

Digital Tastes Social Media and Class Identity in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This article presents a detailed analysis of social media usage in Northern Nigeria, the class distinction theory of Pierre Bourdieu and the technology amplification theory of Kentaro Toyama presents a framework for our data analysis. Results show that the choice of social media usage is heavily stratified according to social class, with cultural and social capital playing a primary role in the choice of social media platforms throughout Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Social Media; Digital Culture; Northern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

“Welcome to Northern Nigeria, the pretenders are on Twitter, the celebrities are on Instagram while the politicians are on Facebook, and given that the clerics are also on Facebook, you know what that makes them”

The above quote was the conclusion of a participant when he saw the results of the pilot study of this paper. Researchers are yet to agree on the primary motivations behind the choice of social media platforms with some suggesting functionality might be the primary factor (Bowmann *et al.*, 2012). Also, some conventional theories of technology usage have suggested social media was a tool that not only aids social mobility but transcends social distinction (Edwards 2014). but in the developing world, where class stratification is deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural realities of the environment, social media can play a role in class distinction. The results of this research challenges both popular conventions by leaning towards the technology amplification theory proposed by Toyama (2011) which suggested that most technologies will amplify the prevailing socio-political realities of a society.

In this paper, we present the data collected by one of the largest surveys of social media usage in the Northern Region of Nigeria. Socio-cultural data was derived with inspiration from Abdullahi (2017) which in turn was inspired by the social distinction theory of Bourdieu (1984). 10,000 questionnaires were distributed, and 200 interviews were conducted with individuals in the Northern Region of Nigeria. Our data analysis was framed around the technology amplification theory of Toyama (2011) and the social distinction theory of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984).

Our findings suggest that rather than serving as a tool for distorting class boundaries, Social Media can actually increase such stratification. The results also indicate that cultural and social capital play a very important role in a users choice of social media platform in Northern Nigeria The data also shows a mismatch between the intended usage of social media by the platforms themselves and the actual usage by Northern Nigerians. This, even

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though affluence has a subsidiary effect on a users choice of social media platforms (Lawrimore, 2011).

BACKGROUND

Northern Nigeria and Social Media use

The Northern Region of Nigeria is a sociology-culturally distinct region of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Although much has changed since feudal times, it remains a deeply stratified society with class boundaries defining rulers and subjects (Yield, 1960). All Northern Nigerian states run a parallel system of local government administration, where hereditary Emirates work side by side with elected officials. Internet penetration is around 40% with social-media use dominating the citizenry's internet usage. Social media was often used as a cheaper alternative to voice and SMS communication (Abdullahi 2017).

Facebook is the most popular social-media platform among the population then followed by twitter and Instagram. Government usage of the social-media has however been on twitter which suggests it targets a different a segment of the population, while Royal Governments- the traditional high class rulers of the native Emirates were found to use Instagram (Abdullahi, 2017). Both Facebook and Twitter have recently opened offices in Nigeria with Facebook (which also owns Instagram) deploying its services in Hausa Language, the local lingua franca of the region (Abdullahi, 2017).

Although present, most other local social-media platforms enjoy little patronage in Northern Nigeria with Nairaland- the largest local social media platform in Nigeria that mirrors reddit being predominantly restricted to Southern Nigeria and Southerners resident in the North.

Toyama's Technology Amplification Theory

The amplification theory of technology was formulated by Kentaro Toyama in Toyama (2011) and further expanded in Toyama (2015). It argues that technology, rather than being an agent of social progress and development will actually increase (amplify) the inequalities and iniquities in a society. The theory challenges the popular assumption that technology in it of itself will push a society towards social progress, especially in the developing world, as suggested by Brewer *et al.* (2005). Toyama argues that certain differential mechanisms will conspire to amplify the inequities of a society when technology is infused without recourse to other social factors that pervade the underlying social problems.

Toyama used the simple analogy of American gun culture, stating "The gun lobby rhetoric that 'guns don't kill people; people kill people' is effective precisely because it speaks to a truth about violence -that it requires human intent first and foremost. At the same time, those who disagree with the motivation behind the slogan would counter that guns simplify people's ability to commit violence, and therefore magnify latent hurtful intent in society that would otherwise be muted or less violent These opposing viewpoints are reconciled intellectually (if not politically) by the principle that technology amplifies underlying human force" (Toyama, 2011).

Bourdieu's Theory of Class Distinction

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class distinction differs from previous theories in that it identified cultural capital, an individual's taste, style of dress, speech, his or her intellectual ability etc as the main vehicles of social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984).

Our framework, based on Abdullahi (2017) was not only a traditional use of Bourdieu in that it had to make substantial adjustments to the currencies of both social and cultural capital- the first of its kind adjustment to the context of sahelian Africa. Bourdieu was a natural choice for this research giving that applications of other theories such as Yeld(1960) and Smith (1959) were mostly based on socio-political realities of pre fourth republican Nigeria.

Social Media Research in Northern Nigeria

Our study is an expansion of Abdullahi (2017) which looked at social media usage by governments in Northern Nigeria. Until now, much of research has focused on social media usage in Nigeria, which invariably focuses on the much more developed and culturally distinct Nigerian South. But this research goes beyond mere usage and seeks to understand the social dynamics that govern interaction in the digital space. As indicated in Abdullahi (2017), Facebook is the dominant player in the Nigerian social space holding a substantial portion of the market share, it is closely followed by twitter and then Instagram, nevertheless, government services that were presumably meant to service the population have targeted other platforms such as twitter. Abdullahi (2017) could not sufficiently explain such aberrations using other theories of technology use.

THE STUDY

10,000 responses were received from each of the 20 administrative divisions of Northern Nigeria . We expand upon Abdullahi (2017b) by attempting to discern the usage of social media by regressively looking at the influence (if any) of social class in the region. A questionnaire combining the paradigms of Abdullahi (2017a) and Abdullahi (2017b) was used to determine

1. Social media usage of the respondent
2. The social class of the respondent

A focus group composed of 18 participants, two each from the social classes identified in Abdullahi (2017b) were used to conduct interviews in order to derive a qualitative measure of the users participation on social media. A qualitative method was chosen because it provides the in-depth data needed to assess the differentials (if any) that influence choice of platforms. The interviews were conducted in June 2017 and using normal inductive procedures, we looked for specific mismatches between the products and services of the social media platform they were using and their own needs and capabilities. In line with Toyama, we were trying to see if indeed there were differentials in access, capacity and or motivation between these platforms and their users in Northern Nigeria and whether such differentials followed a pattern defined or not defined by the class definitions proposed in Abdullahi (2017b).

The interviews were structured as an open discussion were participants tell the interviewer their views concerning a set of questions framed around the usage of social media platforms and the reasons that guided the participant's choice of social media. Normal inductive approach was used to interpret the findings from the focus groups.

Data from the questionnaires was analysed and triangulated with the focus group interviews in order to form a cohesive model of social media platform choice.

FINDINGS

Data from the questionnaires was analysed for class demarcations around the model proposed by Abdullahi(2017) , it showed a correlation between social class and choice of social media platform.

Social Media Survey

Abdullahi(2017b) proposed a model of class stratification based on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, using four factors namely economic, social, cultural and academic capital, the model classified Northern Nigerian society into nine distinct social classes. All the classes were represented in our survey in the following manner

Class 1:

712 (7%) of our respondents fit into this class category. 63% (N=445) of this seven percent reported using twitter alone. 14% (N=101) reported using no social media platform at all while around 22% (158) reported using twitter and Instagram. This class is associated with high scores on all four factors

Class 2:

This was identified as the political class of the region, its main indicators are high score in social and economic capital but low cultural and academic scores.

Instagram is the social media platform of this group with around 75% of the respondents that score within the ranges of this group saying they used it. 66% said they used Instagram together with Facebook and around 5% said they used Instagram and twitter. Less 1% said they used no social media platform.

Class 3:

This class is associated with high academic and cultural capital and only mid level economic and social scores.

Around 82% of the respondents in this group said they used twitter. Approximately 40% reported using twitter alone and Pinterest with twitter is 12%. 9% used twitter and Tumblr and 5% used twitter and Facebook and around 15% used twitter and Instagram. 10% used no social media platform

Class 4:

Lower levels of social and economic capital distinguish class from class 3. Usage of twitter climbs in this group with up to 92% of the respondents saying they used twitter. 80% of used twitter alone and around 10% used twitter and Facebook. Around 7% reported using no social media platform.

Class 5:

Lower levels of cultural capital demarcate class 5 and 4. Also class 5 displays slightly lower levels of economic capital.

Facebook usage climbs dramatically in this class with 84% of respondents claiming to use Facebook, of those only 7% used Facebook and twitter. 80% said they used Facebook and Instagram. Twitter usage was around 11% in the entire group. And only around 2% used all three (Facebook, Instagram and twitter).

Class 6:

High levels of economic capital with significantly lower levels of social, cultural and academic capital define this group.

Facebook and Instagram are the platforms of choice for this group with 73% reporting to use both around 3% used only Facebook and no respondent reported using Instagram alone. Twitter usage was less than 1%. and around 25% used no social media platform.

Class 7

This is the political middle class of the north with social capital being the main definer of the

group. Facebook is the primary social media platform of choice for the group. 93% of respondents in the group report using Facebook alone. But while only about 5% report using Facebook and Instagram regularly, about 20% claimed they were irregular users of Instagram. And none reported using Instagram alone

Class 8 Cultured poor

The group is defined by high cultural capital and low scores on all other factors. Its less represented in our survey and only about 30 % said they used social media regularly. Of those about 12% said they used Facebook and the other 18% said they used twitter. About 2% said they used both Facebook and Instagram. No respondent used both. Facebook and twitter.

Class 9 unskilled workers.

This group is the defined by low scores in all four factors. About 50% said they used social media and 100% of those said they used Facebook. No respondent used any other social media platform

Class Segmentation of Social Media Space

The results of the social media use survey allow us to understand what, if any class sensitivities guided the choice social media platform. Once a respondent decides to join social media, cultural capital was the main determinant for the choice of platform. Data from the 10,000 respondents point to a distinct configuration of users, social classes with high cultural scores prefer using twitter while those with lower cultural scores prefer Facebook.

Interestingly, even those with high economic capital (class 2) but low cultural capital are only marginally on twitter, the bulk of them prefer to stay on Instagram.

Once cultural capital is used for class segmentation, economic capital became the determinant of whether a respondent was on Facebook, Instagram, or both. Classes with higher economic capital prefer using Instagram while those with lower economic capital prefer Facebook

The only other factor that affects choice for low cultural capital groups was academic capital, where for instance groups like class 6 while having high economic capital, as high as class 2 (Abdullahi, 2017b) still prefer Facebook over Instagram.

Findings from the focus group identified the following factors affecting the choice of social media platform.

Taste and Distaste

Participants with high scores in cultural capital attribute their unwillingness to use Facebook to the “distasteful”, “appalling” views they found there. All six participants that qualified for Class 1,3 and 4 said they left Facebook (4 deactivated their accounts and two simply stopped using them) after feeling they no longer belonged there. A participant classified as class 2 said she chose Instagram “because it kept her safe away from the meddling of little people”. She further cited instances in which the pictures of her friends posted on Facebook had found their way to pages of *lindaikeji* and other national tabloids. Although such tabloids are also known to have used pictures of rich Nigerians taken from Instagram the participant seemed to infer a degree of safety with Instagram because most her “followers there also do the same thing”. Another participant said she left Facebook after noticing the “inordinate number of religious clerics there, it started to feel creepy”. This suggests that cultural variations between users and content providers does play a major role in determining the social media platform of choice.

Economy of Freebasics

In 2015, Facebook introduced freebasics, a service that allows the subscribers of certain mobile networks to browse certain internet sites for free, this led to the enrolment of numerous individuals, who would have otherwise chosen not to spend their money on data subscription. The enrolment tilted the class balance of Facebook, creating a large amount of cultural content tailored for certain classes. Freebasics has been cited by our participants (class 7 and 8) as one of the main reason behind their choice of Facebook

Instagram Vs Twitter

The habits of the culturally rich which frowns upon extravagant displays of wealth also explains why groups with high cultural scores might choose to stay away from Instagram. A participant (class 2) noted explained why she's a regular user twitter:

“Twitter provides just the right method to interact with my friends and followers. I don't have to always communicate with pictures and those 140 characters are like an inbuilt reality check which stop me from taking my opinions too far”

This suggests that twitter provides an avenue for interaction which is reserved enough to satisfy the cultural preferences of the culturally rich class.

Amplification

One of the main aims of social media is presumably to bring different people, cultures and presumably social classes together. But the data from our survey seems to infer otherwise. In line with the technology amplification theory of Toyama, we Identified the differential factors that have amplified the class segmentation of the digital space of Northern Nigeria.

Differential accesses

The introduction of freebasics which was celebrated as a means towards digital inclusiveness has unwittingly amplified the digital divide of Northern Nigeria along class lines. Free basics was conceptualized as a free information highway that will allow the poor, primarily in sub Saharan Africa to access certain important sites such a Wikipedia and Facebook. Participants from our focus group who cited freebasics as a reason for them joining Facebook also claimed they had no idea they could also surf other sites like Wikipedia. It is clear that while the intention of freebasics was to close the digital divide, it had actually enhanced it, but this time along class lines, with much of the intended benefits such as access to information and knowledge on Wikipedia, lost due to the educational disabilities of its targeted users.

Also, the relative high cost of data has reduced access to, and sometimes prevented the economically disadvantaged from accessing other social media platforms, especially Instagram, This, due to its higher data requirements. This differential has amplified the class divide, especially along economic parameters (class 2 and 5).

Differential Capacity

Differential capacity is more pronounced in the platform usage disparity between class 6 and 2. The relatively lower educational levels of the respondents in class 6 meant they had little capacity to use the more complicated platforms of Instagram but found it easier to use Facebook which had been translated into the local Hausa language. This difference in capacity was enough to amplify the digital divide between the educated and non educated.

Motivation

Amplification as a result of differential motivation is quite apparent in freebasics. Instead of using the service to enhance their skills and knowledge, users were found limited to using freebasics to browse Facebook with non of our focus group participants knowing about the

alternative usage of freebasics. This hints at differences in motivation between the users and the people who concerned of the service.

Also, while Facebook was primarily meant to connect people on social media, most of the respondents from class 7 said they were using it for “political and religious purposes” . All of our focus group participants that were classified as class 7 also said Facebook was primarily a tool for campaigning for their candidates and pursuing political debates, the participants also alluded to social media volunteers being hired by politicians in order to spam Facebook groups with information deemed favourable to their political parties. Another participant said he also used Facebook to “call other Muslims away from bidi' a and into sunnah”, in other words for inter sectarian religious evangelism. This differential in motivation as served to further amplify the digital divide within Northern Nigerian digital society

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented findings from a survey of social media users in the northern states of Nigeria. Framing our analysis around the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Kentaro Toyama, we suggest that social media in Northern Nigeria is actually divided along class boundaries, with the culturally enlightened preferring twitter, the rich preferring Instagram, the religious and political class preferring Facebook, and the poor being left with no option than to choose Facebook due to its free nature as a result of freebasics.

Using the model of Kentaro Toyama, we have shown that instead of bringing different people together as customarily suggested, much of social media is actually amplifying the class segmentation of Northern Nigerian society in the digital space. But it is also relevant that we highlight some the limitations of the study. The scope of our usage of Bourdieu was a projection of Abdullahi (2017b) which as already mentioned used social indicators that have not been widely validated. Also, our focus group was selected from a pool that satisfied each of the various social strata, it is possible that the views and opinions projected in the interviews does not reflect the majority of Northern Nigerian society. Some latent class analysis shows a distinct shift towards class selection and age, future endeavours may explore that.

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