Identity construction and gender involvement in online social networks among undergraduates in two universities, Southwest Nigeria

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In this paper, we explore identity construction and gender involvement of Nigerian undergraduates in online social networks. This paper presents the qualitative findings on identity construction and gender involvement of Nigerian undergraduates in online social networks. This was with a view to investigating the reasons for the increasing participation of young people in online social networks. The study examines their views on what constitutes an identity and the rationale for adopting a particular identity in online social networks. Qualitative data were collected through four focus Group Discussions and twenty in-depth interviews (IDI) among undergraduate students from two universities in Southwest Nigeria. The findings reveal identity construction in online social interactions as a frequent occurrence and an extension of real life. Trust in online relationships develops overtime depending on frequency and nature of interactions. However, gender influences young people's online activities, as more females than males tend to construct their online social identities using photographs in particular with symbolic interpretations. In addition, there are perceived risks of involvement, especially those relating to privacy in online social networks. Hence, the findings call for diverse interrogations of the contexts and dimensions of involvement in online social networks among youths and how such interactions could influence further positive outcomes.

Keywords: Gender, identity, online and offline interactions, social networks, university students, Nigeria

Introduction

Online social networks perform various functions and possess some inherent dysfunctionality. Functionally, an increasing social category of young people adopt and interact on these platforms for purposes such as self-discovery, expression, pleasure seeking and identity presentation (Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013). Identity formation and reconstruction is crucial in the socialization process throughout life (Friedman 1994; Padilla and Perez 2003). This includes the web of relations provided by online social networks (Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013). Relationships and context are influential in identity formation and reconstruction. This does not imply the irrelevance of individual factors like personalities and will in the process (Brown and England 2005; Asgari and Kaufman 2005; Schachter 2005). In terms of definition, the concept of identity has been looked at from two positions; first as defined by the individual social actor and second the context and social relationships that define identity engagement and outcomes. This process affects what, and how, femininities and masculinities are considered in social interactions in both virtual and physical space. The context and process of identity construction is somewhat internal and external to the individual. As a social process, it is done in relation to social roles, relationships with others and values (Côté and Levine 2002).

There are slight differences in the norms and context of interactions in virtual and physical space. The variations affect the multi-dimensional nature of identity construction and reconstruction. With the increasing web of relationships found among online community members and the inevitable effects on other spheres of social relations, an encouraging number of research studies have focused on the unending social engagements and relationship outcomes within virtual and physical space. With the digital divide, more of such research studies are from developed countries despite the increasing rate of adoption and engagement in virtual interactions among youths from developing countries and sub-Saharan Africa. This paper explores the dynamics of identity construction within the platform of Facebook among undergraduates in two Nigerian Universities. This is informed by the dearth of studies on identity construction among the teeming population of Youths in Nigeria using the Facebook among other emerging online social networking sites.

Against this backdrop, Adams and Marshall (1996) argue that identity can be understood by considering an individual's subjective assessments within a given social setting. A subjective assessment within a context offers an opportunity to understand the phenomenon of identity from the social actors' position despite the influence of the socialisation process on what becomes an identity (Greenhow and Robelia 2009). Identity is dynamic and not static. It is fragmented and constructed in or through a diverse network of social relations. For instance, an online user may decide to choose a name, one that can either reflect or conceal his/her real identity to others. The freedom from physical restrictions, alongside a chance of anonymity, provides virtual community members with a platform to explore different identities (or

features) with little or no constraint and consequence compared with the real world (Greenhow and Robelia 2009; Amichai-Hamburger 2013).

The increasing access to and relevance of the Internet among youths has also led to more research interest on the role of the Internet in identity constructions at the individual or group levels as well as gender involvement and differentials in online social networking sites (Amichai-Hamburger 2013; Bosch 2009). Other areas of interest include how their online social network activities reflect the dilemma between privacy and disclosure of identities and personal concerns to others (Hargittai, 2007;Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Livingstone and Brake, 2010). Available evidence reveals that communicating and networking with one's peers by means of the new media has become an inseparable part of the everyday lives of young people today and a tool that has a potential for learning and dynamism in knowledge production (Bosch 2009; Greenhow 2011; Dunne *et al*. 2010; Patchin and Hinduja 2010). Many people connect to social network sites at least once a day either to check their profiles or to participate in different online activities (Urista *et al*. 2009; Livingstone and Brake, 2010).

The concept of trust is increasingly relevant in negotiating identity in both online social networks and physical interactions. Trust in social relations is multidimensional and there are diverse interpretations and rationale for engaging and developing trust even in online social relations (Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter, 2013). Given that trust comes through earned and negotiations from diverse positions and means, social actors acquire a degree of conscious in ensuring its formation and sustainability. Against this backdrop, Volakis (2011) argues that trust is fundamental to identity formation and online relationships and the fact that it is easy for us to shape our words and how we present ourselves online is a big factor in this. For instance, two people entering an online relationship implicitly or explicitly expect that the other party is partially or largely a true representation of the identity presented online. While truth is central to trust formation in online friendships and networking (Volakis 2011; Dwyer *et al*. 2007; Krasnova *et al*. 2010). In reality, the differences and dynamism in the ways social actors engage others are capable of defeating the precious value of trust and truthfulness needed for deeper social relations. Hence, the dynamics of developing and maintaining diverse identities between online and offline social interactions could be understood by focusing on the conscious tactics and practices of members of online social networks in presenting who and what they are. A major reason is that identity formation at this level of social interaction is susceptible to influence from regular and offline social network of relations (Krasnova *et al*. 2010; Volakis 2011; Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013).

Few researchers have focused on the perspectives of youths and their active engagement in reconstructing their identities within the framework of virtual and physical spaces. Exploring the views and experiences of Internet use among Nigerian undergraduates has relevance in increasing the body of knowledge on identity formation, reconstruction and youth empowerment. Prior studies on Internet use among Nigerian youths have focused on the practice and patterns of their involvement in cybercrime, thereby limiting the body of knowledge in this area (Agunbiade and Titlayo 2010; Aransiola and Asindemade 2011; Tade and Aliyu, 2011). Thus, in an effort to fill this knowledge gap, this article explores identity construction in the profiles and engagements of male and female undergraduates in online social networks. The paper addresses specific questions such as: what are the reasons for the increasing participation of young people in online social networks? What is the importance attached to the Internet and online Social Networks? What are the experiences of young people with online social interactions? How do young people conceive and portray acceptable identity to other social actors in online Social Networks? What are the perceived social virtues that sustain virtual relationships? Are there gender differentials in the ways identities are portrayed and sustained in online social networks? The paper, based on a qualitative approach, examines these questions from the perspectives of the undergraduates themselves.

The social practice theory as shaped by the works of prominent sociologists and philosophers like Bourdieu, Giddens, Taylor, and Foucault, provided a theoretical framework for exploring the research questions as well as the interpretation of the generated data. Social practice has diverse strands traceable to the contributions and emphases of the key figures within the framework (Ritzer and Yagatich 2011). However, the theory has potentials for descriptive and interpretative understanding of describing how individuals in diverse contexts shape and are shaped by the cultural atmosphere in which they live. It attempts to articulate the ways in which identity and individual agency rely on and produce cultural forms. For this study, attention is given to how this theory helps in exploring the influence of peer groups and other social factors in the youth's involvement and expectations in online social networks.

Hence, this article presents an empirical investigation of the process and measures of identity construction among university undergraduatesas active users of the facebook. The gender dimensions and variability of identities within and across gender are important to this study. The degree of gender involvement, the reasons for their involvement, their perceptions of online social sites as well as gender similarities and differences in online social activity present an opportunity of arriving at a clearer picture of the processes involved in identity construction and reconstruction. An underlying feminist assumption in this study is that gender differentials exist in disclosure or non-disclosure in virtual

interactions. While males and females alike tend to gain social status and image by sharing their photos and personal characteristics with others to form new relations, studies exploring the dynamics of identity construction and relationships in online social networks, especially relating to Nigerian undergraduates, have been on the margin. Hence, the article proceeds with a critical engagement with the literature and the social practice theory providing a lens for articulating the questions earlier stated. The methodology comes next then followed by a contexualised presentation of findings and a discussion of the implications.

Identity construction and trust building as a continuum

Identity is our perception and definition of self, as well as the way we are defined by others (Deschamps 2010). It touches on the kind of personality we wish to portray to others in the social space by summing up all the factors that have come to define us. For instance, identity defines what is feminine and masculine in social interactions within space and time. The functionality of identity is obvious in social interaction as people come to know and define themselves in ways that were not possible during their childhood (Abrams and Hogg 2010). Thus, identity and identity construction are inherent in the existence of every social being (Deschamps 2010).

With globalization and wider access to the Internet, in the 21st century, the forums for self-discovery have expanded. The emergence of online social networks (OSN) and multi-user domains (MUDs) have provided youths and other social categories of individuals with a veritable tool for identity exploration (Sherry 1995). The construction of identity has thus gone beyond the face-to-face real life sphere. Identity construction is a complex process because it refers both to how we consider ourselves from a subjective point of view and how we define ourselves from the position of 'others'. Against this backdrop, Cheung and Lee (2010) differentiated between two broad categories of identity, personal identity and social identity. Personal identity is the unique sense of self, knowledge and experiences that all of us possess. Social identity refers to the social groups we belong to and the commonalities we share with others. In addition, our social location within society and how we interact with other people within social groups depends on what and how our social identity is construed. Cheung and Lee (2010) argue that gender, group norms and culture are significant components in forming both personal and social identities in online social relations. Although social identities refer to what we are, often they are defined just as much by what we are not and how we see ourselves as different from others (Cheung and Lee 2010; Pearson 2009). Similarly, identities may be ascribed in ways that do not necessarily agree with our own understandings of personality but still affect how others relate to us. Social identities have a key role in shaping and interacting with our personal identities and making us the people that we are (Pearson 2009). The need to maintain acceptable personal and social identities is central to most social interactions, especially when positive image building is underlying the purpose of putting on a particular identity.

The need to maintain acceptable personal and social identities is central to most social interactions, especially when positive image building is underlying the purpose of putting on a particular identity. However, as stated earlier, it requires trust to achieve an acceptable identity at the personal or social level. As a social enterprise, trust is an essential process to social capital building and can be achieved through a process that requires diverse practices. Material and non-material means are dominant forms of establishing interaction and building trust in social relations. In online social networks, pictures, videos, language among other means are dominant forms of engaging other social actors (Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013). The sharing and engaging of others through material and non-material means is a dual process, taking place both in the virtual and the real world, and is never static. Hence, the construction of identity is done simultaneously both in the virtual and physical sphere, thereby making a plural identity for the same individual possible.

Despite the continuing involvement and participation in online social networks among youths in Africa, there are few studies focusing on the prevailing practices of engaging in identity construction and dialogue among this social group of youths. This paper recognises the relevance of investing the process and practice of trust building through identity construction in online social interactions. However, much attention is devoted to the practices and not the process of identity construction. The practices and involvement are examined through a gendered lens. Thus, the next section of the article takes a theoretical look at practices within the framework of social practice theories. Due to the variance in the body of knowledge on social practice theory, Bourdiue's social practice theory was perceived to be close to the underlying assumptions and focus of this article.

Theoretical framework

Social Practice theories are sociological frameworks useful in describing the constant web of interactions between social structures and the agency. It attempts to articulate the ways in which identity and individual agency rely on and produce cultural forms. The major thesis is that structure-agency interaction is multi-directional. Social actors enjoy their agency that is utilizable in creating and interrogating structural effect. Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory provides a context for

interrogating the dialectics and nexus between agency and structure within context. The heart of Bourdieu's work, and of his effort to bridge subjectivism and objectivism, lies in his concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' as well as their dialectical relationship to each other (Aldridge 1998). While habitus exists in the minds of actors, fields exist outside their minds.

The 'habitus' is the socialized norms or tendencies that influences behaviour, thoughts and inactions. It is *the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them*' (Wacquant, 2005:316). Online social network operate on norms and values that members are socialized into and expected to display in their interactions with others. Social actors imaginatively rehearse these norms in constructing and engaging others in trust building and identity construction. Online social networks provide fields for social actors to engage one another. 'Fields' in Bourdieu's view represents series of positions in which a variety of "games" are undertaken. The actions taken by the agents (individual or collective) in presenting their online social identity are governed by the structure of the field (online social network), the nature of the positions, and the interests associated with them.

However, it is also a game that involves self-positioning and the use of a wide range of strategies to allow one to excel at presenting an identity that may attract trust and capital formation. There is a strong correlation between social positions and the dispositions of the agents who occupy them (Aldridge 1998). It is out of the relationship between habitus and field that practices, cultural practices in particular, are established. Practice is a routinized way of acting in which taken-for-granted assumptions affect how we act, especially how we manage our bodies, handle objects, treat subjects, describe things, and understand the world (Bourdieu 1992).

In addition, Bourdieu's construe social actors as those with at least some degrees of freedom: "The habitus does not negate the possibility of strategic calculation on the part of agents" (Bourdieu 1992). However, strategies do not refer "*to the purposive and pre-planned pursuit of calculated goals ... but to the active deployment of objectively oriented 'lines of action' that obey regularities and form coherent and socially intelligible patterns, even though they do not follow conscious rules or aim at the premeditated goals posited by a strategist*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127). It is via strategies that "the occupants of these positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their position and to impose the principle of hierarchy to optimise their own products. The strategies of agents depend on their positions in the field" (Wacquant and Deyanov 2002). As young people, forming relationships and sustaining the interactions for valuable purposes including altruistic, may determine the importance and efforts that will be attached to their online social identity. Bourdieu was focally concerned with the relationship between habitus and field (Wacquant and Deyanov 2002). He saw the relations between habitus and fields in two main ways: on the one hand, the field conditions the habitus; on the other hand, the habitus constitutes the field as something that is meaningful, that has sense and value, and that is worth the investment of energy (Wacquant and Deyanov 2002).

Another important concept introduced by Bourdieu is that of 'capital', which he extends beyond the notion of material assets to capital that may be social, cultural or symbolic (Bourdieu 1992). These forms of capital may be equally important, and can be accumulated and transferred from one arena to another (Navarro 2006). Bourdieu therefore saw culture as a kind of economy, or marketplace. In this marketplace people utilize cultural rather than economic capital. This capital is largely a result of people's social class origin and their educational experience. In the marketplace, people accumulate more or less capital and either utilize it to improve their situation or lose it, thereby causing their position within the economy to worsen. Bourdieu's practice theory provided a framework to interrogate the dialectical relationship between the individual's self-construction of identity (habitus) and the social and cultural milieu that aids identity shaping.

As earlier emphasised, both field and habitus were important to Bourdieu. However, it is their dialectical relationship that is of the utmost importance and significance. Field and habitus mutually define one another; *the dispositions constituting the cultivated habitus are only formed, only function and are only valid in a field, in the relationship with a field ... which is itself a 'field of possible forces,' a 'dynamic' situation in which forces are only manifested in their relationship with certain dispositions. This is why the same practices may receive opposite meanings and values in different fields, in different configurations, or in opposing sectors of the same field (Bourdieu 1992).*

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative exploratory research design. The rationale is to gain in-depth and contextual understanding of the involvement of Nigerian undergraduates in online social networks. Focused group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews (IDI) were the only methods of data collection. The study population consisted of undergraduates with active profiles on an online social network. The undergraduates are either male or females who are students in two universities (One private and the other public owned) in southwest Nigeria. The rationale for targeting these two universities was the high levels of access to Internet facilities. Private and public owned universities were

selected purposively to also understand the socio-economic differentials that may exist and possibly impact on practices and gender differentials in online social networks. The two universities have an approximate population of 40,000 undergraduates with a high proportion from the south western part of Nigeria. Privately owned universities in Nigeria charge more for tuition than the public owned ones and an average Nigerian parent often finds it difficult to pay such tuition fees due to the prevailing low wages and high cost of living in Nigeria.

To account for the influence of years spent on campus and peer pressure on setting profile and active engagement in online social networks, we focused our attention on undergraduates that have spent an average of two years on campus. Two focus group discussions were conducted on a gender basis on the campus of the two universities. Four focus group discussions were conducted in total. Focus group discussions have been used in diverse studies focusing on group dynamics and behaviour. Studies on online social networks have also employed the method with encouraging findings. An average of eight discussants featured in the FGDs. In all, a total of thirty-nine discussants featured in the FGDs. Additional data were collected through in-depth interviews with twenty males and females on equal proportion.

The IDIs were conducted with undergraduates who maintain active profiles on Facebook. This was informed by a high involvement of undergraduates in the online social network. For the IDIs, 20 open-ended interviews were conducted with student subscribers to any of the online social networks. The IDIs were conducted while the participants were online checking their profiles. To achieve this, students with active profiles were approached for interaction at their convenience. The browsing was either effected through a computer system or a mobile phone with Internet functions.

Only students that were checking their profiles on the social network platform during the field work were interviewed. In addition, the content of messages posted by the participants or their friends were also accessed and for additional information on areas of interests and events that the interviewees found more appealing on their online social networks. All the qualitative data collected were transcribed, coded and subjected to thematic analysis.

The audiotape recordings were done with the consent of all the participants. Before each discussion, verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant. All the discussions and interviews took place at the preferred suitable locations suggested by the participants. Throughout the interaction periods, participants were informed of their rights to decline participation at any point in the discussions.

Findings

Findings from the study are centralized and captured under five interrelated themes, namely: Internet and online social networks, identity and identity construction in online social networks, trust in identity formation and virtual relationships and gender differentials in online social networks.

Profiles of participants

All the FGDs were conducted on a gender basis and equal proportions in the two universities, that is two FGDs in each university. In all, thirty-nine (39) discussants took part in the focus group discussion, 18 males and 19 females. Among the males, ten (10) were Christians and eight (8) were Muslims. Among the females, seven (8) were Muslims and eleven (11) were Christians. By age category, all the participants were within the ages of 18-26, with most being between the ages of 18 and 22 years. Twenty interviewees were involved in the in-depth interview; five (5) males and five (5) females in each university. While all the discussants maintain active profiles on Facebook, 17 participants also belong to other online social networks like Twitter, BlackBerry Messenger, WhatsApp and 2go. Most of them were introduced to online social networks by friends and very few by siblings and other family members and they have been on the online social networks for an average of four (4) years.

The Internet and online social networks

The participants accorded a high relevance to the Internet. In the FGDs and IDIs, both the male and female participants of both schools considered the Internet as inseparable from the everyday life of young people, especially students. The Internet was generally viewed as a platform for meeting people through online social networks and information seeking on virtually every aspect of human existence. It is even more important to students for its usefulness in research and class assignments. A particular male interviewee opined that the Internet provides opportunities for anyone 'to satisfy both personal and social goals'. The Internet also qualified as a veritable means of communication across borders. The extracts below reveal some of their views on the internet:

> "It (internet) is very good for students especially. One can reconnect through the internet and get materials for your assignments" (Interviewee, female, 20 years)
> "It is the most effective tool of communication; a bridge of the communication gap in the world." (Interviewee, male, 21 years)

In addition, the participants shared a consensus on online social networks as platforms for connecting with people, whether old friends, relatives or searching for new friends or contacts. In economic terms, some of the participants also opined that online social networks are more affordable in keeping in touch with loved ones compared with making phone calls. When asked about their activities on these online social networks, most participants engage frequently in activities like chatting, blogging, sending mails, viewing photos of friends and loved ones. Very few seem to utilise the online social networks and indeed the Internet space for business and playing games. While few males go online with the intention of getting into online heterosexual relationships, they expressed the fear of experiencing a mismatch between the online identity and the physical identity of their prospective girlfriends or lovers. The fear of mismatch was also described as an active factor in the readiness to engage in successful online dating. The rationale and factors that influenced the study participants to join online social networks range from the need to build new networks of contacts or reconnect with old friends. A high proportion of the FGD participants were influenced to join the online social networks by their friends. Others were either influenced by their family members or on their own. A particular female respondent joined Facebook on her 16th birthday because 'my dad opened it for me as part of my birthday gift.' Facebook is also the most popular online social network among the undergraduates in this study, as all the participants have personal accounts on Facebook.

However, despite the increasing participation of young people in online social networks, most of the participants only demonstrated their knowledge of these OSNs in terms of their individual activities on them, and some even expressed ignorance of online social networks in terms of the origin and purpose of OSNs. In addition, most participants equated the internet with online social networks, as they defined the Internet in terms of just connecting with people. Nevertheless, they recognize that Internet availability and accessibility largely drive online social networks and networking.

The experiences of participants in OSN also differ, as much as their likes and dislikes about OSN. Nevertheless, the issue of privacy, nudity and pornographic contents in online social networks remain the most disturbing for some of the users of online social networks. Other issues like 'logging out without notice', 'vulgar updates' and 'unwanted dating proposals' also determine the overall experiences of the respondents, especially the female ones in OSNs. Here are excerpts from the participants:

> "Guys always want to woo girls irrespective of the age difference. My younger brother's friend asked me out for example. That was quite bad. But I have really been able to connect with old friends" (Interviewee, female, 23 years old)
>
> "I mistakenly posted a private message on my wall, which eventually became food for public consumption. Of course I was embarrassed" (Discussant, 22 years, male)
>
> "I have only had good experiences thus far. One of which is I have been able to help a particular friend online overcome a problem" (Discussant, 24 years, male)
>
> "I receive up-to-date information and also connect with friends. I was once tagged in a viral pornographic picture and this made some friends of mine delete me" (Interviewee, male, 21 years)
>
> "Well I met someone very nice and at the same time I met someone not so nice. The person almost raped me when we met offline, if not for GOD" (Interviewee, female, 22 years)

While all the participants expressed concern over the growing negative use of the Internet for bullying and blackmailing, they also posited that the Internet could be addictive and time-wasting. This partially accounts for the under-utilization of conventional libraries and overall reliance on the Internet for academic materials despite their unawareness on the credibility of the materials. A similar fear was expressed over the increasing involvement of undergraduates in plagiarism and practices that are non-academic. These, among other reasons, were described as contributors to the poor academic performance of undergraduates. Often, previous moments that could be utilized for academic purposes are now spent 'over-staying' online.

Identity and identity construction in online social networks
The participants mainly explained identity in terms of their physical characteristics, attributes and conduct. Thus, identity as defined by the participants is a person's characteristics, what a person is known for and how one is defined by others. In addition, a large proportion of participants said they construct their identities online by simply transferring elements of their offline identity to the online space. This they do by 'putting your name, uploading your pictures, marital status and so on.'

"Identity is the way people think about self. Pictures, interests dictate or create your identity. I construct my identity online through my updates" (Discussant, male, 19 years)

"I am an African. A black man, easygoing and strictly formal" (Interviewee, male, 24 years)

"I am a humble, easygoing person. I am more career-inclined and very interested in project management." (Interviewee, male, 21 years)

"Well, identity is the definition of self. You construct identity online by the way you define yourself through your pictures and bio-data"(Discussant, female, 22 years)

"Identity is a kind of logo; who you are. Presenting yourself online the way you are." (Interviewee, female, 23 years)

On whether they kept same or different identities online and offline, some of the participants affirmed that their online identity did correlate with their offline identity, while others admitted maintaining 'slightly incomplete' and different identities. Nevertheless, they were of the opinion that different people have different reasons for keeping different identities online and offline. Hence, the reason for incompatible offline and online identity 'may be to make up for their (young people's) incompleteness offline. Some people create the identity that suits what they want to become offline. In particular, friends and the media have great influence on young people.' Thus, young people maintain a projected identity online for their real life identity. The online identity in this respect is actually one the individual aims to achieve but has not yet attained.

The participants also posited that a personal feeling of inadequacy, lack of self-esteem, hypocrisy, criminal tendencies, security and other privacy reasons account for the differences between online and offline identities. Lack of physical contact between OSN users, peer pressure and inconsistent access to the Internet could also account for these identities. In addition, the purpose for maintaining similar or different identities all revolve around a desire for self-esteem, respect, creating a false sense of importance and to be accepted by the larger society.

"There is no real difference. However my information online may not be up to date" (Discussant, male, 21 years)

"Yes, but it depends on the person. Some do it spontaneously or to conform to popular culture" (Discussant, female, 23 years)

"It is not deliberate. Human beings naturally want to hold back some pieces of information about themselves. It is normal" (Interviewee, male, 21 years)

"Young people keep different identities to please people. People may want to hide certain aspects of their identity. A handicapped person may for the fear of rejection refuse to upload his/her full picture" (Interviewee, female, 24 years)

Hence, young people maintain whatever identity they choose to conform with the yearnings of the wider society too.

"Nobody or group in society appreciates failures, so why not create an identity of a successful achiever, while you keep working at it?" (Interviewee, male aged 20).

The participants unanimously posited that young people participate more in online social networks. This is as a result of young people's greater inclination to the Internet and also being more computer literate than the adults. Joining online social networks is also the current fad and undergraduates find it trendy. Some interviewees opined that the increased participation of young people in online social networks could be traced to the increasing population of young people, greater access to the Internet and high-tech communication gadgets, to be informed and to be socially acceptable. Keeping in touch with friends is cheaper using online social networks than using phone calls.

"To make friends and it is also cheaper to connect with people online than through phone calls" (Interviewee, female, 24 years)

In essence, the participants submitted that young people participated more in OSNs and that the increase of young people in OSNs is, apart from peer pressure, a desire to meet new people, connect with old friends, find love and enjoy other benefits that OSNs afford them. Hence, a 22-year-old female undergraduate from the public owned university states that the increased participation of young people online is the result of 'youthful exuberance and the desire to catch fun'.

Trust in identity formation and virtual relationships

All the participants in the FGD and IDI expressed similar views on what trust means. Chiefly trust was explained as believing or having confidence in someone or something and that it is earned when both parties know each other well and feel comfortable with each other. They believed that trust is ensured in online interaction through honesty, truthfulness, sincerity and open communication between the two parties.

When asked if differences existed in the manner they build trust with their online friends and offline friends, most of the male and female participants responded in the affirmative. While a few others felt building trust online was the same as offline, they conceded that it would take a greater effort to trust an online friend than an offline friend. However, two males said they do not bother trying to trust anyone online as trust for them would only be possible if there was a physical dimension to their online friendships.

> "Trust level is generally low. Everyone has something to hide, so I don't bother trying to ensure trust" (Interviewee, 22 years, male)
>
> "I don't know anything about the other person online. I have not seen him, he could be anything. "Seeing is believing". So I think trust is built on physical contact" (Interviewee, male, 21 years)

A particular female interviewee opined that ensuring trust online is not within her powers and that she can only hope her friends in OSNs trust while she tries to trust them too. The participants also have varying opinions on online intimate relationships. Most of the participants posited that such virtual relationships are unreal and risky, and as such do not get involved in them.

> "They work but they won't last for long because most of such relationships are built on deceit. Any relationship built on a kiss will end with a hiss" (Interviewee, 20 years, male)
>
> "I don't believe in it. It's rubbish. How can you start a relationship with someone you've not seen?" (Discussant, female, 24 years)
>
> "Online intimate relationships don't work. God didn't design intimate relationships to be online" (Interviewee, male, 25 years)

However two male and three female participants stated that an online intimate relationship was 'okay' and acceptable. Two of these (a male and a female interviewee) have once been involved in an online intimate relationship. The male, a 400 level undergraduate student from the privately owned university, used to be in an online relationship that lasted for a year. He ended it when he discovered that the identity his partner portrayed online was different from her real-life identity. Another interviewee, a female was almost raped by her online boyfriend when they met offline.

> "She lied about her real educational status and her physical appearance" (Interviewee, male, 26 years)
>
> "The person almost raped me when we met offline, if not for GOD" (Interviewee, female, 22 years)

Very few participants reported having any privacy issues with their identity online. In fact, only three females have privacy issues with their identity. Hence they are always reluctant to disclose any information about themselves to anyone online. Other participants despite not reporting any privacy issue with their identity online still choose to protect their identities by limiting the degree of personal information they put online and restricting access of their online friends to such information. They also make use of tools provided by the different online social networks in protecting their privacy.

> "I don't display online what I don't want people to know" (Discussant, 22 years, male)

In conclusion, the degree of reality in offline interactions makes trust easier to establish between two friends than in online friendships. To ensure trust between two people who meet online, a physical and real-life contact between the two is essential.

> "Yes. Offline interaction involves a higher degree of reality." (Interviewee, male, 21years)

Gender differentials and involvement in online social networks
The participants deliberated on the role of gender in reaching a decision whether to join an online social networks or otherwise. A few of the interviewees claimed that gender has nothing to do with one's decision to join online social networks. Some males and females who felt otherwise stated that some chat-sites and rooms in online social networks were gender-specific and exclusive. Such chat rooms exist on 2go, Yahoo Messenger and so on.

> "A man will always be a man even online. It determines some of the groups I join, the conversations I engage in and the people I befriend" (Interviewee, male, 24 years)

However, some of the male and female participants in the FGD and IDI felt that gender affects the manner they present themselves online. It was a general consensus among the participants that gender differences exist in the ways both sexes

relate with the opposite sex and even same-sex members in online social networks. However, other factors may determine their activities online. Such factors according to them are personal and vary from one person to the other.

> "Yes. My gender makes me feel more in control. Girls are more receptive and reactive. Being a male makes me go all out and also determines how I relate with the opposite sex" (Discussant, 22 years, male)
> "Yes. I act like a lady online. For example I don't initiate conversations with a guy. If he doesn't talk, I won't" (Interviewee, female, 23 years)
> "My gender determines what I do online but not so much. I write articles and post it for my friends to see and I don't do that because I am a guy, no" (Interviewee, male, 23 years)
> "The females feel they cannot do what guys would freely do and go unscathed" (a chorus response from an FGD with females).

Moreover, gender-related fear was mainly expressed by some female discussants; it mainly concerns and dictates how they conduct themselves and relate to others in online social networks. Such fears include harassment and a feeling of timidity. The female discussants believe they cannot expose their bodies or speak 'too freely' with just anyone online so as not to be stalked for instance. They also fear kidnap, impersonation and other security concerns. The males, however, do not have any gender-related fear online.

However, most of the male and female participants affirmed that their gender gave them some advantages online. Others did not think so.

> "Yes. You get to add more friends and you might even meet rich guys. You also get more responses to your posts as a lady. Nobody answers a guy, but because they want to toast you (a girl), they will post comments" (Interviewee, female, 22 years)
> "Gender has a way of helping you know who you really are and also streamlines your activities. It helps you determine how to relate with the opposite sex" (Discussants, male, 19 years)

In conclusion, while gender determines what young undergraduates do online, it is but one of many factors that come to play in their routine decisions and activities in online social networks.

Discussion of findings

The study focused on the construction of identity in online social networks among undergraduates at two Nigerian universities. The study sought to unravel the dynamics of identity construction by Nigerian undergraduates using online social networks. This study was able to establish the high involvement of youths that are undergraduates in online social networks. These social categories of youths are active and often employ diverse means such as text messages, pictures and videos in projecting an identity. Participation in online social networks requires an understanding or possession of 'habitus' that matches the 'field' as defined by the online social network culture. Formation of diverse capitals as described in Bourdieu (1992) *Logic of Practice* is closely laced with the quality of habitus and the fields that are available to social actors. Thus, trust building and engaging in new and old networks of relationships are a strategy for acquiring capital in online social networks. The findings from this study also show that undergraduates are warmly receptive to joining and maintaining profiles in online social networks.

Previous findings revealed that young people and indeed students accorded high relevance to the Internet, which is seen as inseparable from everyday life (Amichai-Hamburger 2013; Bosch 2009; Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013; Greenhow 2011; Livingstone and Brake 2010). Similarly, undergraduates in Nigeria and in some other parts of the world have adopted online social networks as a means of constructing identity for diverse purposes (Amichai-Hamburger 2013; Dunne *et al*. 2010; Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013; Hargittai 2007; Krasnova *et al*. 2010; Livingstone and Brake 2010; Lounsbury *et al*. 2011). Such studies have revealed that online social networks are mainly platforms for connecting people; whether old friends whose contacts have been mislaid or new ones. The findings of this study however reveal that due to the increased interaction OSNs afford young people, the propensity for frictions increase. While online social networks are used for connecting with people (Bosch 2009; Hargittai 2007; Krasnova *et al*. 2010; Livingstone and Brake 2010), the findings from this study also revealed that young people show disaffiliation or better still disconnect from others through their online social network profiles.

Similar to findings of other studies, the participants also expressed fear over privacy issues, security, nudity and pornography on online social networks (Livingstone and Brake 2010; Urista *et al*. 2009). Sexting, which involves sending and receiving sexy messages, picture or videos, could qualify as a latent function of the Internet and membership of an online social network (Dunne *et al*. 2010; Lounsbury *et al*. 2011). The findings also showed that young people now use OSNs to

register displeasure with parents and significant others and in most cases use online deletion of a person to cement an offline disaffiliation from the person.

The findings also showed that unregulated and undisciplined access to the Internet could create problems for students. Online social networks could be addictive and time-wasting. Some of the participants argued that undisciplined access and active presence in online social networks has affected their academic performances. Over-patronization of dating, regular visits to dating and chatting sites reduces the quality and total number of hours a student can spend on reading and studying.

Findings also underscore the fact that online social networks are cheaper and more affordable in constructing identity and connecting with other people. Most online social networks operate free accounts for their subscribers with numerous benefits that aid the construction of identity and meeting of people. As such the participants in this study only need Internet access, which has become almost ubiquitous due to the improved wireless connections found on both campuses. Similar to some findings from the literature (Amichai-Hamburger 2013; Dunne *et al*. 2010; Livingstone and Brake 2010; Lounsbury *et al*. 2011), it was also found that very few undergraduates utilise the OSN for business purposes, but rather mainly use it for chatting, uploading and viewing pictures, blogging, sending mails and gossiping.

In terms of identity, a number of the participants argued in favour of the disparity that exists between online and offline identities. This may be associated with the difficulty in building and sustaining trust in online social, networks (Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013; Volakis 2011). Again, the desperation for capital and quality network of relationships including engaging in intimate relations were influential in the decision of some of the participants to join may influence some of members of an OSN. Nevertheless, different people have different reasons for keeping different identities online and offline. Hence, other reasons for incompatible offline and online identities may be to make up for their (young people's) feeling of incompleteness offline. Some people were found to create the identity that suits what they want to become offline. Thus, young people maintain a projected identity online for their real-life identity.

Trust was a vital issue for the participants. As argued by some of the participants, trust is earned in online interaction through honesty, truthfulness, sincerity and open communication between the two parties. However, differences exist in building and establishing trust online and offline. Trust building with an online friend would require a greater effort than trusting an offline friend (Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013; Volakis 2011). Young people mainly keep different identities because of a personal feeling of inadequacy, lack of self-esteem, hypocrisy, criminal tendencies, security and other personal reasons (Dwyer *et al*. 2007; Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2013; Hargittai 2007; Krasnova *et al*. 2010; Livingstone and Brake 2010; Volakis 2011). Consistent with the literature, lack of physical contact between OSN users, peer pressure and inconsistent access to the Internet also accounted for the differences between offline and online identities (Schachter 2005; Urista *et al*. 2009).

Notwithstanding the strength of this study, it is limited in a few respects. The study did not take into cognisance the undergraduates who despite access to the Internet did not join any online social networks as platforms to construct their identity. In addition, the study did not investigate the different platforms that this category of undergraduates utilises to construct their identity. The study is also limited in some respects by the research design. Due to the study population and sample being entirely focused on undergraduates from just two universities in Southwest Nigeria, one cannot ultimately say the findings of this study would hold for students in other parts of Nigeria, especially those in the South-Eastern, South-Southern and Northern part of the country where a seemingly different socio-cultural milieu exists. This study seems to mainly cover students of Yoruba descent. However, the use of an FGD and IDI gave the findings more validity as the information elicited from the participants tend to be more detailed and more authentic.

In conclusion, identity construction in this present age of Internet advancement has been largely done by young people through online social networks. While the identity online may differ from the real offline identity, it is completely impossible to separate both dimensions from the real personality of the person. And despite the several issues that are associated with online social networks, it has come to stay as a veritable means of constructing identity.

Conclusion

The advent of the online social networks has largely influenced the manner of constructing identity online, especially among young people. Identity construction is a dual process, taking place both in the virtual and the real world and it is never static. In addition, students use social networking sites as avenues to interact with both their existing base of offline friends and the new ones made online. As such, online identities are usually not constructed to completely differ from the real life identities, but rather are an extension of the real-life identities and in most cases used to enhance the offline identities.

However, in cases where online identities have been constructed to differ completely from the real offline identity, a myriad of reasons could easily be put forward as an explanation. While such reasons are usually personal and may differ

from one user to the next, an aggregate of such reasons might include low self-esteem, criminal tendencies and the desire to keep up with societal demands. These reasons cut across both genders. Therefore, online social networks remain essential in young people's quest to construct a satisfactory identity both online and offline. The findings echo the relevance of interrogating the context and involvement of youths in online social networks and how social networks can be further encouraged for positive outcomes.

Acknowledgments

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