniel-Nissim and Barak suggests that social media use can be therapeutic. Their study examined the effect of blogging on adolescents with social-emotional difficulties. The findings showed that generally open blogging had a greater and significant effect on participants, irrespective of subject content, when compared with blogs that were closed to readers' comments. Their findings posited that Internet-based blogging is a viable intervention to help adolescents with social-emotional difficulties. The researchers also saw it as an enhanced form of writing diaries, since it offers the writer not only text, but pictures, movies, and links to other web pages, while expressing themselves, sometimes anonymously.^{xxvi}

A few studies in Africa have discussed various aspects of social media use by youth. For example, a South African study reveals that young people use social media as a source of political, social, educational, economic, and cultural information.^{xxvii} Kassam discusses the role of digital social media in teaching Kenyan students responsible citizenship in a democracy. He mentions that skills—such as having respect for all irrespective of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, taking a moral stance on issues, showing concern for others, and possessing the ability to argue respectfully with others—can be taught in the classroom without access to social media. However, he argued that in the broader context of knowledge acquisition and communication within and outside the country, it is important to include digitized media technologies in the curriculum to impart critical media literacy skills to students. Such skills can help prevent mass violence, protests, and demonstrations, which can be caused by students disregarding their civic responsibilities and not respecting the rights of others.^{xxviii}

A qualitative study of Facebook use among young people ages 17–23 in Viwandani, a slum in Kenya, reports that youth accessed Facebook at Internet cafés and on their cell phones. They used Facebook to communicate with their friends and relatives abroad, to monitor the social status of their friends, to look for romantic partners, to access short-term job opportunities through friends, to market their businesses, to keep up with fans, to seek remittances from friends and family members abroad for emergencies, and to read Bible verses posted by friends. They regretted the limited time they were able to spend on Facebook because they lacked money to pay for Internet access at cafés or to buy airtime for data use on their phones.^{xxix}

A Nigerian study involving 932 polytechnic students between the ages of 15 and 29 years reveals that the students preferred to use Facebook and WhatsApp to share information; communicate with friends; access movies, photos, and music; search for jobs; propagate their religion; and conduct business.^{xxx} Similarly, a Mauritius study involving 4,545 secondary students reports that the teens preferred Facebook for keeping in touch with friends and family members, making new friends, discussing schoolwork, and sharing photos, music, and videos with their friends.^{xxxi}

According to Davies and Cranston, youth are at risk in engaging with strangers in their social media use, which might lead to serious consequences such as sexual abuse.^{xxxii} However, Madden et al. report that teens' Facebook friends are a reflection of their offline social network of friends. In other words, they know most of their Facebook friends personally. They include friends from their school and other schools, and friends of members of their extended family, parents, and siblings. Other Facebook friends are teachers, coaches, and celebrities such as musicians and athletes.^{xxxiii}

Existing findings suggest that youth spend varied amounts of time on SNS. For example, 43% of 100 young people between the ages of 10 and 24 who participated in a Swaziland study used social media sometimes, 40% used it always, and 17% used it often.^{xxxiv} The Nigerian study revealed that a majority of the students used social media more than five hours per day.^{xxxv} With regard to the Mauritius study, 52% of the respondents accessed SNS daily, 35% weekly, 6% twice a month, and 7% once a month.^{xxxvi}

There are many problems and risks associated with youth social media use. One of the major risks is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the act of posting hurtful, false, and embarrassing information about another person.^{xxxvii} A Pew Research Center report on cyberbullying indicates that 32% of online teens had experienced or participated in some form of online harassment, such as spreading malicious rumors; forwarding private material like pictures via e-mail, text, or instant messaging without permission; or receiving threatening messages.^{xxxviii} Drussell has emphasized that there is a need to pay attention to cyberbullying because of the detrimental effects on victims, including feelings of depression, guilt, and shame, which can lead to self-harming and withdrawal from family and friends.^{xxxix}

O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson also highlight the consequences of some identified risks of youth social media use such as sexting as well as privacy issues.^{xl} Sexting is using digital devices such as computers and cell phones to send, receive, or forward sexually explicit photographs, images, or messages. These images can then be shared and distributed rapidly. About 20% of teens have reportedly sent or posted nude or semi-nude photographs or videos of themselves. The consequences of sexting include emotional stress and accompanying mental health conditions for perpetrators, school suspensions, and in some cases (in the United States) child pornography charges. Lenhart explains that sexting in itself is not a form of harassment; it is when the images are shared that the senders become victims of bullying and harassment.^{xli}

Activities that put young people’s privacy at risk include sharing vital personal information and posting false information about themselves or others. O’Keeffe and Clark-Pearson emphasize that teens can be ignorant of their digital footprint—the record of their web activities—and the fact that whatever they post online becomes a permanent record.^{xlii}

The participants of the Swaziland study also indicated several harmful effects of social media use on youth, including addiction to SNS use, antisocial behavior, exposure of underage users to pornography and immoral language, falling standards of both spoken and written English as a result of the use of colloquial language on social media, and the shirking of household chores in favor of social media use.^{xliii}

Nonetheless, an analysis of a national survey of 1,511 UK children ages 9–11 revealed a positive relationship between online opportunities and online risks. In other words, young people who are skilled in using the Internet and thus make the most of the opportunities available on the Internet are also more vulnerable to the risks associated with its use.^{xliv} It is therefore important for young people to learn to navigate away from the risks, while making the most of the opportunities offered by social media.

Related Literature in Ghana

A review of the literature revealed that few empirical studies have investigated the use of social media by youth in Ghana. The bulk of this literature involves discussions by ordinary Ghanaians and opinion leaders in the print media of the negative effects of social media. For example, Amofah-Serwaa and Dadzie investigated social media use and its implications on child behavior in a basic school. Their findings show that all participants were aware of social media and used sites such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Yahoo Messenger, and Skype to communicate with friends and family and for entertainment purposes, including watching videos and playing games. Both teachers and parents were aware of pupils' use of social media. However, parents had no knowledge of their children's social media friends. With regard to the influence of social media on the behavior of students, 48% indicated that they had not been affected by what they saw online, 2.5% felt that their learning had been positively affected, and 23.3% said that they could not concentrate fully on their studies. Over 70% of parents answered that their children had become friendlier and their dressing, speech, and reading habits had improved. The negative effects noticed by parents included inappropriate dressing, unorthodox hairstyles, distractions from learning, and use of jargon or Pidgin English by their children. The participants made suggestions on how to mitigate the negative effects of social media. Teachers advocated control of students' social media use and formulating policies to ensure responsible use of social media. Parents suggested that social media be used for academic purposes only, at specific times under parental supervision, with enforcement of censorship in social media use.^{xlv}

Another study investigated social media participation and its effect on the academic performance of students in four senior high schools in Ghana. The findings revealed WhatsApp and Facebook as the students' preferred social media. Purposes for using social media included making friends (41.4%), discussing school-related matters (30.5%), and entertainment (15.8%). Others shared and discussed exam questions with friends. Students spent varied amounts of time online each day. Thirty-eight percent of respondents spent more than 8 hours, 25.8% 1–2 hours, 21% 3–5 hours, and 15.8% 6–7 hours or 8–12 hours daily. Some respondents (38%) indicated that they use social media during school hours. The negative effects of social media on students' performance included reduced time for studying, distraction from schoolwork, and procrastination in completing assignments. Other negative effects included poor grammar and spelling, incorrect sentence construction, and falling grades. In spite of these negative effects, 45.1% of respondents felt that use of social media had improved their reading skills.^{xlvi}

Thus, the limited literature on the use of social media by youth in Ghana shows that social media offer young people a platform for self-identity, self-expression, creativity, and networking. The literature also captures concerns for the erosion of Ghanaian culture and falling standards in education, especially in use of the English language, as a result of exposure to and use of social media by young people in Ghana. There have been calls for educating youth to raise awareness of the risks associated with using social media and to promote responsible use. There is a need for more research to investigate the effects of social media use on young people in Ghana, especially its effect on Ghanaian traditions and culture among youth.

Methodology

The study used the mixed-method approach to generate more complete data and provide a better understanding of the research problem.^{xlviii} It was conducted in the Nima and Maamobi communities in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. The researcher first conducted an informal survey in December 2013 to identify and select Internet cafés for the study. She visited a total of forty Internet cafés to observe patronage by youth who fell within the age range (11–19) for the study. This was done by unobtrusively counting the number of young people in each café at the time of the visit. The survey revealed several Internet cafés in the study area, coupled with a large population of youth often found browsing the Internet at these cafés or on their phones after school or during break periods. Five cafés with the highest number of youth were selected for the study.

The cafés are of different sizes and are equipped with secondhand desktop computers, ranging from 3 to about 65 computers, with broadband Internet connections, tables and chairs, fans, and a few with air conditioners. They provide a range of services such as printing, photocopying, scanning, computer repair, networking, Web design, and telephone services, and a few sell drinks and pastries on the side. They have varied opening and closing hours, and a few offer 24-hour services. The youth patronize the cafés daily after school hours, Monday to Thursday, Friday after Muslim prayers (12:00 p.m.), and on the weekend. The majority of the residents of these communities are Muslim and therefore attend Friday prayers.

The study population comprised all the youth and five Internet café staff (“operators”) in the Nima and Maamobi communities. Convenience sampling was used to select 150 young people ages 11–19 years from five Internet cafés in the study locations. Operators of these five cafés were also selected as study participants.

Convenience sampling was adopted for the selection of study participants because of several factors, including lack of statistics on the youth population in the two communities, the limited time available for the completion of the study, and lack of statistics on youth attendance at the cafés. (Café operators do not collect attendance statistics for their operations. They depend on café software known as Handy Café, which records sales only.) Thirty volunteers were selected from each café to participate in the study.

Data was collected in June 2014. The main data collection instruments were questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was designed to collect demographic information, frequency of SNS use, purposes for use of social media, social media preferences, access to social media, effect of social media on developmental needs, and problems with social media use. It was pretested on ten participants in order to correct poorly worded and ambiguous questions, unclear choices and instructions, and so on.

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher at each café after following the appropriate ethical procedures such as explaining the purpose of the study and seeking the consent of participants. She was at hand to answer participants’ queries and to clarify any of the study’s questions that they did not understand. The café operators were interviewed about statistics on youth patronage, young people’s purposes for using the Internet cafés, knowledge of filtering

systems, types of software used in monitoring the café, knowledge about cyber crimes, and the minimum age of people allowed to use the cafés.

The main problem encountered in the collection of data was relative unavailability of the participants during the time of data collection. Most of the young people were preparing to write their final Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), which begins in June; therefore, they were not coming to the cafés regularly. Those using the cafés were often not willing to complete the questionnaire, with the excuse that they were studying for their exams. This necessitated a number of visits to the cafés before the target number of participants was reached. In spite of these problems, the quality of the data did not appear to be compromised in any way, as those who agreed to complete the questionnaire were very responsive and supportive.

Results

Background of Participants

The participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, educational level, and occupation of parents. The results (table 1) show that most of the respondents were males (68%), between the ages of 17 and 19 (50%), and attended secondary schools.

Table 1: Summary of Respondents' Background

CATEGORIES	N = 150				
Gender	Male (68%)	Females			
Age groups	11–13 years	14–16 years	17–19 years	No response (4.6%)	
Education	Upper	Junior HS	Senior HS	Tertiary (18.0%)	No response

Parents'	Trader	Farmer	Civil servant	Commercial driver (7.3%)	Other

The majority of their parents were self-employed and mostly worked as traders (44.6%), with a few working as commercial drivers and farmers. The next largest group (28.0%) was government workers or civil servants.

Use of Social Media

The respondents were asked to indicate whether they had profiles on any SNS. The results showed that social media is popular among the youth visiting Internet cafés in the two communities, where 76% of respondents had profiles, 8% did not, and 8.6% did not respond.

They were further asked to indicate the types of social media they used. The results (table 2) showed that Facebook and WhatsApp were the most popular SNS among the participants by 83.3% and 70.6%, respectively. Other SNS used by study participants in descending order were Yahoo Messenger, Twitter, YouTube, Skype, and MySpace.

Table 2: Social Media Profiles of Respondents

<i>N</i> = 150		
Categories	Number of users	Percentage
Facebook	125	83.3%
Twitter	40	26.6%
WhatsApp	106	70.6%
YouTube	36	24%
Skype	24	16%
Yahoo/MSN Messenger	43	28.6%

MySpace	10	6.6%
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Frequency of Use of Social Media

The participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they used different SNS, whether they used SNS daily, three times a week, once a week, or occasionally. The results (table 3) show that Facebook and WhatsApp were used much more frequently than the other SNS. For example, 60% and 44% of respondents indicated they used WhatsApp and Facebook, respectively, compared to 16% and 6.6% of respondents who said they use Yahoo Messenger and Twitter.

Table 3: Frequency of Use of Social Media

N = 150				
Categories	Daily	3 times a week	Once a week	Occasionally
Facebook	66 (44%)	30 (20%)	12 (8%)	11 (7.3%)
Twitter	10 (6.6%)	14 (9.3%)	7 (4.6%)	9 (6%)
WhatsApp	90 (60%)	9 (6%)	1 (0.6%)	6 (4%)
YouTube	8 (5.3%)	16 (10.6%)	6 (4%)	5 (3.3%)
MySpace	3 (2%)	4 (2.7%)	3 (2%)	3 (2%)
Skype	6 (4%)	6 (4%)	6 (4%)	6 (4%)
Yahoo Messenger	24 (16%)	9 (6%)	5 (3.3%)	10 (6.6%)

Hours Spent Using Social Media

Respondents were also asked to indicate how many hours they spend each day using SNS. The findings showed that 10% of respondents spent less than an hour per day, 52% 1–3 hours, 13.3% 4–6 hours, and 1.3% 7–9 hours per day on SNS. Also 7.3% of the respondents spent 10 hours or more a day on social media. The hours spent by youth in the current study are higher than those reported in other studies. A similar study involving Somali youth ages 21–30 reported that 30.9% spent 1–2 hours daily on Facebook, 24.4% 2–3 hours, 19.9% less than an hour, 12.9% more than 4 hours, and 11.9% between 3–4 hours.

Purpose for Use of Social Media

To determine the uses and gratifications that youth derive from using SNS, respondents were asked to indicate the purposes for which they used social media. The results (table 4) show that the respondents primarily used social media for staying connected, which included chatting with old friends (74%), making new friends (73.3%) and staying in touch with family members (62.6%).

Table 4: Purposes for Use of Social Media

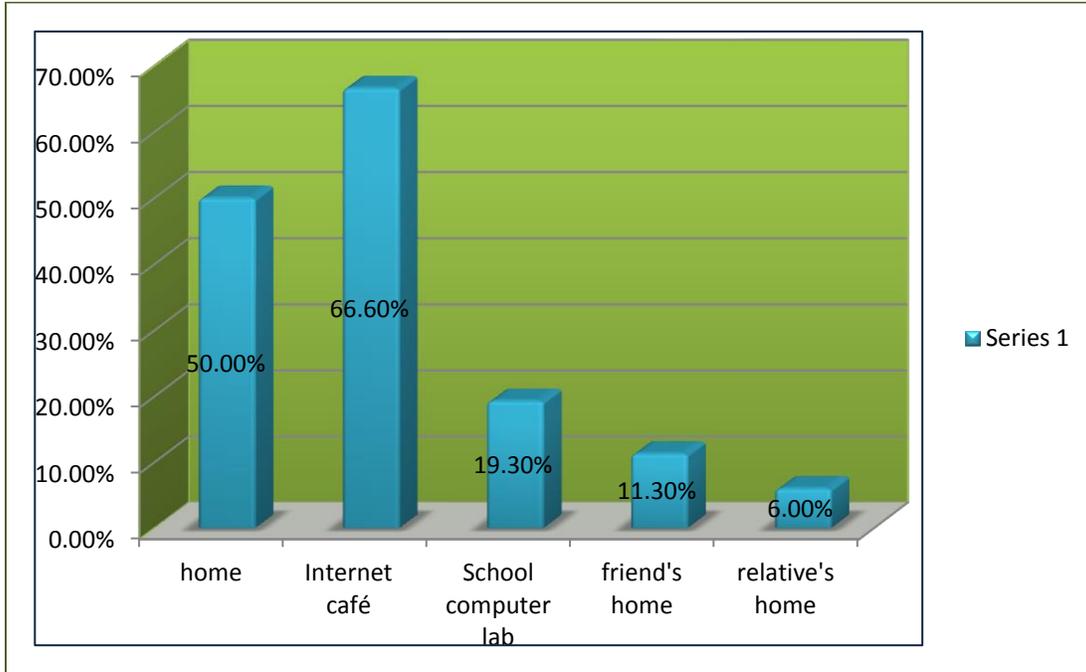
<i>N</i> = 150				
Purposes	Activities			
Staying	Making new friends: 110 (73.3%)	Chatting with old friends: 111 (74%)	Staying in touch with family members: 94 (62.6%)	
Entertainment	Watching movies/videos: 58 (38.6%)	Playing games: 38 (25.3%)	Watching sports: 45 (30%)	Listening to music: 66 (44%)
Sharing	Posting/updating statuses and timelines: 60 (40%)	Sending messages: 112 (74.6%)	Posting/updating profiles: 59 (39%)	Uploading/downloading videos: 46 (30.6%)
Education	Keeping up to date with current affairs: 61 (40.6%)	Sharing/discussing school-related information: 80 (53.3%)	Learning about topics of interest: 42 (28%)	Learning new technological skills: 45 (30%)
Business	Shopping: 23 (15.3%)	Promoting/doing business: 30 (20%)	Other: 8 (5.3%)	

Other purposes included entertainment, such as listening to music (44%) and watching movies (38.6%) and sports (30%); sharing content, such as sending messages (74.6%), and posting and updating statuses and timelines (40%); education, such as sharing or discussing school-related information (53.3%) and learning about new topics of interest (28%) and new technological skills (30%); and finally promoting/doing business (30%) and shopping online (15.3%).

Access to Social Media

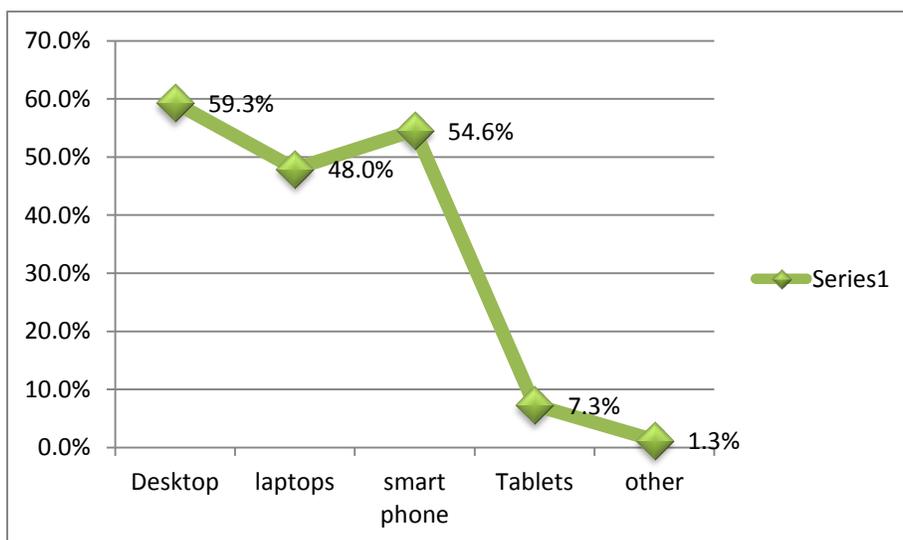
The respondents were asked to indicate how and where they accessed social media sites. The results (figure 1) show that they mostly accessed social media from Internet cafés (66.6%) and their homes (50.0%).

Figure 1: Access to Social Media



The findings of the study further revealed that the respondents accessed social media through various technological devices (figure 2) including desktop computers (59.3%), smartphones (54.6%), laptops (48%), and tablets (7.3%).

Figure 2: Devices for Accessing Social Media Sites



Satisfaction of Developmental Needs

The Uses and Gratification theory indicates that people's choice of media is highly influenced by their needs and the gratification, or satisfaction, they get by using those media. Also social media has been associated with several benefits for adolescent development, such as identity formation, creative self-expression, and development and maintenance of new friendships. Therefore, the respondents were asked to indicate the types of developmental needs that had been satisfied by their use of social media. The majority of the respondents (table 5) indicated that their friendship needs (68.6%) had been met, followed by social relationships need (56%), need to learn and discover new things (48%), and need for family attachment (46%). A few of the respondents indicated (in descending order) that their need to freely express themselves (self-expression), to be accepted by their peers, to be loved and shown affection, to be shown recognition (self-esteem), to freely express negative thoughts, and to have some romance have been met by their use of social media.

Table 5: Satisfaction of Development Needs

N = 150		
Activity	Frequency	Percent
Self-expression	32	21.3%
Social relationships	84	56%
Friendship	103	68.6%
Love and affection	30	20%
Acceptance by peers	32	21.3%
Romance	15	10%
Recognition (self-esteem)	28	18.6%
Need to express negative feelings	19	12.6%
Family attachment	69	46%
Learn and discover new things	72	48%

Problems Encountered in Using Social Media

The review of the literature revealed several risks/vulnerabilities and problems associated with the use of social media by young people; therefore, the study sought to find out whether participants of the study had similar or different encounters while using social media. The results show that the main problems (table 6) indicated by the respondents are unreliable power supply (59.3%), followed by unwanted friendship requests (42.6%) and lack of Internet access (37.3%). A few of the respondents also listed unwanted sexual advances from adults, low Internet bandwidth, lack of concentration at school, and sleep deprivation.

Table 6: Problems Encountered in Using Social Media

N = 150	
Nature of problems	Frequency
Unreliable power supply	89 (59.3%)
Unwanted friendship requests	64 (42.6%)

Lack of Internet access	56 (37.3%)
Unwanted sexual advances from adults	23 (15.3%)
Low Internet bandwidth	22 (14.6%)
Lack of concentration at school	19 (12.6%)
Sleep deprivation	18 (12%)

The survey also addressed the types of cyberbullying incidents the respondents had encountered in their use of social media. The results (table 7) revealed that 48% had experienced mean, offensive, or hurtful messages either from one-on-one contact or in a chat room, and 21.3% had experienced name-calling in a chat room. Another 52% of respondents had encountered fake profiles on social networking sites, and a further 12.6% of the respondents had encountered people spreading rumors online.

Table 7: Cyberbullying Incidents

<i>N</i> = 150	
Incidents	Frequency
Offensive message	72 (48.0%)
Name-calling	32 (21.3%)
Fake profiles	78 (52.0%)
Spreading rumors	19 (12.6%)

Findings from Café Operators

All five cafés used monitoring software called Handy Café software, which generated log-in codes for users, monitored computer-use time allotments, and automatically logged users out. Handy Café generated statistics concerning sales quantities and hours of Internet use but did not log personal statistics about users, such as age or gender. Thus, the café operators did not have access to accurate statistics indicating the number of young people who used their services or their demographic characteristics.

Of the five operators, only two had knowledge of filtering systems. One of them indicated that they had a technical team in charge of their network and so there was a filtering system in place that blocked inappropriate content such as pornography from their networks. Generally, they had no restrictions on the age of patrons with the exception of one operator who said that the café accepted children from age 12. He, however, mentioned that sometimes children below 12 years accompanied their older siblings to the café to learn how to play online games.

With regard to the purposes for which youth patronize their cafés, the operators confirmed some of the findings from the respondents, such as chatting with friends and family members, looking for new friends (especially foreigners), doing assignments, and watching and uploading videos. One of the operators emphasized that as a rule their role is to provide the service and not to meddle in the private affairs of their patrons, including what they do on the Internet.

Discussion of Results

The findings indicate that most of the participants' parents were self-employed. They worked as traders, farmers, and commercial drivers, vocations implying that the respondents come from poor backgrounds. This is not surprising, since most of the residents in the study location are low-skilled migrants. This is confirmed by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), which has categorized the area as low income and non-indigenous.^{xlviii} It can also be concluded that youth who patronize Internet cafés and are therefore likely to use social media in the Nima and Maamobi communities of Accra are secondary students between the ages of 17 to 19 years and from poor backgrounds.

Social media is now a common media platform for youth around the world, including participants of this study. The results reveal that 76% of respondents use SNS. This popularity can be ascribed to the many benefits, or uses and gratifications, that youth derive from it, such as building friendships and communicating with friends both offline and online, entertaining themselves, building their own content, and exploring their self-identities. For these young people from poor backgrounds with limited opportunities at home, social media offers an opportunity for personal and educational advancement, and many try to take the best possible advantage of it. The popularity of social media use among the youth of the current study is consistent with the results of other studies. For example, a 2010 Pew Internet Project report indicates that 73% of online teens use social media.^{xlix} An Indian study also reported that majority of Indian youth are members of one or more social media sites.¹ It is remarkable that the study participants are from poor backgrounds with low-quality educations and yet are avid users of social media. This finding stands in contrast with those of a recent Pew Research Center analysis of 27 nationwide surveys on use of technology by the U.S. public from 2005 to 2015.^{li} The analysis revealed socioeconomic differences in social media use. In the past decade, those living in affluent or high-income households and those with a college education were consistently more likely to use social media than those with only a high school education or lower.

The preferred social media of the study participants were Facebook and WhatsApp. It is probable that participants are using these two media to stay connected with friends, since some study reports reveal that Facebook and WhatsApp are generally popular among young people. For example, Madden et al. reports that 81% of online teens in the United States maintain profiles on Facebook, and a news item by Digital Media Asia found that about 69% of teens in Africa are using WhatsApp.^{lii}

The findings on the frequency of use of social media show that WhatsApp is used much more frequently on a daily basis than Facebook. This may be ascribed to the fact that WhatsApp is readily accessible from mobile phones without any log-in information. It also has call and messaging features, which are useful in communicating with friends and family members. In Ghana, using these features on WhatsApp is much cheaper than buying phone units to make calls or send text messages. Money spent on purchasing airtime is so high that “flashing” is popular among phone subscribers. A user “flashes” a contact by dialing his number and allowing the phone to ring only once or twice before hanging up. This is done to notify a contact to call back. The participants in the study may be using WhatsApp more frequently than other SNS to take advantage of its free chat and call features.

The findings also reveal that 1.3% of the respondents spent 7–9 hours a day using SNS and that 7.6% of them spent over 10 hours. Students spending this much time on SNS will have less available time for schoolwork, which can affect their academic performance. A Ghanaian study of the effects of social media use on school performance reveals that prolonged use leads to reduced time spent on schoolwork and procrastination in completing assignments.^{liii}

The study found that the respondents accessed social media via smartphones and desktop computers. As the young people were from poor backgrounds, they may not have had access to computers at home. Also, statistics from the last Ghana population census in 2010 revealed that only 7.9% of the 24,658,823 people in Ghana owned a desktop or a laptop computer.^{liv} This explains the high patronage of Internet cafés by youth in the study. It is not surprising that 54.6% of the respondents indicated that they accessed social media via their smartphones, as mobile phone ownership is quite high in the country. Census data on mobile phone ownership indicates that about 73.5% of the 4,010,054 residents in Accra age 12 years and above own a mobile phone.^{lv} It seems that this proportion nationwide has been increasing; statistics from the National Communications Authority showed that by the end of December 2015, there were 35,008,387 mobile voice subscribers in the country with a penetration rate of 127.63%.^{lvi} The number far exceeds the total population because it is commonplace to meet people with more than one phone subscription. Many users maintain multiple subscriptions as a means of controlling costs and also to have a fallback when one of the service providers goes off air temporarily, which is a common occurrence. It is also cheaper to speak to a contact on the same network. Sey is of the opinion that the mobile phone is no longer a preserve of the rich, because there are affordable ones on the market, so both the rich and poor can afford to own a mobile phone.^{lvii} That explains why the youth in the study can afford to own mobile phones and use them to access their favorite SNS.

Respondents reported unreliable power supply and lack of Internet access as problems encountered in using social media. Ghana was experiencing a protracted power-supply crisis at the time of the study. It led to the introduction of scheduled load shedding by the power utility to regulate supply.^{lviii} Lack of Internet access may also be attributed to the low economic status of most of the respondents. Many could not afford Internet access in their homes.

The findings also show that youth in the study had encountered some cyberbullying in their use of social media, including mean, offensive, or hurtful messages, name-calling in a chat room, fake profiles, and spreading of rumors on SNS. This finding is similar to those of other studies. For example, a 2007 Pew Internet Project report stated that one in every three online teens have experienced online harassment.^{lix} About 32% of all teenagers who use the Internet reported that they have been targets of a range of annoying and potentially menacing online activities, such as receiving threatening messages and having embarrassing pictures posted without their permission. Drussel warns that cyberbullying must be taken seriously since it can be detrimental to its victims and may lead to feelings of depression, guilt, and shame, as well as self-harm and withdrawal from family and friends.^{lx}

Theoretical Interpretation of the Study

The study adopted the Uses and Gratification theory, which postulates that people's choice of media is highly influenced by their needs and the gratification or satisfaction they derive by using those media. One of the assumptions of the theory is that people are able to verbalize their motivations for their choice of media, that is, their reasons for using the media. The youth in this study were able to identify their uses and gratifications for social media use when asked to indicate the purposes for which they used social media.^{lxi} They are discussed based on the uses and gratification categorizations of Elihu et al.^{lxii} and Whiting and Williams.^{lxiii} They include the following:

- *Social interaction*: Seventy-four percent of the respondents indicated that they use SNS to chat with old friends.
- *Communication utility*: Over 62% of the respondents responded that they use SNS for staying in touch with family members, and 74.6% used it to send messages.
- *Entertainment*: Respondents said they used SNS for listening to music, watching movies/videos and their favorite sports, and playing games.
- *Sharing information*: Forty percent and 39% of the respondents used SNS to post their statuses and profiles and update them, respectively. Over 53.3% also indicated that they share school-related information using SNS. Sharing of content is beneficial in many ways. According to Madden et al., Lenhart et al., and O'Keeffe and Clark-Pearson, it encourages collaboration and increased technical and visual literacy among young people.^{lxiv}
- *Information seeking*: Twenty-eight percent of the youth in this study also use SNS to look for information about topics that interest them.
- *Business*: The findings also show that 20% of the respondents use social media to promote and transact business. Considering the background of the youth as students with their parents' occupation as mostly petty traders, it was not clear how they funded their online business transactions. Further research is needed to investigate the nature of businesses these youth are doing online.
- *Social integrative needs*: Katz et al. define social integrative needs as strengthening contact with friends, family, and relations.^{lxv} The findings of this study reveal that use of SNS facilitates the satisfaction of the young people's need for friendship (68.6%) and for family attachments (46%).
- *Cognitive needs*: Cognitive needs are defined as the acquisition of information, knowledge, and understanding.^{lxvi} Forty-eight percent of the youth indicated that use of SNS satisfies their need to discover and learn new things. Learning new technological skills were reported by 30% of the youth.

Although the respondents in the study were from poor backgrounds and disadvantaged neighborhoods, their uses and gratifications are consistent with young people from more affluent environments. For example, Lenhart and Madden, as well as Smith, report that most teens in the United States use these networks to stay in touch with people they already know, either friends whom they see a lot or friends whom they rarely see in person.^{lxvii} Jones and Fox also found that young people ages 18–32 in the United States are likely to seek entertainment by watching online videos, playing online games, and downloading and listening to music.^{lxviii}

The uses and gratifications for SNS use identified in the current study are also comparable to those of young people from other cultures. For example, a study involving students from Iran, South Africa, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom reported similar uses and gratifications for social media use. These included entertainment, interpersonal communication, information sharing, and social interaction with friends and family members.^{lxxix}

Sharing of information via social media, especially school-related information, is corroborated by several studies, including Baker, who reported that students use social media to discuss class-related subjects with their peers and teachers.^{lxxx} O’Keeffe and Clark-Pearson also found that Facebook and similar social media programs allow students to gather outside of class to collaborate and exchange ideas about assignments.^{lxxxi} A U.S. study to investigate question-asking-and-answering practices of high school students on popular SNS sites also reports that the majority of the questions (76%) were school related.^{lxxxii} It is gratifying to note that in spite of the poor backgrounds and living circumstances of the youth in this study, they were able to share and receive content of importance, including school-related information. Thus social media can play a vital role in school-related information.

Implications of the Findings for Library and Information Services

The findings reveal that most of the youth in the study accessed SNS at Internet cafés. This implies that they had limited or no Internet access in their schools or homes, requiring them to go to these cafés and pay to use the Internet. With regard to Internet access in public libraries, since 2012 the Ghana Investment for Electronic Communications (GIFEC), an agency of the Ministry of Communications, has provided all public libraries in the country with computers and Internet connectivity under the GIFEC Library Connectivity Project. The project includes the provision of ten mobile library vans equipped with computers and Internet connectivity for all the regional libraries in the country to provide access to books and ICT (information and communications technology) to schoolchildren, street youth, and graduates from the non-formal education division in underserved communities and remote areas in each region.^{lxxxiii}

It is probable that the youth in this study are not aware of Internet connectivity in the public libraries where they could access the Internet for free, hence the high patronage of the cafés. This has been confirmed in a 2013 country brief by Beyond Access, which indicates that the majority of the Ghanaian populace was not aware of services offered in public libraries.^{lxxxiv} Thus public libraries must do more to publicize their services in media and in schools so that young people, especially those from low-income families such as the youth in this study, will access the Internet for free to improve their ICT skills, media literacy, and support their healthy development in areas such as identity formation and social skills.

This study also reports on some negative encounters and cyberbullying in the participants’ use of SNS, such as name-calling and offensive messages, as well as other negative effects of using SNS, such as sleep deprivation and lack of concentration at school. The public library can initiate a nationwide education of young people about the risks and dangers of using SNS and how to use them responsibly. They can collaborate with the Ministry of Education to organize seminars/workshops in schools, organize radio and TV talk shows on the subject, and produce handouts/flyers to be picked up in the libraries. Such a campaign will enable youth to enjoy the

benefits of using social media and educate them on how to avoid the risks associated with SNS use.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown that social media is popular among the study participants with over 70% having profiles on social networking sites, especially Facebook and WhatsApp. The patterns in social media use by young people in the study are largely consistent with those recorded in other studies in relation to popular social media sites, extent of use, purposes for use, mode of access, and problems encountered in using these sites, as well as the many benefits to their development, including self-identity, relationship development and maintenance, acquisition of social, communication, and technical skills, and new knowledge. Since accessing social media from Internet cafés is popular among young people, it is important for the government to formulate and implement policies that ensure that Ghanaian youth benefit maximally from its use but are well protected from the associated risks.

This study has provided significant data on the extent of use of social media, purposes for use, mode of access, and associated problems by youth from two suburbs of Accra, Nima and Maamobi. The main limitation is that the findings can be applied only to the 150 participants as a result of the use of non-probability sampling (convenience sampling) in their selection for the study. There is a need for more studies involving youth from other regions of the country and in different settings to confirm the findings.

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