

Social Networks and the Social Interaction in Family Relationships among Zimbabweans: A Survey on the Perceptions of Residents in Harare and Mashonaland West Provinces of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Electronic communication is clearly becoming a reliable and chosen form of communication in the 21st century. The goal of this study was to determine how Zimbabweans perceive how the use of electronic communication, specifically text-based electronic communication, including e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, and the social media networks Whatsapp, Twitter and Facebook, impacts on interpersonal relationship. To answer the research question, a descriptive survey design was opted for. Using the convenience sampling technique, a Survey Questions Interview Guide with both open ended and closed ended questions was distributed via the participants' email. Of the 30 interview questionnaires distributed, only 20 responded. Thus the findings from this study are constructed from the views of 20 (n=20) participants. The results of this study showed that, when used correctly, user perception is that electronic communication positively impacts on interpersonal relationships. Since the sampling size of this study was small the researcher recommends a longer survey that is offered to more participants because it would offer more data about the perceptions of electronic communication and its impact on relationships.

Keywords: Social Networks, Social Interactions, Families, Relationships

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has been facing many challenges socially, economically and politically forcing family members to migrate in search for jobs. Neighbouring countries like Botswana and South Africa are known for accommodating Zimbabweans who are working there. Some have gone as far as Britain, Canada, and the United States of America just to mention but a few countries. Inside the country, Zimbabweans are known for staying apart, for instance the parents may be in the rural home whilst the child is in the urban area. Consequently, communication technologies like twitter, face book and whatsapp are increasingly being used within family settings to support and extend relationships.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The research is coming against the background of the influx of various social networks at global level. The main social networks that are currently in popular use in Zimbabwe are the facebook, whatsapp, and twitter among some other networks. However, questions continue to be asked on these social networks in relation to moral values, especially in the African society. There are also issues of trust, privacy and disclosure that continue to be questioned by the community. Little and Seller (2009) therefore claims that much work is needed to detail the contexts in which communication between family member takes place, to detail just how family life is constituted and routinely played out through communicative practice, for instance the social networks.

Cheal (2002) describes a family as a group of people that *"live together in a permanent arrangement separated from the rest of the world by the walls of the family dwelling"*. Families are diverse in their functions. Divorce, step- family relationships and multigenerational bonds are all altering familial structures (Little and Seller, 2009). What it shows is that families are diverse in their structures. If a couple divorces, it doesn't cease to be a family because communication is still important in as much

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as the children are concerned. A family can also be made up of multigenerational bonds. Some have argued that there is frequent speculation regarding the future of the family and this has led to the assumptions of a general deterioration in family bonds.

Hank (2007) also observes that this deterioration is regularly associated with the increased physical distance between family members. The further apart family members live, the greater the negative effect on any subsequent social interactions. Lalor et al. (2009) argues that a family is essential to a young person as it is their “*most important source of security, love, belonging and identity*”. As such, communication is the centre for ensuring that sense of security and love. It also enhances a sense of belonging and identity between family members in the African society.

In this study, the researcher explored the impact of social networks in social interaction within the family relationships. Little and Seller (2009) classifies a family as cyclic: live at home when young, migrate to other places, and return home (or area) in later life. Young children mainly live at home with their parent/s or guardian until they reach an age where a decision is made to migrate to another area within their country or a foreign counterpart. Communication becomes of paramount importance to keep the family intact. The study therefore seeks to find out how family members are interacting, the type of social networks they are using to interact and why they are using those networks.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Cheal (2002) claims that modern society has given rise to a complexity and diversity of personal relationships, which has led to an “*increased questioning about the future of family structures*”. Zimbabwe, for instance, has been facing a number of challenges that have led in families dispersing. As highlighted in the background, many people have flocked in neighbouring countries in search of jobs. Even within the country, because of economic challenges some have neglected their original homes. They can no longer visit their rural homes usually, which confirms Scott’s (1997) assertion that there has been a decline in traditional nuclear family households as people have become more individualistic. Zimbabwean families are spending less time together. Turtiainen et al., (2007) bemoans that family’s position in society has changed; as such traditional family values and the family itself have been eroded. Some of the changing dynamics in Zimbabwean society include: the increased participation of women in the workforce, a fluctuating marriage rate, an increase in divorce and the number of children being born outside of marriage.

As argued by Turtiainen et al. (2007), the change in working life and the labour market have affected family life among Zimbabweans. Family members are no longer spending time together. The Zimbabwean family is a social system that has a collective identity. Mesch (2006) explains this social system as one that is a result of shared recollections of togetherness that are created as family members spend time together in shared meals, games, and chatting. Communication becomes a necessary component of life as it is a symbolic, transactional process or the process of creating and sharing meanings (Smith et al. 2009). Communication also plays a significant role in the relationship between individuals of the functioning family or a household. As observed by Mesch (2006) families that spend time together in common activities enjoy a higher quality of communication. For that reason, family communication is essential to any family and household as it “plays a significant role in the relationship between family leisure and family functioning” (Smith et al. 2009:80).

The introduction of the social networks has impacted in the contemporary society in a number of ways. As outlined by Mesch (2006), families with access to information and communication technology differ from those without them, not only in access to technology but in family dynamics as well. Church et al (2010) adds that new media technologies have become embedded within daily domestic routines and are now an intrinsic part of contemporary life. As suggested by DiMaggio et al. (2001) the internet enhances social ties by putting users in more frequent contact with families and friends. Yoon (2006) also believes that the internet allows individuals to strengthen their connection with the extended family beyond their own nuclear family. It is a new form of online interaction that enhances offline relationships and it does so by filling communication gaps between face to face meetings.

Communication technologies have developed relationships, assisted in relationship management and enhancement of relationships (Heirtein and Anchet, 2014). Family members communicate everyday of their lives using social networks. As highlighted by Bargh & McKenna (2004) over a billion text messages are sent through mobile phones around the world every day. Pettigrew (2009) found that

Mutanana, N “Social Networks and the Social Interaction in Family Relationships among Zimbabweans: A Survey on the Perceptions of Residents in Harare and Mashonaland West Provinces of Zimbabwe”

specific use of text messaging provided couples the ability to stay connected throughout the day based on interviews of dyads that were dating, engaged, married, or cohabiting.

Hertlein (2012) also observes that online gaming may contribute to a couple's ability to fantasize in their relationship, acquire and or improve socialization skills, and an ability to better understand their partner's context. For Parker et al., (2013) technology provides unique opportunities for couples to connect to satisfy both function and emotional needs. In a similar study Coyne et al., (2011) explored that married individuals reported using texting, instant messaging, social networking, blogs, and webcams more frequently than couples that were dating. Technology provides a quick and accessible way to deal with marital concerns at any time, such as discussing responsibilities throughout the day.

However, Venkatesh and Vitalari (1985) feels technology has affected the life of a household in a number of different ways and has become a basis for future social behaviour. The introduction of the communication technologies have led to major social change which has meant that individuals, families and households have had to adapt in a number of ways. The social interaction and communication between family members and individuals in a household depends with the situation or portability of particular devices. As argued by, Church et al., (2010) the human interaction is now mediated, if not governed, by the situation or the portability of particular devices. With the coming in of new media technologies like whatsapp, facebook, the twitter just to mention but a few, family members are forced to possess digitals that operate these systems. They may be too expensive for family members.

Some have argued that the introduction of these communication technologies have had a negative impact on children. For instance, Plowman et al (2010) argue that new media technologies have resulted in the technologisation of childhood. The modern child is now different from the old calibre of children. The argument is that nowadays children are technologically driven and this has affected them socially. Technology in the form of television is now being used to baby sit children.

Henline and Harris (2006) states that technology introduces a potential to misinterpret messages between partners in relationships and marriages. This may create barriers in problem solving and intimacy development. There are also complaints of poor attention partners because one may concentrate with the gadget at the expense of his/her partner. For instance, Hawkins & Hertlein (2013) claim that online gaming in relationships may disrupt intimacy processes and introduce feelings of exclusion from one area of their partner's life, potentially resulting in perceived neglect and jealousy. As such, these communication technologies may also disrupt communication between parties.

Whitty (2003) also discovered that if a partner's computer is left accessible or a spouse's password is known, partners will often engage in investigatory behaviours that lead to the discovery of infidelity activities. It has also been the popular social networks such as the facebook and whatsapp that have contributed to a number of marriage breakdowns with the families. For instance, Lumpkin (2012) stated that 33% of divorce cases mentioned facebook in 2011 and involved inappropriate messages to individuals of the opposite sex. Social networks such as the facebook introduce a potential to misinterpret messages on another's profile. Some make some comments on another's photograph, can send private messages and chat online. If this information is misinterpreted with a partner, it may lead to some disagreements within the household. Hertlein and Anchet (2014) summarise by stating that the other challenges introduced by technology into relationships include distancing, lack of clarity and impaired trust.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, the researchers adopted the descriptive survey design. This design is the best to solicit for people's perceptions (Mutanana and Mpofu, 2015). The approach to this research question was within the constructivist paradigm. According to Schutt (2009) the constructivist philosophy is the perspective that emphasises how different stakeholders in social settings construct their beliefs. A sample of 20 participants was drawn from residents in Harare and Mashonaland West Provinces of Zimbabwe and a questionnaire was used to get the views of the participants on the impact of the social media as a means of communication within the family set-up. The participants were identified using convenience sampling, or as it is sometimes called, accidental or opportunity sampling which involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time (Cohen et al, 2007).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questions in the survey were specifically designed to ask participants about their personal experiences and perceptions about the impacts of social networks on interpersonal relationships among Zimbabweans. The combination of four demographic and profile questions and twenty-three questions on the use and attitudes regarding electronic communication questions using an online questionnaire allowed the respondents to take the survey quickly while still providing valuable information that applies to this research. The online survey was promoted through email. Because no personal information was required, the participants, and their responses, remain completely anonymous.

Using online survey research, the research gathered information on the behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes of people (Neuman, 2006). The data collected was analyzed using a descriptive approach to the responses. Descriptive research includes identifying or describing conditions of a large number of people (Rubin et al., 2010). In the one day the survey was open, 30 online surveys were submitted to respondents by e-mail. Of the 30, 20 were completed. Eight men and twelve women completed the survey, which means that 60% of the respondents were women. This supports prior research that women are much more likely to communicate through electronic means (Smith, 2011.)

All of the respondents said they owned cell-phones with 30% owning a personal computer as well. The largest reasons for using their computers and phones were to keeping in touch with family and friends (60%) and getting news and information (20%). Generally, family relationships are valued positively. Additional questions were asked to show the amount and types of communication used by survey respondents. All of participants said they engage in face-to-face communication and also make use of the phone equally more than any other forms of communication on a daily basis (1 to 4 hours a day; 10 minutes to an hour a day respectively). On the phone, the most common form of communication with family and friends was through WhatsApp (100%), Facebook (100%), Instant (40%) and text messaging (50%). The participants make use of these social media networks everyday and each time they get an opportunity such as during meal times (70%). From these findings, it shows that the use of electronic communication is now popular among Zimbabweans. This justifies Church et al (2010) belief that new media technologies have become embedded within daily domestic routines and are now an intrinsic part of contemporary life. DiMaggio et al. (2001) also suggests that the internet enhances social ties by putting users in more frequent contact with families and friends. For Yoon (2006) the internet allows individuals to strengthen their connection with the extended family beyond their own nuclear family.

The next set of questions were designed to either support or negate the theories that are commonly used to dismiss electronic communication as a valid form of interpersonal communication namely the social presence theory, lack of social cues theory, and media richness theory. Respondents were asked their commonly used form of interpersonal communication, their preferred form of communication and if it was dictated by time and physical proximity. Eighty percent answered that their use of electronic communication was dictated by proximity and time. All the respondents were quick to point out that there is a time when they spend time together as a family that is not involving or centred on these social networks. Eighty percent of the respondents strongly agree that social networks are playing an important role in the relationship of a functioning family and household. When asked to what extent these social networks assisted in communicating with family members every day, the responses included to know about death issues, illness among family members, discuss social issues affecting the family and interacting. What it shows is that electronic communication is helping to build up relationships within the family set ups. This is supported by Heirtein and Anchet (2014) who have claimed that communication technologies have developed relationships, assisted in relationship management and enhancement of relationships. Similarly, Pettigrew (2009) observed that specific use of text messaging provided couples the ability to stay connected throughout the day based on interviews of dyads that were dating, engaged, married, or cohabiting. Hertlein (2012) is of the opinion that online gaming may contribute to a couple's ability to fantasize in their relationship, acquire and or improve socialization skills, and an ability to better understand their partner's context. For Parker et al., (2013) technology provides unique opportunities for couples to connect to satisfy both function and emotional needs. In a similar study Coyne et al., (2011) explored that married individuals reported using texting, instant messaging, social networking, blogs, and webcams more frequently than couples that were dating. Electronic communication is thus proving to be quite effective in managing family affairs within the Zimbabwean community.

Mutanana, N “Social Networks and the Social Interaction in Family Relationships among Zimbabweans: A Survey on the Perceptions of Residents in Harare and Mashonaland West Provinces of Zimbabwe”

While electronic communication was the overwhelming option for communicating with family and friends, when asked if it had ever aided in the breakdown and or ending of a personal relationship over something learnt about someone, eighty percent of the respondents said it had never. Instead, they had positively changed their opinions about someone because of what they post on a social network, and the relationship with that person continued to grow. Over nine-tens said they experienced a misunderstanding from communicating through electronic communication that affected a close relationship and half (50%) said that the misunderstanding damaged the relationship. This is supported by Venkatesh and Vitalari (1985) who feels that technology has affected the life of a household in a number of different ways. However it was not highlighted if the damage to the relationship was so significant that they were unable to resolve the misunderstanding and move forward in the relationship. All the respondents agreed to the perception towards the assertion that social networks like the face book and whatsapp have contributed to a number of marriage breakdowns. Similarly, Lumpkin (2012) attributed 33% of divorce cases to the facebook in 2011 and inappropriate messages to individuals of the opposite sex. The majority of the participants (60%) strongly agreed that email, text messaging, and social media networks positively impacts personal relationships

The following advantages were highlighted; you keep in touch with family members every day, you can discuss social issues affecting the family every day, you can communicate with family members across the borders, get everyday news in time, and research studies. The disadvantages included; family breakdowns, misinforming each other (it is a tool for lying), children no longer studying, and poor concentration among each other (e.g. spouse may spent a lot of time on phone ignoring each other.

CONCLUSION

The use of electronic media will continue to become a bigger part of daily life, which will undoubtedly impact relationships. Communication as a “transactional process” to create “shared meaning” and “build relationships” can be effectively conducted through electronic media. Face-to-face communication remains the gold standard of preferred communication because friends and family members’ value being able to sit among each other and spend time together. This research confirms that people like to spend time with people they like. When friends and families are unable to spend time together due to time constraints and physical proximity, they rely on electronic communication to stay in touch. Email, text messages, and connecting on social media networks like Facebook and Twitter keep relationships going and create another way to communicate on a regular basis. Electronic communication is easy, convenient, and cost effective.

While the loss of nonverbal behaviours can negatively impact the quality of communication through electronic channels, it rarely caused permanent damage to close relationships. This research has shown that misunderstandings can arise, yet people involved in close relationships are able to correct the misunderstanding and continue to move forward in their relationships. So, while electronic communication has its place in personal relationships, it cannot be the only form of communication used to build relationships. Ideally, electronic communication is be utilized as a supplement to face-to-face communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Since the sampling size of this study was small it really only scratches the surface. A longer survey offered to more participants would offer more data about the perceptions of electronic communication and its impact on relationships. Focus group research that includes more detailed experiences and perceptions should also be conducted. Ideally, research that not only asks participants about their perceptions, but also employs ethnographic observations, and experimental research should be included in further studies.

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Mutanana, N “Social Networks and the Social Interaction in Family Relationships among Zimbabweans: A Survey on the Perceptions of Residents in Harare and Mashonaland West Provinces of Zimbabwe”

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Mutanana, N “Social Networks and the Social Interaction in Family Relationships among Zimbabweans: A Survey on the Perceptions of Residents in Harare and Mashonaland West Provinces of Zimbabwe”

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