

## **LANGUAGE AND HUMAN COMMUNICATION IN A DIGITAL AGE: EFFECTS ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ON THE NIGERIAN YOUTHS**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

**T**echnology in a digital age, characterized by human-computer interactions, has dramatically transformed the world in various ways, enhancing rapid flow in the way we communicate with one another. Digital technology has significantly influenced language in some ways (such as, new vocabularies and styles). Language is a powerful instrument in bringing people together and at the same time it can be used to create enmity in relationships if not well used. By transforming language, the digital technology also transforms communication positively. With the advancement of the digital era, there has been a noticeable contrast in the way humans communicate. This study examines human communication in a digital age and the effects on the Nigerian youths. This study portrays the Nigerian youths as those within the ages of 18-29. The object of this paper is to show how electronic technology has played significant roles in human communication. The paper adopted a descriptive approach in the analysis. The data for this study is from secondary source which consists of observations and views by different authors. We noted that electronic technology as a major instrument of communication has positive as well as negative effects on the Nigerian youths. We recommend more of face-to-face interactions especially in the family level so as to promote family bonding. The youths should minimize the use of electronic devices for only important and relevant issues. Finally, we also recommend a check on immoral and unethical activities by the youths online. Ethical principle should be maintained.

**Keywords: Language, human communication, electronic technology, digital communication, electronic devices, digital age.**

### **Introduction**

It is of utmost importance to understand the role language plays in the lives of human beings. Language is a human behaviour as well as a window to the human mind. Language is the most essential tool for the creation of relationships and familiarities as well as bonding. By bonding, we mean the establishment of a relationship or link with someone based on shared feelings, interests or experiences. A society without language is bound to be rife with anarchy and confusion (Ajileye, 2007).

The use of electronic technology in recent times has transformed our society in different and interesting ways as well as facilitates the rapid flow of information in the way we communicate and interact with one another. As technology continues to penetrate all aspects of human lives and transform the social order, it has impacted on language and human communication significantly, both positively and negatively. Positively, electronic technology has made human communication a lot easier, people can interact and communicate from their comfort zones (living rooms, work places, business areas etc.) and get feedbacks immediately. No longer the age when one will have to travel from one place to another just to have a conversation or discussion with a family member,

colleague or friend or sit and write a letter, stress to locate a post office so as to send the information across to the receiver. Sometimes, the letter gets missing on transit or takes ages to get to the receiver and in some cases, the information gets expired before getting to the receiver. Electronic technology has elevated the level of human communication to a great extent that communication is now very easy and stress free. All you need is to have a phone and internet access which is also cheap to afford according to one's level. Business transactions has become easy, even interviews for employment as well as educational paper presentations are now carried out from the comfort of ones' home or area. On the other hand, electronic technology has affected human relationships negatively too, in the sense that this digital way of communication has created a gap in the human interpersonal relationships. Face-to-face interaction which facilitates human bonding is gone, especially among the younger adults.

The consequence of this is that the interface between person and machine has drastically reduced the desire for physical presence. For when people interact face-to-face, they share emotions and feelings of one another. They observe facial expression, pains and joys of the other person/s. Aside the gap created by not having a face-to-face interaction due to too much time spent online, Cyber connection also infringe on our social functioning. According to (Yamamoto et al, 2015), negative comments can hurt others' feelings and aggravate conflict. It is easier, however, to heal the relationship face-to-face than online. It is difficult to identify the source of conflict when tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions are missing (Hsu, 2009). For instance, an utterance that is meant to be a joke can be misinterpreted as an offensive remark. This could result in other parties taking comments out of context and being upset. But if the discussion is face-to-face, both parties will be able to see the difference between joke and serious utterance through the body language or voice. Hence, with the invention of electronic technology, bonding between friends and relatives is fast diminishing in our society.

According to Warschauer et al, 2010, the digital revolution has transformed language by triggering an explosion of new vocabularies, genres and styles and by reshaping literacy practices. By developing a mode of communication where writing approximates speaking, instant messaging (IM) and texting have facilitated the production of new words and styles that bridge the interactive nature of speech and the documental capacity of writing.

With increasing numbers of electronic technologies and penetration of the internet around the world, localization of the technology and the content it carries into the many languages people speak is becoming an area for discussion. Localization, simply, includes translation and cultural adaptation of user interfaces and software applications, as well as creation and translation of internet content in diverse languages. It is essential in making information and communication technology more accessible to the populations of the poorer countries, increasing its relevance to their lives, needs, and aspirations, and ultimately in bridging the 'digital divide' (Osborn, 2021). (Gardeazabal, 2011) opines that language can be an instrument to unify people and also be used to separate people. Language in this discourse is being viewed from the social perspective. In this piece, we therefore explore language and human beings, human communication in a digital age with views on the effects on interpersonal relationships among the younger adults. This will help to ascertain our assumption that, the use of electronic technology as a major means of communication in this digital age has created a big gap in interpersonal relationships (especially face -to-face interactions) between people- families, colleagues, friends, business associates, etc. This has contributed immensely in the breaking of bonds in our relationships alongside other factors.

## **Objective**

The objective of this research paper therefore, is to show how electronic technology has played and continues to play a significant role in creating gap in human communication and interpersonal relationships among the youths in the digital age, with the view to suggesting the way forward to reduce such gaps so as to facilitate bonding. To do this, the paper will also examine human communication in the digital age with regards to the youth which is the bedrock of the larger society.

## **Statement of the problem**

In the past, scholars of communication have been concerned about the apparent changes in the lives of our youths with regards to the innovation and evolution of electronic technologies in our society. While examining this trend, some scholars elaborated a number of reasons for changing communication patterns among the youths which include: westernization, socialization, isolation of the children from home. These changes in communication patterns were associated with technological development. The new communication protocol is less oral based; instead relying heavily on messages that are constructed and sent in form of symbols, signs and texts to computer/phone screens. Hence youths rely less on oral forms of communication that require them to communicate face-to-face. Considering this change in communication, there is a growing concern with regards to the effects of these technological communications among our youths. Does the digital literacy which is facilitated by the new communication culture encourage interpersonal relationship among our youths or pulls them apart? This separateness against togetherness discourse is not new, but his paper contributes to this discourse by observing patterns in the context of the Nigerian youths.

## **The Nigerian Youth**

In Nigeria, youths include citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria aged 18–29 years according to the (new youth policy, 2019). On the other hand, the African youth charter recognizes youth as people between 15 and 35 of age. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with one of the largest populations of youth in the world, comprising 211,400,708 members. The Federal Ministry of Youth Development is responsible for youth affairs with the aim "to empower Nigerian youth to become self-reliant and socially responsible, focusing on enterprise development, vocational skills & training, youth voice, employment, and education. The ministry is responsible for the national youth policy, youth development programs, funding youth activities, youth participation, and to manage the National Youth Services Corps and the Citizenship and Leadership Training Centre.

## **Literature Review: Conceptual Review**

### **Language in Human Beings**

Different people define language differently depending on the context of use and the situation surrounding its use. Language is a tool for effective communication and transfer of information among people. For communication to be effective and complete, the sender is required to encode the information using adequate linguistic tools. According to (Essien, 2003), language is a system of structured arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate with each other in a given community. For (Prasad, 2009) language is defined as a system of conventional, spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate. Here, we hold that language is simply a means of communication/interaction.

### **Human Communication in a Digital Age**

Both language and communication are viewed as two distinct terms. Yet, both of them are related linguistically and they work side by side each other. Hence, we need to look at both concepts

'language and communication' individually so as to understand the difference between them.

The main purpose of a language is, for easy communication. Hence, without language, it is impossible to create an effective communication. Simply put, language is a medium that helps in the sending of thoughts and feelings of two individuals and it allows us to express our feelings and thoughts using sounds, symbols, written or spoken words, posture, gestures or signs, etc. Thus, we can continue communication through language.

Communication on the other hand, is a process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, and information from one person to another verbally or nonverbally. Communication requires some basic simple steps such as, the sender, encoding process, message, channel, the receiver, decoding process, and feedback. Every step of this process of communication is vital and ignoring any of these steps, will collapse communication. Feedback is one of the major areas of communication process. Without feedback, there is no effective communication. Communication can be classified into verbal, non-verbal, written/text, listening/audio and visuals such as charts, graphs, etc.

Human communication has deep evolutionary roots, characterized by its inherently cooperative nature. And it emerges, changes and continues to evolve in contexts of use: usage is the driver of language change. While this is a natural process, new technology is advancing the range and means available for interpersonal interaction, extending the envelope of the human communication potential. This is both fascinating and exciting, (The Guardian News, 2015) Human communication according to (Daramola, 2012) is defined as the social interaction that occurs between persons through the exchange of messages. Through communication, humans establish relationships and companionship. Hence, communication is central to human existence and serves as the channel through which humans interact with one another.

According to (DeVito, 2009), human communication strengthens the feelings of togetherness among people through mutual understanding. It involves all the collective activities used in the sharing of ideas, facts and data from one person to the next. Interpersonal communication can occur within a social group or in the business area. According to (Onyeator et al, 2019), the foundation of interpersonal interaction is often traced to the family - the basic unit of human life comprising people who interact in small groups. Interpersonal communication in the family context involves face to face interactions among parents, children and other blood relatives. This facilitates bonding through the use of gestures, eye contact, touching etc. but for the purpose of this study, we will look at the effects of interpersonal communication from the perspective of the Nigerian youths.

Interpersonal communication is therefore a symbolic process through which individuals maintain close relationships by observance. By observing, they use facial expressions, eye contact, body language and posture as well as gestures to communicate with others. According to (Spape et al, 2014), social psychologists are of the opinion that the physical presence of people during interaction influences message perception, cognition, decision making and action. They argue that such human features enhance the communication experience.

### **The Digital Age**

The digital age, also known as the information age, is defined as the time period starting in the 1970s with the introduction of the personal computer with subsequent technology introduced providing the ability to transfer information freely and quickly. 'Digital' describes electronic technology that generates, stores, and processes data. It is obvious that humans now interact and share their feelings and emotions mostly via electronic communication media. Consequently, the use of telephones,

mobile phones, smart phones, the internet and other digital technology has taken over face-to-face conversations to a large extent. According to (Global information society watch, 2014), nearly all forms of interaction among humans are communicative acts that are digitally enabled, observable and recordable by others. In other words, technology has taken over almost every aspect of human life, resulting in a reliance on them to communicate with one another. In this recent time and age, the physical presence of humans is increasingly hampered by electronic/communication devices which have altered not just the communication process, but human behaviour as well. The effect of this communication revolution on personal communication among the youths in particular and the society in general is of utmost concern to this study.

Generally speaking, language is a means of communication among people. But the communication that is of utmost concern in this study is linked to the language of technology, innovation, and rapid growth (digital age/information era). In recent time, social media and digital communication platforms, such as Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram, Google Chat, Email etc. have replaced the use of face-to-face interactions, hand gestures, facial expressions, intonation etc. Naturally, language is dynamic and continues to change in contexts of use. New technology is advancing the means available for interpersonal interaction. This is both fascinating and fun, especially for the young generation.

### **The Effects of Digital Technology on Human Communication**

One of the major gifts of electronic technology is the optimization of communication systems in the form of mobile devices and internet. The Mobile devices brought about a drastic change to human interaction. The evolution of all electronic technological systems has altered human behaviors and interactions in both positive and negative ways.

### **Positive Effects of Electronic Technology among the Nigerian youths in the Digital Age**

#### **i. Faster Human Communication.**

The availability of electronic devices and easy access to internet has made it possible for people especially for loved-ones to be in close contact irrespective of their location on earth. Distance is no longer a barrier for people to stay closer to their loved ones when they are physically far apart, using technological means like Facebook Messenger Calls, Skype, Telegram Calls and WhatsApp Calls. With the use of video call, people can watch or see the person they are communicating with, this gives a sense of closeness.

#### **ii. Easy and Effective Learning**

Digital technology has also been incorporated into the learning environment (classroom) over time, to facilitate learning among the younger people, as well as engage students in the learning process and also to make academic instruction more meaningful. Students now make use of electronic devices to solve educational works and researches on their own. With the availability of the Internet facilities, students are able to access educational materials and learning systems on their own without interacting with anyone. This has reduced the burden of buying all textbooks or paying for trainings amidst less money. Most skills are now made available via Youtube. All one need do is to activate the internet device and learn as much as possible; skills such as production of cleaning products, cooking, baking etc.

#### **iii. Swift Business Transactions**

Today, digital technology enables one to keep contact information in a mobile device. Most people tend to transact their businesses through digital technologies. Ability to contact and reach vendors quickly helps to facilitate the development of any business operation. Even at midnight, one can

order products online from the comfort of his home. For instance, D-Light Pure Daily Wash, a company that produces and sells cleaning products in Nigeria, all you need do is to order a product online (Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram) or call the customer care lines with the use of electronic device and get the products delivered to your location swiftly.

Digital technologies have bridged the gap on the risk of being on transit all the time in the bid to meet up with some business meetings or transactions. Business tycoons can now sit at the comfort of their homes and transact multi-million-dollar businesses. Also, technology has made it easier for business people who must travel, to get to their destination in a very short time with the use of flights. Gone are the days when people spend the whole day on transit. With the invention of technology, in few minutes/hours, one has reached his destination.

Employment interviews as well as client interviews are being carried out from a distance just with the help of technological devices. Digital technology also helps in the work places. Many a times, companies organize seminars online, carry out visual meetings online via Zoom etc. this can only be possible with the invention of electronic devices.

### **Negative Effects of Electronic Technology in the Digital Age**

#### **I. Infringes on interpersonal relationships and social skills**

Aside the positive values of digital technology connecting people digitally, its evolution has created a gap in the human interpersonal relationship as well as physical bonding. First and foremost, people tend to bond when they communicate face-to-face. Emotions are formed as human beings tend to see and feel each other's pains and fears. In the past, the young people are taught how to maintain eye contact during communication, make use of facial expressions and adjust their tone according to the reaction of the listener. In some cases, even when people are physically close, they are often far apart due to their inability to keep their mobile devices away. People are physically together but detached from each other due to the engagements with their electronic device, such as mobile phones. Some young adults even carry along their phones to the dining table and their eyes glued to the screen while meal is been served. The importance of face-to-face interaction cannot be overemphasized. Most times in business, customers tend to trust vendors only when they engage in face-to-face interactions. Hence, physical contact is power in business.

#### **ii. Digital Technology triggers Health Challenges**

As the saying goes, too much of everything is bad. Excessive use of digital devices can be detrimental to the health of young adults in particular and the old people in general. Too much viewing on the screen can cause serious eye damage. Sitting at a place a long period of time can cause obesity etc. all work and no play, makes John a dull boy. With time, accumulated unhealthy habits will manifest as serious health issues.

Furthermore, most of the younger people tend to be occupied with whatsapp chatting, face booking etc. till late at night thereby forfeiting quality rest. Normally, human beings need about 6-8hours of sleep and when this is not obtainable due to over usage of digital devices into the night, such individuals suffer some physical and psychological issues.

#### **iii. Increase in Social Vices**

The advent of digital technology has given rise to increase in social vices. Lately, it is no longer news that the younger people are being driven by the quest to get rich quick syndrome and as such, they indulge in so many bad things such as internet fraud, which are facilitated by the use of mobile devices. Electronic technology causes a lot of distractions, money illusion, lack of interest in academic achievements through hard work etc. For instance, the so-called Yahoo-yahoo group of people or yahoo plus people are able to perpetuate their dealings with the use of digital technologies.

Also, most kidnapping cases are been carried out with the use of mobile devices. The kidnappers use mobile phones to get information and track their preys. Cyberbullying and hate speech are not left out on the internet vices. More so, it gives access to irrelevant information, the desire to acquire the communication devices breeds so many societal vices especially on the girls.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The paper investigates language and human communication in a digital age, examining its effects from the perspective of the Nigerian youths. The paper explores the effect of technology communication on the young adults and found that there are both positive and negative effects. No doubt that the advent of digital technology is becoming more prominent by the day and this has made human communication a lot easier and faster. The world at large has gained a lot positively, with the invention of digital technologies, ranging from acquiring great knowledge and skills to being responsible individuals. But, the negative effects of the digital technology on human communication and interpersonal relationship in the youths remain a concern to humanity and this should not be overlooked. And if not put in check, these negative effects can lead to lack of bonding especially with family members, social isolation, increase in social vices infringement of ethical principles, as well as trigger some serious health issues. Hence, there should be a check and awareness on the use of these electronic devices.

Finally, the paper proves that although language itself undergoes changes with time, the use of electronic devices facilitates the process of these changes.

### **Recommendations**

#### **i. Encourage face-to-face interaction**

In as much as electronic communication creates easy avenue for communicators, it is important to indulge more on face-to-face interaction especially at the family level. Note that the family is the bedrock of a bigger society. Face-to-face interaction gives room to emotional and psychological bonding. The younger adults should be encouraged to maintain physical interpersonal relationships especially in the families by making out time to visit and share some family issues together. For instance, parents of a millionaire son feel lonely and sick even with a fat bank account just because their son hardly visits. Any day their son pays a visit, their loneliness and sickness vanish. That is the power of face-to-face meeting and interaction

#### **ii. Encourage less time on irrelevant issues on electronic technologies**

Awareness should be created, and the youths should be enlightened on how to regulate and discipline themselves on the use of digital technology. Some of them get glued to their mobile devices the whole day chatting away on irrelevant things. Some just watch pornography, play irrelevant games, indulge in forgery, deceitful activities, plan and execute kidnapping etc. the end result could be terrible health challenges. Hence, they should be encouraged to reduce as much as possible, the time they spend using digital technologies and channel such time in other more creative and productive activities so as to enjoy a better life in good health.

#### **iii. Checkmate immoral and unethical activities online**

Additionally, no doubt that technology has facilitated human communication in numerous ways, but their communicative behaviours should be governed by ethical rules. Special facilities should be put in place to checkmate the activities of unethical communicators. Communication technologies should be used in a moral and ethical way.

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