

EMERGING *AFRO-TECHNO SAPIENS*: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CORE AFRICAN CULTURAL IMAGINATION

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Abstract

The ubiquity of social media in Africa is leading to an insidious displacement of African cultures and values. A gamut of indicators suggests that social media is not only changing the daily habits of African users, but it is on the verge of redefining the very identity of the African. The reason for this is not far-attached. Every social media platform is laced with the cultural ideals, values, and idiosyncrasies of its originating culture. The most popular social media platforms in Africa today, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Linked In, and Snapchat, are products of Western cultural imaginations. Their algorithms are designed, whether explicitly or implicitly, to promote Western cultural ideals. In encountering any social media platform, therefore, we not only encounter technology, but we also encounter the cultures of the creators. This essay investigates the cultural underpinnings implicit in social media and provides cautionary sing posts for users who may be unreflective on the ways in which social media is impacting African personhood, family structures, family traditions, and African sexual ethics.

1. Introduction

The common denominator among all the nomenclatures employed today to articulate the encounter between technology and homo sapiens: the cyber age, artificial intelligence age, etc., is the growing role of technology in human activities. From the invention of the world's first stored-memory computer in 1948¹ to date, many scholars have sought to express the reality of the interaction between humans and technology. The intricate dependence of humans on technology is

¹ HELEN BRIGGS, "The 'Baby' that ushered in modern computer age," *BBC News*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-44554891>.

captured quite aptly by Albert Borgmann, who suggests that “technologies have colonized everyday life to such an extent that they have become virtually invisible.” For Borgmann, technologies have ceased to become benevolent aids to human comfort and now serve as the taken-for-granted matrix through which all experience is mediated.²

The near complete fusion of humans and technology today suggests a gradual transformation of homo sapiens into *techno sapiens*. Although *techno sapiens* is a technical concept used to designate the outcome of the integration of humans and technology,³ this essay utilizes the term loosely to conceptualize the reality of an emerging generation of social media addictive users who seem completely dependent on technology, especially their mobile phones, making it a near impossibility to exist offline, in an unplugged world. Their response to an offline life is akin to an out-of-water fish experience. This phenomenon in African society is what this essay describes as *afro-techno sapiens*. This reality of the emerging *afro techno-sapiens* calls for critical reflection.

In particular, social media, the “modern interactive communication channels through which people connect to one another, share ideas, experiences, pictures, messages and information of common interest,”⁴ has taken on new dimensions of influence on human activities. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and more recently, TikTok have become key elements in human interactions and are on the verge of redefining the ways of being human. There is a steady rise in the use of social media around the globe. In 2015, for instance, there were 2.078 billion people on social media. This number rose by a 21 percent growth rate the following year, which recorded about 2.307 billion users. By 2018, there was a 9 percent growth rate putting the total number of users at 3.196 billion. That growth rate remained steady through 2020 when there were 3.960 billion people on social media. The average growth rate is expected to grow by 3.9 percent by

2 ALBERT BORGMANN, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry: A philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 224.

3 ERIK CALONOUS, “Techno Sapiens the Convergence of Humans and Technology,” *CNN*, July 8, 1996, https://Money.Cnn.Com/Magazines/Fortune/Fortune_Archive/1996/07/08/214357/Index.Htm.

4 CHIEME ONYEMA AND CHRISTIAN CHIMA CHUKWU, “Social Media Usage, Moral Decadence and the Impact on The Nigerian Family Values: A Critical Perspective” *globalscientificjournal* 7, no.8, (September 2021): 880, https://www.globalscientificjournal.com/researchpaper/social_media_usage_mora.

2025.⁵ These numbers have huge implications for society. Andrew Keen was on to this when he warned that, “The consequences of Internet and social media revolution are much more profound.” For him, the internet and the majority of its social platforms are revolutionizing our cultural habits, our ways of entertaining ourselves, and our ways of defining who we are...”⁶ Social Media has become a principal initiator of sociocultural transformation, by challenging and modifying existing customs, traditional structures, and practices of societies. This essay seeks to investigate the ways in which social media interacts with and engages African cultural imagination, i.e., the culture, beliefs, social behaviour, customs, art, law and the African way of life. In particular, it examines the impact of social media activities on African personhood, African sexual ethic and African family institution. It contends that social media is not a neutral technological instrument incapable of impacting human life, it impacts those who use it. Social media is not only affecting African lives, especially the younger generation, but it is also changing the ways of being African today. Unfortunately, despite the proliferation of literature on social media, its impact on core African culture has not been given elaborate investigation and sustained attention. Resultantly, many consumers of social media in Africa remain unreflective about its impact on them and the African culture. It is important to note however, that given the complex nature of African society, especially, the religious influences between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, this paper will focus on sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, in its illustration of African values, this paper does not reflect the moral expressions of those countries in the North of Africa that are considered members of the Arab league.

2. Social Media Use in Africa: Facts and Statistics

Africa has 13.92 percent of the world’s social media population, making it home to the second most social media users in the world.⁷ According to Statista, Africa has witnessed a continuous rise in the number of social media users. As of

⁵ “Social Media in Africa – Statistics and Facts,” Statista, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/topics/9922/social-media-in-africa/#topicOverview>

⁶ OPEOLUWA TOSIN ELUWOLE, NSIMA SYLVANUS UDOH, OLUGBENGA DAVID OJO, “The Impact of Internet on African Education and Culture,” *International Journal of Business, Humanities and Technology* 4, no. 3 (May 2014), 70, https://www.ijbhtnet.com/journals/Vol_4_No_3_May_2014/10.pdf.

⁷ “Social Media Users by Country 2023,” World Population Review,” accessed February 9, 2023, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/social-media-users-by-country>.

2022, there were over 384 million users of social media in Africa.⁸ The major social media platforms in Africa include Facebook, which is the leading platform, with about 271 million users and maintaining about 50 percent traffic generation capabilities since 2021, followed by YouTube which has about 180 million African users with a share of around 9.4 percent and Twitter which has about 24 million users with a share of 3.8 percent in 2022.⁹ Other influential social media platforms include WhatsApp and more recently TikTok.

The above statistics is understandable given Africa's young population and the general attraction of social media among young people. "Africa has the youngest population worldwide. On the continent, 40 percent of the population are below 15 years of age, and less than four percent are above 65..."¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, while "on the average, global internet users spent 2 hours and 26 minutes on social media platforms every day" in 2022, Nigeria surpassed the global average. An average user spent 3 hours and 42 minutes on social networks every single day, making Nigerians the most addicted users of the internet in Africa.¹¹

From the foregoing, if there is any culture that has witnessed profound cultural transformation as a result of technological advancement in social media, it is the African culture. Today more than ever, social media has become a substantive part of African life. Opeoluwa Tosin Eluwole et al examining Africa vis-à-vis Marshall McLuhan's theory of technological determinism maintain that "the African community is in a midst of a cultural revolution."¹² For a number of scholars, social media is reshaping Africa and Africans. They argue that social media and other technological advancements are sure to continue to "influence the lives of individuals within the African community; and it would extensive-

⁸ "Social media in Africa – Statistics and facts," Statista, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/topics/9922/social-media-in-africa>.

⁹ Statista, "Social media in Africa."

¹⁰ "Proportion of selected age groups of world population and in regions in 2022," Statista, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265759/world-population-by-age-and-region/>

¹¹ VICTOR OLUWOLE, "Nigerians are the most addicted social media users in Africa – see how other countries ran, *Business Insider, Africa*, February 10, 2022, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/lifestyle/nigerians-are-the-most-addicted-social-media-users-in-africa-see-how-other-countries/7d93c98#:~:text=The%20African%20country%20most%20obsessed,their%20favourite%20social%20media%20sites>.

¹² OPEOLUWA TOSIN ELUWOLE, ET AL., "The Impact of Internet on African Education and Culture." 71.

ly be reflective in overall Africa's culture, education and thought processes."¹³ That technology then is exerting an influence on the African soil is not a *questio disputata*. The bone of contention today is whether such influence is negative or positive. While some scholars are optimistic about social media's impact on the society, others are more cautious.

Beth Delay maintains that "Social media does present a powerful platform for creating multiple stories about Africa... Embracing the accessibility of modern technology, African social media bloggers and commentators are using Facebook, YouTube and other platforms to undermine longstanding "Afro-pessimistic" stereotypes– the backward continent characterized by strife and poverty."¹⁴ Therefore, social media among other benefits is providing a platform for Africans to tell their own stories, control their narratives and engage the world. A host of Afro-positive activists through various social media platforms have embarked on the task of rebutting what they see as the bias of media coverage about Africa.¹⁵ Therefore, through social media, Africans "reclaim their agency by creating and distributing their own self-representations. In this sense, social media may be seen as a democratizing space."¹⁶ On the economic front, social media offers opportunities for African content creators and for its increasing population. However, some writers believe that in spite of its value to Africa, social media is substantially saturated with western-based values and cultures which is leading to the erosion of African culture and value systems.

3. Personhood in the African Society and the Challenges of Social Media

Anicius Manlius Boethius, the great Roman Philosopher defined a person as *naturae rationalis individua substantia*, "the indivisibly single subsistence of that which is most universal."¹⁷ This definition resonates with Thomas Aquinas'

¹³ ELUWOLE, ET AL., 71.

¹⁴ "Changing the African Narrative Through Social Media Platforms," The Conversation, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/changing-the-african-narrative-through-social-media-platforms-97097>

¹⁵ The Conversation, "Changing the African Narrative."

¹⁶ The Conversation, "Changing the African Narrative."

¹⁷ BÉNÉZET BUJO, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*. Translated by Brian McNeil (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2018), 86.

conceptualization of the human person as *unum simpliciter* – unqualifiedly one.¹⁸ These views of the human person undergird the notion of the human person in Western societies. In Western societies, a human person is an integrated person-an individual. The notion of the human person for Africans is quite different. The human person is not simply “an individual substance of a rational nature”¹⁹ of Boethius, and transcends the *unum simpliciter* of Aquinas.²⁰ For the African, the human person is not simply an integrated person divided into reason, will and passions, but one that exists in relation to others. Simply put, the notion of the person for the African is expressed in inherent relationality and not individuality.²¹ Bénézet Bujo maintains that African ethics defines a person as “a process of coming to existence in the reciprocal relatedness of individual and community... the individual becomes a person only through active participation in the life of the community.”²² Placid Temples in reference to relationality in the African notion of personhood from Bantu culture writes that,

The Bantu cannot conceive of...the human person as an independent being standing on his own. Every human person, every individual is as it were one link in a chain of vital forces: a living link both exercising and receiving influence, a link that establishes the bond with previous generations and with forces that establishes his own existence. The individual is necessarily an individual adhering to the clan.²³

Leopold Senghor reveals that African societies stress “on the group than on the individuals, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society.”²⁴ Elochukwu Uzukwu corroborates Senghor’s position, from the Igbo culture where he opines that it is impossible among the Igbo to define the characteristics of a person without linking him or her to par-

¹⁸ ST I, q. 76, a. 1.

¹⁹ PAULINUS ODOZOR, *Morality Truly Christian Truly African: Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2014), 233.

²⁰ ODOZOR, 233.

²¹ ODOZOR, 233.

²² BUJO, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 87.

²³ BUJO, 86.

²⁴ ODOZOR, *Morality Truly Christian Truly African*, 210.

ents and even to departed ancestors.²⁵ In other words, for Africans, the human person is inherently communitarian. The individual is inserted into the context of “social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated, atomic individual.”²⁶ The implication of this is deducible. At the core of African personhood is the virtue of solidarity, grounded in the ubuntu principle. For Africans, solidarity as a social virtue conveys the sentiment that the existence of all is linked to the existence of the individual just as the existence of the individual is dependent on the existence of all. Archbishop Desmond Tutu reinforced this when in a series of teachings, he contended that,

In our African language we say, ‘a person is a person through other persons’. I would not know how to be a human being at all except (that) I learned this from other human beings. We are made for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence. We are meant to complement each other. All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we break that fundamental Law of our being.²⁷

In Tutu’s view, no one is self-sufficient in African society; there is mutual interdependence. This reality is expressed by John Mbiti who maintains that the individual can only say: ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am.’ For Mbiti, this is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.²⁸

In contrast, social media proposes an understanding of the human person that is deeply Western. Veronica Prytko posits that “Social media is a modern concept of individualism” which tend to destroy social capital by creating “egoists.”²⁹ Rather than actively engaging the community and family, many users of social media today are bent inwards to themselves within their virtual worlds. Prytko further asserts that “social media encourages an individualist lifestyle,”³⁰

²⁵ ODOZOR, 210.

²⁶ ODOZOR, 211.

²⁷ JULIUS MUTUGI GATHOGO, “African Hospitality: Is It Compatible with the Ideal Christ’s Hospitality?” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 94, no. 1 (March 2012): 6, <http://search.ebscohost.com.providence.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001570446&site=ehost-live>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ VERONICA PRYTKO, “Social Media’s Link with Individualism and the Dangers that Follow” (Honors Thesis, Assumption University, Massachusetts, 2021), 4, <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/>.

³⁰ Ibid., 33.

one that encourages its users to self-isolate, create their own worlds within their own hands and be more invested in gaining followers and likes rather than paying genuine attention to the needs of one's family and community.³¹ In an online article, Clare Morell writes that social media algorithms are designed to foster self-preoccupation, maximize addiction among users and keep them in their world engaged as long as possible, often oblivious of the happenings in their immediate environment.³² According to Morrell, creators of social media platforms want people to live their whole lives online, so they can generate as much revenue as possible for pecuniary purposes.³³ Social media, she argues, "monetized a vision of life as a performance, which has rapidly accelerated the modern trend of expressive individualism."³⁴ With the advent and proliferation of social media community gatherings and festivities are fastly becoming anachronistic. It is not difficult to see how social media, with its undercurrents of a Western individualistic culture, is disrupting the expression of African identity.

4. The Impact of Social Media on African Family Institution

In traditional African society, the family is the most vital institution. It is essentially the most basic social structure within which each individual establishes his or her identity, develops a sense of belonging and learns the values of the larger community. According to Ambe J Njoh,

The family is a highly valued social unit, which plays an extremely important role in African society. African tradition requires people to have a high sense of obligation to their kin in particular and their community at large. The importance of family in traditional Africa, where there are no formal social welfare institutions, derives from the fact that it provides a platform on which members offer and receive assistance, encouragement and advice.³⁵

³¹ Ibid.

³² "How Digital Media Helped Shape the 'Modern Self,'" Public Discourse, accessed January 8, 2023, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2022/04/81532/>.

³³ "How Digital Media," Public Discourse.

³⁴ "How Digital Media", Public Discourse.

³⁵ AMBE J NJOH, *Tradition, Culture and Development in Africa, Historical Lessons for Modern Development Planning*, (Vermont: Ashgate publishing company, 2006), 51.

Evaristus Chuma Nnamene rightly observes that “right from antiquity, inculcating values have often taken place in families. The family has continued to be the citadel of cultural socialization.”³⁶ It was typical for traditional African families in the olden days to get “together at the moonlight to tell stories, folklores, and songs by which socialization and assimilation of cultural and familial values took place.”³⁷ The family, as a vehicle for social, moral, spiritual, and political formation played a very vital role in the holistic character formation of its members.”³⁸

African society is stratified, and there are different ways to be integrated into the various layers of society. A Yoruba proverb in Nigeria captures this stratification and the respective roles of all, *omode ni ise, agba ni ise, ni a fi da ile aye*. This means that both “the young and old have roles in the creation of the earth.”³⁹ In African society, “authority flows from the old to the youth, and respect for the elderly is a guiding principle.” This, therefore, means that “an older person is automatically expected to hold a certain level of superiority, regardless of his or her rank, title or education.”⁴⁰ Respect and obedience to constituted authorities usually begin with one’s immediate parents and other elderly folks of different age grades in a community.⁴¹ It is important to explain that “the traditional African family typically includes all individuals belonging to a common lineage.”⁴² The emergence of social media and its ubiquitous use in African families have however changed the family structure. Just like in the society, social media has played ambivalent roles in the family as well. Social media has the capacity to both unite and disrupt traditional family relationships. There is no doubt that social media has great value for the family. In so many ways, it presents a great op-

³⁶ EVARISTUS CHUMA NNAME, “Impact of Social Media on Family Values,” *Sapientia Foundation Journal of Education, Sciences and Gender Studies* 3 no.1 (March 2021): 386, <https://www.sfjesgs.com/index.php/SFJESGS/article/view/>

³⁷ NNAME, “Impact of Social Media,” 386.

³⁸ NNAME, “Impact of Social Media,” 386.

³⁹ “The Negative Aspect of Respect in African Culture,” *Modern Ghana*, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/460727/the-negative-aspect-of-respect-in-african-culture.html>.

⁴⁰ “The African Ubuntu Philosophy,” *Course Hero - the University of Namibia*, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.coursehero.com/file/25352330/04chapter4pdf/>, 142.

⁴¹ ADEYANJU JAMES OLUGBENGA AND BEN OLUSOLA BELLO, “African Values,” *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 4, (2017):11.

⁴² NJOH, “Tradition, Culture and Development,” 53.

portunity for new forms of connectedness within the family. Through social media family members can know other members of the family in faraway locations, connect with them, keep in touch with them and share information on a regular basis. Social media, in this regard, is a useful technological innovation that offers opportunities for increased family cohesion, by encouraging parent-child interactions and open communications between parents and children.

At the same time, social media, by providing virtual substitutes to real families are profoundly changing the ways family members relate to each other within the African culture. In different ways, social media is also redefining the family. As stated above, although social media is designed *ab initio* as a platform for interconnectivity, today more than ever it continues to engender complex patterns of interactions within the family. Nnamene believes that social media constitutes the biggest challenge for families in the 21st century. He argues that “Unlike televisions where the “destructive themes” can be controlled, it is hard to place a hold on the social media. Their fluidity beats imagination.”⁴³ Harleena Singh corroborates Nnamene’s position. She asserts that social media has a way of replacing normal healthy family conversation, with text messaging sessions and family activity time, with endless hours of chatting with friends one may have never met. In addition, she claims that family members can very early get addicted to social networking sites which in turn can snowball into further problems such as poor communication in the family, exposure of children and adolescents to sexual adult content, low attention span, problems in marriages as a result of poor attention to the spouse, and damage to family reputation resulting from privacy compromises.⁴⁴

The African society as demonstrated above is essentially communitarian rather than individualistic. Social media is infringing on this cherished value as we become more and more isolated individuals. Virtual friends have become more important than real family members. Family times have become obsolete, and family values are being challenged by the youth as they become familiar with the cultures and traditions of different climes. Family gatherings and meal times, which in the past were educational platforms for the transfer of family

⁴³ NNAME, “Impact of Social Media on Family Values,” 387.

⁴⁴ “Family Problems Due to Social Networking,” Aha! Now: Discover Happiness, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.aha-now.com/family-problems-due-to-socialnetworking/> Retrieved 11th Nov. 2019.

traditions, cultural ethos and right moral conduct, are short-lived because every member of the family wants to return to their virtual life. Consequently, parents are gradually abdicating their roles as parents, for they too are engulfed in the *world of clicks and likes*. Furthermore, social media has a negative impact on the relational dynamics between parents and their children, leading to the renegotiation of parental roles within African families. In Nigeria for instance, a study by Onyema and Chukwu found that,

Social media usage is an albatross on family value system in the Nigerian society. Social media platforms have distorted the functions of parents in the Nigerian society, particularly in inculcating new values which have speeded the decline of family values. In fact, family value system is not likely to thrive and persist in a society where social media is cyclically intertwined with the lacks of decency, discipline, honesty, transparency and accountability.⁴⁵

Elizabeth Igbam, L. I. Ifejika, et al. argue that the family is being slowly replaced by other agents of socialization such as social media. They further reveal that “parents are losing the grip on value inculcation in children,” and social media, and social activities in the family are being reduced or displaced in some “for the reason that the individuals like to spend much time online and they are not able to take part in face to face social activities.” The implication of this on morality is enormous. For instance, in a study conducted by Chieme Onyema and Christian Chima Chukwu on the relationship between social media and family values in the Nigerian context, they found “that a significant relationship exists between the threatening impact of social media on culture and the decline in the Nigerian family values.”⁴⁶

Additionally, Elizabeth Igbam, maintains that “there is a decline in traditional nuclear family households as family members have become “more individualistic” and families are spending “less and less time together.”⁴⁷ Thus, with social

⁴⁵ ONYEMA AND CHUKWU, “Social Media Usage,” 892.

⁴⁶ ONYEMA AND CHUKWU, “Social Media Usage,” 889.

⁴⁷ ELIZABETH IGBAM L. I. IFEJIKA, PAUL CHIJOKE OZIOKO, PHILIP IFEJIKA, “Disruptive Tendency of Social Media in Family Social Interaction Among Women in Borgu Local Government Area, Niger State, Nigeria” *Russian Journal of Agriculture and Socio-Economic Sciences* 118, no. 10 (October 2021): 184, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355832567>.

media being more immersed into family routines than ever before and the increasing role of mobile phones, face-to-face interaction between family members has declined. This has also led to a social situation whereby families have become accustomed to the avoidance of person-to-person communication.⁴⁸ Contrary to the communitarian orientation of African societies, many family members are becoming self-sufficient. The interdependence that once characterized the family is gradually being affected by social media's invasion today, leading to new forms of isolationism and loneliness. Sherry Turkle, a social psychologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reveals that although thanks to social networking and text messaging, people have become more connected to one another than ever before in human history, interestingly, they are also more lonely and distant from one another in their unplugged lives.⁴⁹ In her book, "Alone Together," which is based on meta-analyses of individual and family studies and her own interviews with 300 children and 150 adults, Turkle concludes that "people who choose to devote large portions of their time to connecting online are more isolated than ever in their non-virtual lives, leading to emotional disconnection, mental fatigue and anxiety."⁵⁰

5. Sexuality in Traditional African Society and Social Media Sexploitation

Bujo writes that "African communities are interested in the sexual lives of all their members since sexuality is not a private matter."⁵¹ The reason for this attention to sex and sexuality is not far-fetched. In traditional African society, sex and sexuality are the basic and primary vehicles for preserving and transmitting the ancestral vital force and as such are considered sacred. For Africans, the goal of sexuality is to keep together the community entrusted to its members by their ancestors and to bestow ever new life on the community.⁵² Hence, the duty of inculcating the right sexual ethics in the young

⁴⁸ IGBAM, IFEJIKI ET AL, "Disruptive Tendency of Social Media, 181.

⁴⁹ MICHAEL PRICE, "Alone in the crowd: Sherry Turkle says social networking is eroding our ability to live comfortably offline, Questionnaire," *American Psychological Association* 42, no. 6 (June 2011), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/06/social-networking>.

⁵⁰ PRICE, "Alone in the crowd."

⁵¹ BUJO, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 37.

⁵² Ibid.

is a sacrosanct duty. Consequently, communities prepare young people for a responsible sexual life psychologically and physically. Psychologically, young people are to become so mature that they learn to refuse every abuse of sexuality. "Physically, wise women and men teach them the correct relationships with their own bodies."⁵³ Through various rituals and instructions, the youths are encouraged to accept their sexuality through the performances of socially assigned gender roles. Again, the proper expression of sexuality resulting in the birth of children is the cornerstone of life and happiness. Resultantly, the use of generative powers through sexual intercourse is closely controlled to ensure full procreative potential during the marriage. To safeguard the proper function of sex and sexual activities taboos were employed. Initiation ceremonies and rites serve the purpose of preparing adolescents for the right use of sexuality within marriage.

Some scholars argue that social media has disrupted the above African sexual ethics. Technologically mediated sexual relations are on the rise, leading to and drawing from soft pornography. Morell affirms that "social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok are exacerbating the fixation on sexual identity and sexual liberation that defines modern culture."⁵⁴ Social media, she argues has led to unprecedented "pornification" of culture by "expanding the reach, acceptance, and ease of access to porn."⁵⁵ She argues that despite the attempt to downplay the role of social media in pornography, it is "a first-entry point to pornographic websites, especially for minors and children."⁵⁶

Contrary to the African understanding of the goal of sexuality (keeping together the community entrusted to them by their ancestors for the goal of transmitting new life to the community), social media teaches that "sex is all about individual satisfaction...the self's most important quality" which has little or no intrinsic moral content.⁵⁷ Technologically mediated sexploitation through social media has become prevalent. Acts that were heretofore considered taboos and sources of shame for the family are now celebrated and in fact prescribed as

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "How Digital Media," Public discourse."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

a good to be desired. In a study conducted by Ifejika, Igbam, and Ozioko, in Nigeria, the largest user of social media in Africa, they found that a “significant association exists between social media usage on indecent dressing, and sexual promiscuity among Nigerian youths.”⁵⁸ Social media they expressed has “served as a venue for some youths to share risqué, nude and sexual images, especially of themselves. This has encouraged sexual immorality and promiscuity in Nigeria.”⁵⁹ Again, Onyema and Chukwu reveal that in Nigeria, “three out of four teenagers say that the social media content makes it seem normal for them to engage in sexual relations, and also engineering them to be opened about sex, including how they talk to their girlfriends and boyfriends.” They further disclosed that “intolerant sexual behaviour has been favoured by the availability of sexual imagery online.”⁶⁰ Examples abound. For instance, Osundolire Oladapo Ifelanwa revealed that,

In a recent scenario, something called the #silhouettechallenge trended for days. It involved people, mostly women dancing to a song—initially clothed, then they switch to a filtered version of themselves dancing naked. The now-popular red filter obscures their nakedness leaving only a moving silhouette and the mind of the viewer to fill in the blanks... As the groundswell of video contributions grew, men also jumped on the train either performing with an unclad female or performing solo both showing the outline of their genitalia.⁶¹

He concluded that “While some saw this filtered-nudity show as liberating, especially for curvy women who seemed to form the largest demographic of female participants, others saw it as inconsistent with the values of modesty and social decorum as Africans”.⁶² The challenge today for African societies, therefore, is finding ways to protect young people from the unbridled sexual license and consumer mentality of sexuality that is being promoted on social media,

⁵⁸ ONYEMA AND CHUKWU, “Social Media Usage,” 890.

⁵⁹ ONYEMA AND CHUKWU, “Social Media Usage,” 889.

⁶⁰ ONYEMA AND CHUKWU, “Social Media Usage,” 887.

⁶¹ “Cultural Values & the Social Media-Age African,” Medium, accessed February 5, 2023, <https://osundolireoladapoifelanwa.medium.com/cultural-values-the-social-media-age-african-716c501b1693>.

⁶² Ibid

which can very comfortably supply a constant diet of sexually provocative materials in the comfort of one's living room. This sexexploitative capacity of social media has a huge implication for the society, especially for the youth who are often uncritical of the undercurrents of social media.

6. A Clash of Cultures?

The conflict between social media and African cultural imagination is essentially the clash of cultures. It is an extension of the battle between Western and African Cultures, with social media becoming the new battleground. Most popular social media platforms have been created in Western cultures or designed to promote Western cultural values. Their algorithms bear the imprint of western cultural orientation. Consequently, to understand the interaction of social media and African cultures, one must understand the essential differences between Western cultures and African cultures. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist and Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist have pioneered the study of cultures and cultural differences. Their work as articulated by Kory Floyd offers profound insights into understanding the distinction between cultures in the West and non-western cultures like African cultures. Floyd's distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures and low-and high-context cultures presents an interpretative lens to understanding the interaction of social media platforms that are intrinsically Western and African societies.

The Western culture is essentially individualistic in nature with features that are quite different from the African culture which is essentially collectivistic. In Western societies, "people believe that their primary responsivity is to themselves."⁶³ In contrast, collectivistic or communitarian societies like Africa, teach that "the primary responsibility of the individual is to their families and communities..."⁶⁴ Therefore, while "children in individualistic cultures are raised hearing messages such as "be yourself," "you are special," and "There's no one else in the world who's just like you," the message in collectivistic cultures are different. Rather than emphasize the importance of knowing oneself, and being self-sufficient, collectivistic cultures place a high value on duty and loyalty to the group. They see themselves not as unique individuals but as part of the group to

⁶³ KORY FLOYD, *Interpersonal Communication*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), 43.

⁶⁴ FLOYD, *Interpersonal*, 44.

which they belong. Hence, the focus is primarily on taking care of the needs of the group.⁶⁵

Again, most of the popular social media platforms are created in low-context cultures, where people are expected to be direct and encouraged to express their feelings without any form of inhibitions. As Floyd notes, “Low context cultures value expressing oneself, sharing personal opinions, and trying to persuade others to see things one’s way.”⁶⁶ In contradistinction to low-context culture is a high-context culture. African societies are essentially high-context cultures. In African societies, like other high-context cultures, children are “taught to speak much less directly”. The reason is obvious, maintaining harmony and avoiding offending people are more important than expressing one’s true feelings.⁶⁷ From the foregoing, it becomes clearer how regular users of social media, which is laced with Western values can gradually imbibe the attitude, orientations and values of Western cultures while discarding or calling to question African values. This accounts for the rise in isolationism and questions about respect for parents and elders. Therefore, If we want to preserve African traditional values, we must be aware of the cultural dynamics in the use of social media.

7. Conclusion

There are conflicting perceptions about the impact of social media on the society. In fact, today more than ever, social media can be best described as an enigma wrapped in paradoxes. It both connects and concomitantly isolates. It gives a sense of satisfaction, while at the same time creating an insatiable craving for more. While promoting self-acceptance, it perpetuates the urge for constant validation. Indeed, with social media, we can be everywhere and yet nowhere at the same time. Its algorithms are designed to connect us to everyone in the universe while ensuring that we are insulated in our bubbles.

Within the African society, this ambivalence becomes even more perceptible. The advent and use of social media have led to the emergence of endless possibilities for people, young and old. It has presented an opportunity for Africa and Africans to make their voices heard on the globe. On one hand, it has offered

⁶⁵ FLOYD, *Interpersonal*, 43.

⁶⁶ FLOYD, *Interpersonal*, 43.

⁶⁷ FLOYD, *Interpersonal*, 44.

opportunities for social connections, acquisition of technical skills, and improvement of individual creativity through the exchange of artistic endeavours, and educative contents. On the other hand, social media has also brought numerous challenges that exert a significant impact on the very identity of Africans, their mores and family values.

In the end, the key to the right use of social media is the realization that social media is not simply a tool in the hands of its users. They have huge consequences on their lives, their beliefs, and their cultures. Hence, the wise counsel of our elders becomes germane in the social media conundrum: “avoid excess, as almost anything good taken to unhealthy extremes becomes a detriment.” Social media offers far greater opportunities for the African society than its challenges. Yet, we must constantly remind ourselves of those challenges that can become sources of serious harm to the family. Social media, like other technological inventions, can be good servants but bad masters. We must therefore use it both wisely and prudently.