

**AWARENESS AND COMPLIANCE TO AGE RESTRICTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA
PLATFORMS BY AGE 10 – 13 IN NIGERIA**

By

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ABSTRACT

Awareness and compliance to age restrictions, the topic of this paper was guided by the objectives: to examine the level of awareness of age restriction on social media sites by underage users, to assess the compliance to the age restriction on social media site by the study group. Technological Determinism was adopted for theoretical framework and the method was the survey. The study found that almost 50% of the respondents were not aware of the existence of age restriction on social media even though most social media sites require you to input a birth date to sign up. High degree of non-compliance to age restriction on social media. Over 80% of the respondents had social media accounts which they opened on their own or had assistance from their parents, or friends and made the following recommendations : The restriction has to be made more stringent with features or questions that could detect contradictions, a possibility could be to get a certification that could prove a person's age with previous or existing records, children under the age of 14 should not be allowed to possess or own smart phones so that their internet activities could be limited to computers at home where control is easier to ensure compliance to age restrictions on social networking sites, there should be legislation to limit the use of smart mobile devices by underage children to ensure their focus on their education at the vulnerable stage of their development.

KEYWORDS: Awareness, Compliance, Social media, Technological, Determinism

INTRODUCTION

The internet has become a dominant phenomenon in human existence almost to a point of inevitability. Every human activity is woven around the internet, as if it is the oxygen of life. It is arguable that communication has been impacted most by the invention of the internet and both seem to be inseparable. This is not only due to the speed of exchange to limits unknown, but also because of the rate at which communication has been democratised. The freedom offered by the internet in the communication environment has whittled the once almost suffocating power of control government and media institutions exerted over choice. Today, everyone who is literate in any language can involve in exchange of ideas and impartation of knowledge over the internet, which was exclusive preserve of the conventional media before the early 90s when the first communications protocol, Transfer Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) was established, making it possible for computers to communicate with each other globally (Cerf &

Kahn, 1974; Postel, 1983; Berners – Lee, 1989).handheld devices have further increased access to the internet which has made it possible for minors – a vulnerable group of the population – to be exposed to the toxic communication environment. The gatekeeping function of the media has been taken over by the citizens, including underaged whose consumption of social media is not only unprecedented but psychologically demanding. According to Abaji (2009): The internet now ensures that individuals and institutions can at minimal cost become media gatekeepers. Any internet literate user can now set up personal sites for news publication as well as video and sound streaming. This is what is meant by independent or alternative journalism – a new movement coming as a challenge to the monopolistic domination of traditional mass media platforms by few rich individuals and corporations (SIC) (P. 348).

Social media, those platforms or tools that allow users to create share and interact with content, information or other users in a virtual environment, (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, P. 61), have become so intrusive and pervasive in an almost lawless virtual world. Children and early teens who could barely understand their needs have unfettered access, both as consumers and producers in this chaotic virtual world.

This has necessitated some form of control in the form of laws and policies to protect young people from the dangers of the internet. Age restrictions on social media – the minimum age requirement for access – is achieved through age verification: in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission’s regulations, social media platforms have almost a uniformed age restriction to 13 years across platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. Instructively, that is the age at which many of them transit from junior secondary to senior secondary and the beginning of the teenage years. Age restrictions are observed to achieve two purposes. The first is to protect children from cyber bullying, harassment and exposure to explicit content, and secondly in compliance with regulations like the Children Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).

The pervasive and intrusive nature of the internet makes children vulnerable in a hitherto imaginable way. Children are exposed to explicit content right in the comfort of their homes and in some cases are engaged with very much older adult who explore and exploit their innocence. Apart from cyberbullying, children are exposed to other risks on the internet such as internet dependence, conduct risk, contact risk, commercial risk (De Moor et al 2008; Gasser et al 2010; De Valcke, Vankeer & Schellens 2011)

With further development and increase in internet accessibility many young people are exposed to the challenges posed by this phenomenon. It has become necessary to assess the level of awareness and compliance to social media restrictions among age 11 – 13 who are in the junior secondary stage of their education.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There is no over stating the fact that the internet plays a dominant role in the life of the people, even more so for the Gen Z who have been exposed to the internet from their infancy.

However, the loose regulation and control of the social media environment poses its own challenges to young people whose lives revolves around it. It is of immeasurable concern to educators and communicators alike that children are protected from the dangers of social media

use. It is therefore pertinent to determine the awareness and compliance to age restrictions among ages 11 to 13 or junior secondary school students.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Children and young people are confronted with some developmental challenges which may be exacerbated by unbridled social media exposure which has made the topic of the paper “Awareness and Compliance to Age Restrictions Among age 10 – 13” very relevant.

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the level of awareness of age restriction on social media sites by underage users.
2. To assess the compliance to the age restriction on social media site by the study group.

Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated to guide the study.

1. To what extent are under age users of social media aware of the age restriction on these sites?
2. What is the extent of compliance to age restriction on these social networking sites?

Theoretical Framework

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINATION (TD)

Technological Determinism (TD), a theory that espouses the view that technology advancement is a major driver of change in any society, in an often predictable and inevitable manner has evolved over the years through various philosophical and sociological traditions since Karl Marx (1867), McLuhan (1964), Collingridge (1980), Bijiker and Law (1992) and Williams (1996).

The two basic assumptions of theory are that

- i. Technological advancements lead to changes in the society – since the days of industrialisation, technologies like machinery, press, internet – including human behaviour, social structures and institutions.
- ii. Proponents believe that TD drives change in any society in a predictable way. In orders it is possible through research to determine the direct impact of technologies on the society.

Media researchers have resorted to TD for decades to determine the impact of innovations, not only on media production and consumption, but also on the society in general, Hall (1980), Castells (2001), Beukler (2006), Jenkins (2006), Lotz (2007), Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999)

Critics of TD, however, argue it does not consider the role of social, economic and cultural factors which they consider as a drawback

Conceptual Review

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media ‘as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content’ p. 61. Social media (SM) represent the newest media developed and used nowadays for communication between people. The most common social platforms used are quite young: for example, MySpace was founded in 2003, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter, now known as X in 2006, Instagram in 2010 and Snapchat in 2011. The full potential and comprehension of this new way of communication is not yet well perceived by the majority of people.

Lewis (2009) defines it as the platform that links people together in order to provide a means which will allow them to create and share content with others. According to Tuten & Solomon (2017) social media can be categorised into two; those for social networking (which allows users to connect with other people of similar interests and background) and those for learning activities (p. 4)

Social Networking Sites and Age Restriction

Social networking sites are online platforms that allow users to create a public profile and interact with other users on the website. Social networking websites usually have a new user input a list of people with whom they share a connection and then allow the people on the list to confirm or deny the connection. After connections are established, the new user can search the networks of his connections to make more connections. According to Boyd & Ellison, (2007) social networking site may also be known as a social website or a social networking website. They are internet or mobile-based social spaces designed to facilitate communication, collaboration, and content sharing across networks of contacts. They allow users to manage, build and represent their social networks online. They are usually made up of other individuals; they might also include the profiles of events, companies, even political parties. They may let you add anyone in the network as your "friend" or contact, or they might ask for all connections to be agreed by both parties. They typically support the public display of networks - although they may offer privacy restrictions- or facilitate closed communities. Most of the social networks provide the means for their users to interact via the Internet, such as e-mail and instant messaging.

The inception of social networking sites, to facilitate new forms of computer-mediated social interaction, evolved from early suggestions. Early social networking on the World Wide Web began in the form of generalized online communities such as the glob.com (1995), Geocities (1994) and Tripod.com (1995). Characteristically, many of these early communities focused on bringing people together to interact with one another through chat rooms and encouraged users to share personal information and ideas via personal web pages by providing easy-to-use publishing tools and free or inexpensive web space. Some network such as classmates.com, Facebook and X (Twitter) took a different approach by simply having people link to each other through their e-mail addresses. New social networking methods were developed at the end of the 1990’s and many sites began to design more advanced features for users to find and manage friends. This newer generation of social networks began to blossom with the emergence of Six Degrees.com in 1997, followed by Make out Club in 2000, Freinster in 2002 and Myspace in 2003. Social networking sites have become a new means through which individuals can interact and communicate with friends in distance places. As at the third quarter of 2024, the number of active Facebook users

was 2.99 billion. Today it is estimated that, Facebook has over 3 billion monthly active users. In Nigeria, the number of social network users is on the high side. According to social bakers, a facebook statistics site, Nigeria ranks 35th in the world in the number of facebook users. According to the site, facebook has an estimate of over 47million Nigerian users which is about 20.3 Of the population.

Across Europe, on average, over one third of 9-12 year olds (38%) and three quarters of 13-16 olds (77%) has a social networking profile (www.eukidsonline.net retrieved 24/12/24). The minimum age to open an account on Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Kik, and Snapchat is 13. For Vine, Tinder and Yik Yak it is 17. YouTube requires account holders to be 18, but a 13-year-old can sign up with a parent's permission. Despite these clearly stated and published age restrictions, large and growing numbers of children 12 and under are using social media networks, often with their parent's knowledge and consent. A lot of children are signing up for social media accounts even though age restrictions are in place. Social media websites are not required to verify that an account holder meets the age requirements. Most social media require you to input a birth date to sign up, but kids can come up with fake birthdays for that. On Facebook, 52% of children between the ages of 8 and 16 have admitted that they didn't care about Facebook's age restrictions. Overall, 49% of 9–12-year-olds in Ireland report that they display an incorrect age on an SNS profile. This is similar to the UK at 47% and below other countries such as Denmark (64%), Spain (60%), Sweden (56%) and Norway (55%) with even higher proportions of underage SNS users (ec.europa.eu/Eurostat retrieved 24/12/2024).

In certain countries, laws have been put in place that prevents websites from collecting personal information from children under the age of 13. When a child under the age of 13 signs up for a social media account, he/she can no longer be protected from having their personal information collected.

Adults often times make wrong decisions, children are more likely to make even worse decision, and the internet makes those terrible decisions permanent. Children can harass or cyber bully other kids and not know the consequences of those actions. Anything they post on social media is forever; even if they delete it, there is still a record of it. While they may understand how to use social media, they may not understand how to use it wisely.

Uses of Networking Sites

Social media technologies provide their users adequate freedom (Wilson, 2012). As social media platforms are many, so also their functions and uses. Osatuyi (2015, p. 556) elaborated that social networks are classified based on how people use them. Bilandzic, Patriarche & Traudt (2012) introduced three main uses of social media as; Interactivity, Recognition, and Participation (p. 409). People use social media for different reasons. For instance, some people use social media to play online games, while others use it to negotiate, establish, maintain, and participate in political and cultural issues. According to Osatuyi (2013), people use social networks to organize campaigns (political or non-political), create awareness, social interaction, sharing of information, marketing and healthcare activities. The popularity of social networks grows rapidly by the second. These social sites to an extent have become effective (to an extent) means of communicating ideas and feelings among their users. Thus, they are beginning to get more attention around the globe.

According to Miniocha (2009), ‘social networking enhances a person’s sense of community, sharing and collaboration brings an additional responsibility and workload, which some people find inflexible and rather “forced” (p. 154). Through the use of social networking sites people are able to express themselves, communicate and collect profiles that highlight their talent and experience. Konetes & McKeague (2011), came up with certain revelations about the uses of the social networking sites especially, facebook, the researchers reported that, “Students are using Facebook and other channels to develop their identities, beliefs and stances on various issues such as politics, religion, economy, as well as to pioneer and develop intimate relationships.” (p. 108)

Also, Gross, 2004 p. 29) noted that “students use social networking sites not only for leisure and personal socialization but also as a platform for more meaningful and serious deliberations, and students are using social networking for making friends, sharing links, online learning, finding jobs to accomplish their economic, educational, political and social being”.

Empirical Review

Ezekwelem Guanah (2024) conducted research on the “Awareness and compliance with social media Regulations by Undergraduates of select Universities in South East Nigeria”.

The objectives were to find out the attitude of university undergraduates in South East Nigeria towards the online communication laws to assess the level of awareness of laws guiding online communications among university undergraduates in South East Nigeria and to assess the extent of compliance with laws guiding online communication among undergraduate.

The study adopted the diffusion of innovation theory as theoretical guide, with the survey method. The study found that there was low awareness of laws guiding online communication and a generally low compliance with laws guiding online communication among undergraduates.

It recommended for the education of the populace on the laws in addition to the effective enforcement of internet related laws.

Research Design

The nature of this study demands a Survey method. Survey is one of the most popular methods used today in the course of research. According to Ihejirika & Omego (2011), it is the study of a sample taken from a population in order to know their major characteristics which can be generalized to the whole population

The population of this study comprises Junior Secondary School Students in Obio/Akpor LGA, an infinite population because obtaining the population was not possible.

The sample size for an infinite population as in this case is 384 as seen in Krejcie & Morgan (1970:607-610).

The sampling procedure/technique used in this research was the Purposive Sampling

The strength and viability of any research will be determined by the type of data collected and the mode of collecting them. A close – ended questionnaire was administered on the samples.

The techniques used for data analysis was simple statistics. Data collected were analyzed using frequency tables, percentages and simple descriptive data analysis. This technique was chosen for its affordability of simplicity of data and conformity with social science research as well as quantitative research strategy, which is a suitable approach of this kind of study.

Discussion and findings

The data elicited from the questionnaire which were used in the course of this study were presented, analysed and discussed in line with the research questions of this work. A total of 384 questionnaires were printed and distributed to 6 junior secondary schools located in Obio/Akpor LGA or Rivers State. All data presented, analysed and discussed were generated from the 384 copies that were administered to the respondents.

Research question 1:

To what extent are under aged users of social media aware of the age restriction on these sites?

From the research data gathered, it can be seen that over 50% of the respondents were not aware of the age restriction on social media sites. Out of the 310 respondents who have accounts on social media, only about 48% of them were aware of the age restriction or age limit on these sites. If about 50% were not aware of the age limitation, it implies therefore that they would have opened their account without concealing the age. If that is true, how come the age barring applications was not triggered? Without making an argument for or against, one could conclude that even these respondents were aware of the age limitation hence they may have adjusted their ages to beat the age limitation requirements of the sites. Another question that begs for an answer is why a parent/guardian could lie to open an account for the child/ward given the all intrusive nature of the internet with dangers therein. If about one third of the respondents account were opened on their behalf by the parents/guardian, the morality of these adults is called to question, and one can only wonder how technology could help solve this social and moral problem. The findings also revealed that almost 50% of the study group opened their social media account on their own from which over 32% were respondents in JSS 3 a majority of them falling under the age of 13. Over 29% of the respondents were assisted by their parents, and almost 25% of the respondents had their friends open their social media account for them. The extent of awareness of the respondents is put to question considering the fact that these social media site on registering, would defer an individual who does not meet up to the age qualification to gain access to these sites, therefore, an increment had to have been made by the respondents in order to gain access to these sites. As seen from the data obtained from the research, of the 310 respondents, about 180 of them representing 58% of the respondents sought their parent's permission before opening their social media account, almost 40% of the respondents opened their account despite the age limit without getting approval from their parents of which 29% were JSS 3 respondents a majority of whom fell under the age of 13, about 3% were JSS 2 respondents all of whom fell under the age of 13, and about 7% of the respondents were in JSS 1 an equal number of whom fell under the ages of 10 and 12. It goes further to reveal that even the parents who assisted their children in opening a social media account were aware of the age limit yet disregarded it.

Research Question 2:

What is the extent of compliance to age restriction on social media sites?

Of the 384 respondents used as the study group of this work, over 80% of them representing 310 respondents had accounts on social media from which 52.2% were female respondents. Of the 310 respondents, over 22% of them were respondents who fell under the age

of 10, almost 10% of them were aged 11, another 22% were aged 12 and the majority of whom were 13 years old respondents in JSS 3 forming a little over 45% of the respondents with accounts on social media. From the data received, at least 70% of the respondents who have accounts on social media opened their account before getting to the minimum age as stipulated on these sites. Almost 50% of the respondents had their parent's assistance in opening their accounts which goes further to show that some parents do not comply with the requirements of these social media sites, 22.5% of the respondents were assisted by their friends to open their social media account. The data received also indicated that almost 40% of the respondents did not need their parent's approval or permission before opening their social media accounts which could mean that some parents might not be aware that their child owns a social media account, as they have been provided with an unguarded means through which they can access their social media account. Studies have shown that, in the western part of the world, there are child protection software that monitor the child's access to the internet, they have laws set in place specifically for the protection of their minors online such as; Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). In Nigeria, such laws have not been put in place to protect our minors online. Studies have shown that a child's possession of a phone at such a young age can lead to certain disadvantages as exposure to the online world, although it has its advantages, might conflict with the proper upbringing of a child as most of the activities are not filtered enough for the young and innocent minds. The age restriction put in place by these social media sites is among the few ways of protecting young minds, yet compliance to this restriction is very low. From the research data obtained, over 70% of the respondent's access their accounts through the use of their mobile phone which may or may not be monitored. It was also seen that over 70% of the respondents were not in support of the age restriction on social media.

The following findings were made;

1. From the data gathered, we can clearly say that almost 50% of the respondents stated that they were not aware of the existence of age restriction on social media even though most social media sites require you to input a birth date to sign up. Hence, the respondents must have altered their age in order to gain access to these sites.
2. High degree of non-compliance to age restriction on social media. Over 80% of the respondents had social media accounts which they opened on their own or had assistance from their parents, or friends.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results obtained from this study show that a reasonable number of minors between the ages of 10 – 13 have social media accounts. Therefore, there is sufficient evidence that this vulnerable group of children are exposed to the over whelming influence of social media (both positive and negative). Social networking sites are now an integral element of youthful social communication and an essential part of teenagers' internet use. The presence of large numbers of users under the minimum age of 13 poses significant policy challenges for the legislature, industry, regulatory authorities as well as for parents' mediation of their children's internet use. Setting aside the appropriateness of SNS use for younger children, current age restrictions appear not to be effective. As it is not possible for industry providers to identify which users are under 13, concerns must be expressed for their online safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the findings, the following recommendations have been made;

1. The restriction has to be made more stringent with features or questions that could detect contradictions. A possibility could be to get a certification that could prove a person's age with previous or existing records.
2. Children under the age of 14 should not be allowed to possess or own smart phones so that their internet activities could be limited to computers at home where control is easier to ensure compliance to age restrictions on social networking sites.
3. There should be legislations to limit the use of smart mobile devices by underage children to ensure their focus on their education at the vulnerable stage of their development.

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