

**CAN YOU HEAR ME? AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND MOBILE PHONE
USAGE IN RURAL OWALLA, OWERRI NORTH L.G.A.
IMO STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This Study investigates gender differentials in mobile phone usage in Owalla, a rural community in Imo state, Nigeria. Data were collected from 200 randomly selected respondents from the study area. The result showed that there exists significant gender disparity in favour of men with regard to usage of mobile phone. Rural men make more calls than women. Women use their phone more to receive calls only. This study indicates that unequal power relation in most Africa societies still persist in the rural areas with regards to access and inclusion in information Society. In addition, poverty, illiteracy, lack of technical skills, cultural beliefs and high cost act as barriers to equal access and use of mobile phones in rural Africa.

Keywords: Gender, Mobile Phones, Digital Divide, Rural Area

Introduction

Nigerian rural areas are characterized by sweeping problems ranging from pervasive poverty, illiteracy, mass unemployment, low level of infrastructural development, subsistent farming, disease and above all low standard of living. According to the World Development Report (2007), three out of every four poor persons in Africa live in the rural areas. Although African rural poor are not a homogenous group, yet they have two conspicuous features. The first is, they are mostly women and secondly they lack access to affordable information and knowledge. This lack has been recognized by development practitioners as the major cause of their poverty. Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) is so critical to the creation of modern society that United Nation placed it on the list of the most critical global issues facing women, after poverty and domestic violence (Hafkin and Taggart 2001).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been recognized as a potent force that can accelerate the development of any country (World Bank 2006). It has been noted that new and emerging technologies in the information and communications arena, especially the mobile phone present immense possibilities for African rural areas in the area of poverty reduction, education, disease control, income generation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, civic engagement and, above all, improvement in livelihood. Mobile phones weigh against other ICT devices, they are less expensive than computers,

they require less infrastructure than landlines, they do not require elaborate technical training or literacy, and above all, they are handy.

The benefit of Mobile phones cut across different sectors of the economy. Apart from improving a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Mobile phones and their associated services can also create jobs, increase productivity, reduce information gaps, reduce road accidents (by acting as substitution to transportation), facilitate entrepreneurship, aid disaster prevention/ response, promote tourism, aid disease control among rural dwellers, improve farm practice, food production and enhance social capital and cohesion. Furthermore mobile phones can enhance connectivity between rural and urban areas thereby minimizing rural-urban migration (Bertolini, 2001).

The remarkable impact of the mobile phone industry in Nigeria is verifiable by its unbelievable subscriber base of about 95.3m active lines within ten years. It has also brought in about \$18 billion foreign direct investment and provided about one million indirect jobs (NCC News, 2011).

Despite the high expectations regarding the potential benefits of new and emerging technologies such as the mobile phone in accelerating social transformation and rural development, there are also widespread concern that these benefits are lopsidedly distributed between and within nations and groups based on differential in access to technology and the expertise needed to maximize these benefits. This disparity in access to ICTs, between nations and groups is known as "the digital divide" (Hafkin and Taggart 2001).

For African rural women in particular, the digital divide is wider and more difficult to navigate than it is for men, a situation that authors of gender and technology studies have come to call "the Gender Digital Divide". This area of research is beginning to show that despite the numerous contributions made by African rural women in Africa to overall household survival yet, they are less likely to benefit from the valuable opportunities that new technologies offer. According to Souter, Scott, Garforth, Jain, Mascarenhas, and Mckemey (2005), men in rural communities used mobile phones more frequently than women. The authors suggest that social norms and financial considerations probably have some impact in the differences found.

The lack of affordable access to relevant information and knowledge services among the rural poor is a major developmental concern. Research focusing on ownership and access to mobile phones often suggests a dichotomy based on haves and have-nots. However the underlying cause and pattern of this *divide* has often been politicized, or ignored in Africa. Besides, many of these studies are either western based or market driven researches targeting urban population. In addition, sex segregated data on mobile phone ownership and usage in Africa rural areas are not widely available. This study is an attempt to draw attention to the gender pattern of mobile phone usage in rural Africa.

The main objective of this study is to analyze gender differential in mobile phone usage in Owalla's rural community in South Eastern Nigeria.

The specific objectives of this study include:

- To analyze the gender differential in mobile phone Usage in rural areas.

- To examine if mobile phones have increased gender inequality in Rural areas

- To investigate the main barriers to women's use of mobile phones in rural areas.

In trying to examine the above stated objectives, the following research questions will be answered.

- Which gender uses mobile phone more in rural Owalla?

If the divide does exist in rural Owalla, why does it exist? And what are the implications?

Does gender digital divide exist in Owalla?

Hypotheses

H₀₁ There is no significant difference in mobile phone usage among rural men and women..

H_A There is significant difference in mobile phone usage among rural men and women.

Research Methodology

The study area is Owalla, a rural community in Ihita-Oha Uratta in Owerri North Local Government Area, located about 10km from Owerri, the Imo State capital. At the time of this research, there was concerted effort by the indigenes to become an autonomous community with her own paramount ruler. Owalla is a largely farming community with a large population of women.

Multi-stage sampling was used to select the sample for data collection. Owalla was purposively selected from other communities in Uratta based on availability of Global System of Mobile Communication (GSM) coverage in the area. Again, based on the nature of this study, and limited fund for this research, Owalla was divided by the researcher into four sections based on housing arrangement namely, Ndiuhu, Ndiokwu, Umuosuagwu, and Umubulonu. Sixty (60) respondents each were randomly selected from the four sections. On the whole 240 respondents were involved in this study. However, only 210 questionnaires were retrieved and only 200 were valid for data analysis. Structured questionnaire and interview schedules were used for data collection. Frequency, percentage and chi-square were used for data analysis.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis in Table 1 revealed that about 40% of the respondents are men while 60% are women. It also revealed that majority (32%) could be categorized as old being more than 45 years old. With respect to level of education, majority (45%) of the respondents have no primary education. Out of this number women are in majority. The data further revealed that 27% were engaged in farming while 18% and 8% are Artisan/ Traders and Civil Servants respectively. From this data, it is expected that the high level of illiteracy among women was likely to have influenced their low level of mobile phone usage.

Table 1: Personal Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	F	%
<i>GENDER</i>		
Male	80	40
Female	120	60
<i>Total</i>	200	100
<i>AGE</i>		
15-24	50	25
24-34	40	20
35-44	46	23

Above 45	64	32
<i>Total</i>	200	100
OCCUPATION		
Housewife	38	19
Trader/Artisan	46	18
Farmers	74	27
Schooling	42	13.5
Civil servants	26	8
Pensioners	53	14.5
<i>Total</i>	200	100
EDUCATION LEVEL		
No formal Education	90	45
Primary School	60	30
Secondary School	35	17.5
Tertiary School	15	7.5
<i>Total</i>	200	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010

Table 2. Call Dialing and Receiving Function

SEX	Call Dialing & Receiving Function		Total
	Can Dial & Receive call	Can Receive only	
Male	60 (75%)	20 (25%)	80
Female	18 (15%)	102 (85%)	120
Total	78	122	200

Source: Field Survey, 2010

The data as shown in Table 2, revealed that 75% male respondents indicated that they can both dial and receive calls on their mobile phones while only 12% female respondents can initiate calls. The result implies that majority of women in this study can only receive calls and as such must rely on others to make calls on their behalf.

This concurs with the finding of Diga (2008) when she stated that there is gender imbalance in mobile phone usage and spending due to *unequal partner control of the mobile phone*. She further stated that certain household members rarely made use of the mobile phone while the household head maintained possession of the tool. Women, for example, have calls completed on their behalf by their husbands who fear that women will overuse the airtime.

The notion of 'control of mobile phone' by men was very obvious in our study. It was observed that most phones in men's possession though, bought by children or relatives in the city to serve as household phones are seized by men. This they do in the guise of reducing cost by regulating usage. This, in a way, has given the mobile phone a new social status which tends to heighten the existing gender inequalities in rural Africa.

We also observed that another reason why most women in our study rarely initiated calls is because of the cost implication of making calls. Thus, they wait for people to call them. Few women in this category have perfected the act of flashing ó calling other users and hanging up, so that the recipient calls back the original 'flasher' using their airtime. Again, it was also noticed that mobile phones are shared among larger households with the men having custody of them.

Table 3. SMS Function

SEX	Use of SMS Function		Total
	Can Use SMS function	Cannot Use	
Male	36 (45%)	44 (55%)	80
Female	18 (15%)	102 (85%)	120
Total	54	146	200

Source: Field Survey, 2010

On SMS function, the data as shown in Table 3, revealed that 45% of male respondents use Short Messaging Service (SMS) while only 15% of female can do same. Most women complained that they cannot use this function because SMS function is complicated and require some level of skill and literacy in a language supported on cell phones to operate. Furthermore, others, including men gave bad eye sight as the major reason why they do not use the SMS function.

The implication of this is that majority of women will not be able to maximize full benefit of mobile phone technology because these benefits are mostly accessed through SMS. Some of these services include e-Agriculture, e-Banking, e-health, e-learning, emergency-related communications and social capital and capacity building.

Hypothesis Testing

H₀ There is no significant difference in mobile phone usage among rural men and women.

H_A There is significant difference in mobile phone usage among rural men and women.

Table 2: Call Dialing and Receiving Function

SEX	Call Dialing & Receiving Function		Total
	Can Dial & Receive call	Can Receive only	
Male	60 (75%)	20 (25%)	80
Female	18 (15%)	102 (85%)	120
Total	78	122	200

This hypothesis was tested using table 2 (Call dialing and receiving) and the Null hypothesis (**H₀**) was rejected and alternate accepted (**H_A**). Therefore we state that there is significant difference in mobile phone usage between male and female in the rural areas ($P < 0.05$). Our finding reveals that men can use mobile phone functions more than women in the rural areas. Souter et al. (2005), concur with our findings that men in rural communities used mobile phones more frequently than women. A combination of social norms, cost considerations, technical literacy is contributory to these differences.

Conclusion

Though in theory, mobile phones raise expectations in terms of rural transformation and empowerment of rural women. However in practice, many African rural women are still unable to use this technology largely due to combination of factors which includes cultural beliefs, poverty and illiteracy, lack of technical skills, economics of owning and using a mobile phone. In summary, we observed that the mere existence or even ownership of mobile phone in a rural home or community does not translate to usage and by extension access to the opportunities promised.

Recommendation

In order to maximize the benefits derivable to all from mobile phone technology in African rural areas, we make the following recommendations:

Further research is still needed on gender digital divide. This is crucial because presently there is paucity of sex-segregated data on the scope and characteristics of gender digital divide in Africa especially in rural areas.

Government should formulate more effective telecom policies that encourage mobile phones diffusion in rural areas. This can be achieved by making mobile phones affordable through reduction or removal of taxes and tariffs on telecommunication equipment.

The development and introduction of new technologies such as mobile phones in rural areas should also tackle capacity-building issues and themes with direct application to women.

Governments should build subsidized public access phone centers to provide services to rural poor at affordable rates.

Interface should be developed in mobile phones technology using icons, graphics, touch screens, and voice recognition for the illiterate rural population.

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