

SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH THEIR TRADITIONAL SOCIAL REFERENCE GROUPS

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A B S T R A C T	K E Y W O R D S
<p>Social media, as Shearer (2019) posits, has become an increasingly popular component of our everyday life, as it provides a platform where people across the world can communicate through exchange of messages, sharing of knowledge, and interaction with each other, regardless of the distance that separates them. Such interconnectedness and interdependence of social media users, has become a pattern and a routine due to the ease of communication, and the accessibility of plenty of information available from various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WeChat and YouTube.</p>	

The Nature and Drivers of Social Media

Various studies that have been conducted such as Ainin, Jaafar and Tajudeen (2018) on social media influence on organisation, Mastrodicasa and Metellus (2013) on social media influence on college students, the shifting of norms by social media by Shearer (2019) and Vollenbroek *et al.* (2014) that studied the influence of social media communities, all point out the potent nature of social media as a communication tool, as being its possession of unique characteristics that include large, dynamic networks of friends from different social-economic backgrounds, holding divergent beliefs, and coming from different parts of the world. They also pointed out the aspect of a one-to-many communication style, where there are multiple communicators and recipients with unlimited access to information and the audience. Considering that there are no known gatekeepers in the flow of messages, Fietkiewicz, Lins and Budree (2018) and Shearer (2019) argue that this makes communication flow to be disjointed, leading to over-sharing, self-interested behaviour, low impulse control, and low empathy, which are all aspects that facilitate the creation and maintenance of norms and values in societies.

The various social media platforms that are available, such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, as examples, have embedded themselves for most online users who Park and Kaye (2017) view them as

juggling multiple online personas for different reasons. The usage and the gratification gleaned from them have been associated with a number of factors including social interaction, information seeking, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explain, this makes social media not only an effective communication tool, but an influential cyber-community that provides a challenge and an alternative to the traditional source of knowledge, information and social reference groups that exist outside the cyber world.

The social component of social media vs the role of traditional social reference groups

A major portion of the usage of social media remains the social component, which still mirrors basic social norms and human social needs such as love, feeling of acceptance and belonging. Human behaviour, historically and today, remains governed significantly by these needs, and many people are turning to social media to fulfil them (Chen and Yu-Qian 2015; Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins 2019). As Bosch (2017) argues, while personal influencing factors for social media usage can be based on personality or satisfying individual human needs, there are other external influencing factors that exist, such as intention of use, online capabilities, or ease of site use, and users may be influenced by different factors based on specific contexts and environments, which in turn influences usage patterns of social media.

Social media is known as having loyal, frequent and even addicted users, and this comes as a result of individual users seeking satisfaction of their needs, which happens to be the binding force among the individual members of the cyber community, as it unites them into an amorphous cyber social reference group (Kemp 2016). While the traditional society has divided social groups according to specific needs and interests that society expect them to fulfil, such as the primary one, where, as Chen and Yu-Qian (2015) argues, the relationships is intimate like that of family members, friends and peers, and the secondary one being where the relationships of individuals is impersonal such as that of community members or neighbours.

As Ainin, Jaafar and Tajudeen (2018) point out, the contrast here is the absence of defined social reference groups in a cyber-community, and its lack of characteristics of needs and expectations of individuals members. In this context, all individual members of the cyber-community, and who happen to have accounts with any of social media platforms, have the potential of influencing the norms and values of other cyber-community members. This is a contrast to the traditional social reference groups where there are limitations among individuals from different social reference groups, on the sharing of knowledge and information.

However, the common thread between the two contrasting social groups is that, regardless of their structure or composition, they play the role of being the basic factor in all social functions, social structure, social institutions, system and organisation. Considering that the whole process of socialisation passes through social groups, it implies that social group is important in human life, and this becomes clearer when we observe that human personality develops in social groups, while the type of personality depends on the type of groups in which an individual was socialised (Chen and Yu-Qian 2015; Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins 2019; Shearer 2019). Such groups have reciprocal roles in society, as they help one another and satisfy the needs of individual members in their groups.

The emergence of social media social reference groups

Social norms are learned through social exchanges with others, deeply ingrained in us, and critical for healthy social interaction. They are constructed over time, and conformity to these norms increases the longer group members interact with each other. In-person, norms are established among different social groups, and these norms become represented in societal rules and laws (Vollenbroek *et al.* 2014; Shearer 2019). This is as it happens in traditional societies, however, the emergence of social media has brought about new perspectives on the forms and roles of social groups, where norms are learned not through structured social groups, but social media platforms.

While in traditional societies we learn social norms from the structured social groups, categorised as primary and secondary, in social media, it is through platforms and peer responses to content, which can influence behaviours and how individuals form social norms. The platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, as Shearer (2019) argue, use an enforcement strategy that relies almost exclusively on users to find and report harmful content, meaning that cyber community standard violations are not consistently discovered or enforced. Over-reliance on a user-based notification method can lead to instances of false-positives, generating more frustration and confusion among users. In addition to that Turcotte *et al.* (2015) view is that social media users have also developed a wide range of their own strategies to deal with violations of group social norms, creating platform-wide ambiguity. This situation is further aggravated on what should be acceptable and what will result in sanctions situations, considering the diversity nature of social-cultural backgrounds of social media users.

Platform enforcement as well as other unique features of social media have created an environment in which healthy social norms are not universally followed. How these features impact the maintenance of harmful interactions, such as harassment, discriminatory speech, over sharing, internet mobbing, and violence promotion Khamis (2016). Such attributes have led to serious consequences regarding violence, school, work, legal, and personal reputations. Social media platforms have also enhanced intercultural adaptation, involving the process of promoting understanding of the social media users through interaction to increase the level of fitness so that the demands of a new cyber cultural environment can be met. This poses potential danger to the roles, norms and values that traditional social reference groups are expected to perform and safeguard.

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