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INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON GENDER EQUALITY ADVOCACY AMONG COUPLES IN SOUTH-WEST, NIGERIA

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Abstract
Gender issues are very sensitive and have over the time been at the center of most of public discourse. Perspective of handling gender issues depends on individual ideology and therefore difficult to have a common ground. Nowadays, the issue of gender has taken new dimension with the advent and application of social media. People are now constantly bombarded with series of gender equality stories in different forms and in different platforms of social media. Yes, the advocacy on gender equality is obvious through social media but the danger that came with it is quite alarming. This study is set to assess level of social media impact on gender equality issues as well find out which gender feel more oppressed in their relationship due to gender equality advocacy. Technology Determinism Theory was used to explain influence of social media on gender advocacy messages. Survey research method was applied through the use of a structured questionnaire and the sample for this study was 400 couples from, nine (9) local government areas in three South-west Nigeria states. Findings revealed that social media platforms play an important role in strengthening gender equality advocacy. These platforms disseminate critical information about gender equality to a large audience, with a special focus on the younger generation. While social media has been effective in promoting gender equality, it has also been related to an increased risk of marriage breakdown. Therefore, the study recommends that, gender advocacy should be made balanced and takes into account the opinions of all genders. As well, members of the public should be adequately sensitized and conscious on the concept of fake news/information.

Keywords: Influence, Social Media, Gender Equality Advocacy, Couples

Introduction
Media provide opportunities for people to stay informed and educated about the happenings within and outside the context of a particular society. These significant and statutory responsibilities of the mass media empower people to make appropriate

decisions and take decisive actions on diverse issues that shape their lives. As Cuneyt and Gozde (2014) rightly observed, media is the name that covers all media organs such as radio, television, newspaper, and magazines that provide communication within the society. In recent time, there is paradigm shift from the traditional media of communication listed above by Cuneyt and Gozde to a more sophisticated and technological based media of communication which is the social media. At present, various social media platforms such as, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Snapchat have become major channels of information and serve as conduits for social interactions ranging from gender issues to politics, finance and sociocultural matters with wider patronage most especially among youths and people from all bands of the societies including married men and women.

From all indications, the social media is modern channel of communication that allows human interactions and sharing of information which is internet based in different platforms. Davis (2016) defined social media as the set of interactive Internet applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content. Eniola and Ojedokun (2019) said, some use social media for social, economic and political advantages, a number of people also found it a good avenue to perpetrate crimes at all levels. Among others, gender equality is one of the major topics of concern in public discourse and various channels of communications are used to disseminate and educate members of the public so that people will have better and proper understanding of the concept. This is necessary because gender issues are sensitive and must be holistically observed openly without any form of bias. According to 'Girls not Brides' publication in (2002), marriages, parental cares, child abuse, child trafficking, domestic violence and child education, among other issues are gender related stories that usually preoccupied newsfeeds and channels of communication, notably on social media. These gender stories are not just on social media, they are also promptly and constantly disseminated on social media platforms and intensively engaged by members of the public, with some even regarding themselves as public courts or online in-laws.

Basudey P. et al (2022), noted that, while this decentralised communication system (social media) has undoubtedly raised the bar of public awareness on gender issues most especially on gender equality, the global goal towards gender equality; the state in which both women and men, as well as girls and boys, have equal access to rights, resources, opportunities, and protections, as defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is still far from being reached and remains a major concern across the world in general and Nigeria in Particular.

Therefore, the advocacy regarding the concept, components, essence and challenges of gender equality are still being intensified and ultimately receiving scholarly attentions. In this light, women have been agitating and lobbying for better and more respected place or positions in the society as such positions are presently dominated by men (Ake, et al. 2019). Giving equal rights and opportunities to men and women, as well as to boys and girls in their childhood, is the plain meaning of gender equality advocacy. In clear terms, gender equality advocacy does not advocate for treating women and men equally or for women to be considered as equal to men but to give women or females equal opportunity at all levels.

Statement of the Problem

There are different perceptions and divergent views about gender equality. Shanthi and Mitravinda (2020), described gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. It is clear from the definitions that while some (females) regarded it is an opportunity for creating a balance and providing a just cause, other people (males) perceived it as a form of challenge and barrier to their authorities and masculinity. Aside the divergent views, it is worth noting that news, sermons, dramas, pranks, skits, music, and speeches are mostly produced consciously and unconsciously with gender-based elements to pass information to the general publics. This is quite delicate and such information become dangerous for public consumption because they sometimes lack media messages' assessment mechanisms (Rachel, 2018).

Advocacy on gender equality is rampart on social media, male and female often strive to have understanding of their rights, challenges and opportunities within the already saturated media space. This knowledge about gender equality guides individual in taking actions and making decisions in order to live the best way they so desired. Yet, not all information on social media is factual, some information or contents are made by social media influencers, and inexperienced bloggers to achieve personal objectives which could be far from the ideology of gender equality. This explains why despite social media gender equality advocacy, Nigeria's national newspapers, radio stations, television stations, magazine outlets, and social media platforms have been inundated with reports of numerous divorces among both ordinary individuals and well-known celebrities.

It is therefore not surprising that the influence of social media gender equality advocacy extends beyond celebrities, since a diverse range of individuals in Nigeria are exposed to marital issues and mostly rely on social media contents, for guidance and this study is premised on the assumptions that social media messages have positive and negative impacts on the people and that media literacy is required to make the best of the messages and misinformation that could result from random and unverified opinions expressed on the social media.

Objectives

i. Investigate level of social media gender equality advocacy in South-West, Nigeria
ii. examine ways through which social media contribute to gender equality advocacy
iii. find out which gender perceives to feel oppress the most in relationship

Literature Review

Social media is a means of interaction among people in which they create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Furthermore, social media depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, comment, discuss and modify user-generated content (Chiemela, Ovire, Obochi, 2015). Toivo-Think Tank (2012), the features are social networking and social interaction, participation, the use of social providers, openness, and collaboration. These features are linked to the six classifications of social media postulated by the same author. There classifications are: Social Networks (Facebook, Google+, Myspace,

LinkedIn); Media Products Community (Youtube, Flickr, Slideshare); Blog Services (Wordpress, blogger, Twitter); Information Community (Wikipedia and Wikispaces), which is also referred to as Collaborative Project; Virtual Community also called Virtual Game Worlds) includes Second Life and World of Warcraft; and Link Sharing Services (Digg and Diigo). The social media are a body of packages that users find attractive and even hard to do without. In the same vein, PLAC (2012), adds that social media technologies take on different forms including magazines, internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, podcasts, pictures, and video. Considering that social media come in diverse forms.

Functions of Social Media

Social media has become an integral part of our lives, and it serves various functions. According to digital rhetoric, there are seven functions of social media, which include:

1. Conversations: Social media tools are made for interactive use, and they allow users to communicate through comments, hashtags, messengers, mentions, etc.

2. Sharing: Social media platforms allow users to share their ideas, thoughts, and experiences with others. Almost all social media have built-in tools for connecting with other users. How do they communicate? With the help of hashtags, mentions, messengers, challenges sharing, and so on. In this way, you can meet like-minded people, for example, those who follow the green movement or seek the best hunting tools, increase self-esteem, share an idea, discuss sensitive topics, or simply exchange a few words to maintain socialization.

3. Networking: social media provides a platform for users to connect with like-minded individuals and build relationships. "Social" means sharing between people. This can be the exchange of knowledge, practices, experience, entertainment content, and much more. Modern users distribute and receive more content in less time than all of humanity has done

4. Promotion: social media is used for promoting products, services, and brands. It's generally accepted that social media promotion is more suitable for the B2C market. But the modern possibilities of these tools allow promoting the business-to-business and peer-to-peer markets. Today social media are a tool for increasing loyalty to a person as an expert, a way to create a personal brand, direct sales, increasing the company's recognition, counteraction to negativity, and even recruiting. Promotion and marketing team to work as brand collaboration can do wonders for your business and provide it with a better future.

5. Entertainment: social media provides a source of entertainment for users, with features such as videos, memes, and games.

6. Information: social media is a source of information, with users sharing news, articles, and other content.

7. Collaboration: Social media platforms allow users to collaborate on projects and work together. Social media typically features user-generated content that lends itself to engagement via likes, shares, comments, and discussion. Social media is used for various purposes, including finding others who share similar interests, building communities, and engaging with fans or voters. Social media is also an increasingly important part of many companies' marketing campaigns.

Gender Equality Advocacy

Gender equality refers to the equal participation of women and men in different life domains (e.g., the economy, social life, politics, education). Gender equality is the focal point of all contemporary women rights movements worldwide. Starting with the struggle for women's legal, social and economic rights in the early 19th century, the movement for the freedom and liberation of women hit the highest point in the sixties. Subsequently the movement set forth a new goal-- striving for equality of both genders and elimination of stereotype roles in the society. It merits mentioning that Women rights movement had acquired global significance when in 1947 UNCSW (United Nation's Commission on the Status of Women) was established as a separate commission under the United Nation.

If we take a deep look at the Western nations on gender equality, they seem to determine the rights as well as obligations for both the genders. Consequently, both men and women do not have any preference over each other in any sphere of life whatsoever. Both of them are expected to play an active role in the economic and social development of society with recognizable appearance in public. Women are asked to leave their conventional duties in support of the desired equality and the abolition of gender stereotypes, while males are praised and encouraged for their domestic tasks as well.

However, biological reproductive roles are recognized as being determined by sex. It may be pointed out that feminists and women activists strongly support the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men in every walk of life. However, this gender approach is not found holistic rather sounds individualistic and fragmentary, as accordingly women's problems, family solutions and other related issues are viewed in isolation with their male counterparts.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) has declared that men and women have a right to equality (2013). Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. Women, just like men are entitled to live according to how they want to live. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all aspects of life. There should be equal distribution of political and financial power along with the equal right to quality education. However, in our modern times we cannot totally eradicate discrimination, which poses threat to the balance of the society. One of which is the gender bias, which plays a great influence in all sorts of discrimination.

Social Media on Gender Equality

Some feminist observers applaud the growth of social media because it prioritizes expressiveness and social skills, which are typically seen as feminine qualities, especially platforms like Facebook (Zacharias & Arthurs, 2008). Indeed, women outnumber men on social media. One global study reported that 76% of online women use social media, compared to 70% of online men (Vollman, Abraham, & Mörn 2010).

Similarly, Junco, et al. (2010) found that women spend more time on social networking sites than men. Feminists hoped that social media (websites that facilitate user interaction) would serve as spaces to empower young women to carve out their own identities that might counter

mainstream media stereotypes; indeed, some hoped that women could construct new or altered definitions of what it ultimately means to be a “girl” (Scott-Dixon, 2002).

They could do this by exchanging comments, building relationships, and exchanging social capital (Bailey, et al., 2013) via social media. Senft (2008) suggested that diverse narratives created by girls themselves could start upsetting the prevalent, stereotypical definitions of "girl" and possibly even challenge gender-based restrictions that impede social equality as a result of the potential offered by this relatively new media technology.

Women are clearly enthusiastic in their use of social media technology, and have utilized it in meaningful ways to enhance their social lives (Bailey, et al., 2013). There is a wide plethora of social media platforms to choose from, including (but certainly not limited to) Facebook, Tumblr, Google Plus, Twitter, Vine, and the wide array of online dating sites such as eHarmony. However, one key point to note about many of these sites is that they are both mainstream and corporate.

Corporate, mainstream websites tend to contain large amounts of advertising, and that advertising often portrays pre-existing stereotypes of what it is to be a “man” or a “woman”. Given that women use social media in greater numbers and at a higher intensity than men, it seems likely that they bear more of the brunt of exposure to repeated messages reinforcing gender norms. Evidence suggests that young women internalize the commercial images that they see in advertisements here and incorporate the stereotypes into their online social presentation to varying degrees (Ringrose, 2010). Ringrose concluded that “positioning the self as always ‘up for it’ and the ‘performance of confident sexual agency’ has shifted to become a key regulative”. Thus, women may experience a visual imperative to present the self as sexy on social networking sites. Girls in online spaces also reproduce other common stereotypes of femininity (Bailey, et al., 2013). Often, they place emphasis on being attractive and having attractive friends (Manago, et al. 2008) and generally work to look like a happy, carefree, and sexy but not sexual.

Thus, social media has proved to be a “mixed bag” offering and at times encouraging the enactment of traditional gender roles as well as, at other times, providing opportunities to “give voice” to users’ unique ideas, including both men and women who may be uncomfortable communicating in face-to-face public venues. Social media in general, despite conflicting evaluations, offers a variety of distinctive affordances that enable liberated gendered behaviors that are infrequently easily accessible offline. Some examples of these benefits are as follows:

1. Many venues offer unfettered access to a mass audience for the promotion of individual voices that might otherwise be silenced (such as gay teens) as well as public spaces for the organization of gendered social movements (e.g., the Arab Spring that advocated for increased women’s rights).
2. Gender-bending occurs when biological males pose as female, biological female pose as males, or either sex poses non-gendered. Offline gender-bending occurs (e.g., cross-dressing), but gender-bending is more common online where fewer nonverbal cues are available to unmask the behavior. Samp, Wittenberg, and Gillett (2003) reported that feminine, masculine, and androgynous individuals were equally likely to engage in

gender-bending. Online gender-bending allows for the critical examination of social constructions of gender and potentially contributes to the long-term destabilization of the way society currently constructs gender (Danet, 1998). The act of gender-bending allows individuals to gather skills, tools, and data to challenge rigid notions of gender and sexuality. The performance of an alternative gender identity through online interactions can "defamiliarize" individuals with their real life gender role (Bruckman, 1993), allowing users to address their sexuality and to interact in ways that he/she would not be comfortable doing in offline, as well as to understand the way sexual politics work in society (Danet, 1998).

3. Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, and Buchanan (2000) defined cybersex as "two online users engaging in private discourse about sexual fantasies. The dialogue is usually accompanied by self-stimulation". Cybersex requires the articulation of sexual desire to the extent that would be most unusual in face-to-face encounter. Both married and unmarried men and women participate in cybersex (Millner, 2008), resulting in a wide variety of sexual encounters online. Multiple websites match partners who desire single-single dating, affairs between partners married to others, online sexual encounters, and so on. Cybersex covers a wide range of relationships including but not limited to cyber romances (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006) and cyber affairs (Young et al., 2000), yet many cybersex partners never meet offline. When and if they meet, the relationships are often of very short duration. In contrast, cyber partners who establish emotionally connected relationships often interact online for a very long time (Barta & Kiene, 2005). Thus, many social media sites offers opportunities to develop relationships with others who enjoy uncommon relational and sexual practices that users might be hesitant to explore in offline venues, including various polyamory practices (multiple loving partners) (Ritchie & Baker, 2006), homosexuality (Ashford, 2006), and exploitative relationships (Brookey & Cannon, 2009), as well as sexual practices beyond the status quo.
4. Social media provides important information tools for managing complex multifaced lives with both family and work responsibilities (Edley & Houston, 2011). Using online coordination, both men and women maintain demanding professional positions while they become increasingly engaged with their children's lives and care of older or disabled relatives.
5. Because access to social media is free and relatively easy, many non-profit organizations maintain a social media presence. To facilitate working parents' success in enacting increased engagement in family life, educational, recreational, and healthcare organizations engage social media as a means of information distribution and co-ordination (Atkinson, et al., 2009).

Technological Determinism theory as postulated by Marshall Mcluhan in1962 is applicable as it explains the wonders of new innovation (technology) in determining the way, usage and manner of getting the messages across to the people. So, in this context, social media is inevitable innovation that has been a major tool and avenue that determine public perception of various issues that have to do with gender. It constructs and structure public perception of issues and determine how public will react and relate to them.

Methodology

The survey research design was adopted through the use of a structured questionnaire distributed to 400 couples in nine (9) local government areas that cut across three states South-west states of Oyo, Osun and Lagos randomly selected for the study. Competed questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS.

Findings

Table 1: Awareness of gender equality advocacy in South-West, Nigeria

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	348	88.1%
No	47	11.9%
Total	395	100.0%

(Field Survey, 2024)

Table shows that majority of respondents for this research are aware of gender equality advocacy with 348 respondents representing 88.1 % ticked YES that they aware but only few numbers of respondents which is 47 respondents representing 11.9% said they did not aware of gender equality advocacy. The implication here is that majority of respondents have adequate knowledge of gender equality advocacy and they would be able to make rightful decisions.

Table 2: Level of social media gender equality advocacy in South-West, Nigeria

	VH (%)	H (%)	C (%)	L (%)	SlL (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Facebook	215 (54.4)	112 (28.4)	44 (11.1)	13 (3.3)	11 (2.8)	1.7165	.97980
Twitter/X	111 (28.1)	150 (38.0)	94 (23.8)	25 (6.3)	15 (3.8)	2.1975	1.03810
Instagram	163 (41.3)	119 (30.1)	88 (22.3)	16 (4.1)	9 (2.3)	1.9595	1.00171
Whatapp	145 (36.7)	96 (24.3)	124 (31.4)	19 (4.8)	11 (2.8)	2.1266	1.05396
Ticktok	131 (33.2)	124 (31.4)	106 (26.8)	22 (5.6)	12 (3.0)	2.1392	1.03901
Others	108 (27.3)	94 (23.8)	140 (35.4)	27 (6.8)	26 (6.6)	2.4152	1.15093
Valid N (listwise)	395						

(Field Survey, 2024)

Table 2 shows that all major platform of social media cover to a large extent of information about gender equality advocacy, although Facebook and Instagram dominated with 54.4% and 41.3% respectively. The implication of this is that there are quite number of gender equality issues on different platform of social media and respondents are being bombarded constantly with gender related information.

Table 3: Knowing gender that is perceived to feel more oppressed in a relationship

	Frequency	Percent		
Male	155	39.2%	Respondents Gender	
			Male	Female
			105 (67.7%)	50 (32.3)
Female	180	45.6%	Respondents Gender	
			Male	Female
			56 (31.1%)	124 (68.9%)
Neutral	60	15.2%	Respondents Gender	
			Male	Female
			48 (80.0%)	12 (20.0%)
Total	395	100.0%		

(Field Survey, 2024)

Table 3 shows that female gender is perceived to be more oppressed as indicated by 180 (45.6%) of respondents while 155 (39.2%) of respondents believe that the male gender is the more oppressed in marital relationships. However, what stands out is the fact that almost equal percentage of the male and female gender 67.7% and 68.9% respectively support perception of their gender (male and female) as the more oppressed. This indicates a victim mentality by both males and females in marriage relationships. Another significant aspect of this finding is that majority of men 48 (80.0%) were neutral as to which gender is more oppressed as against 12 (20.0%) for women respondents indicating that men are more liberal and predisposed to not seeing any gender as oppressed in a marriage relationship.

Conclusion

The study concluded that social media platforms play an important role in strengthening gender equality advocacy. These platforms disseminate critical information about gender equality to a large audience, with a special focus on the younger generation. While social media has been effective in promoting gender equality, it has also been related to an increased risk of marriage breakdown.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore suggested;

1. Gender Advocacy should be made balanced and takes into account the opinions of all genders.
2. Members of the public should be adequately sensitized and conscious on the concept of fake news/information.

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