Potentials of Social Media for HIV/AIDS Campaign among Nigerian Youths

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Abstract
Youths constitute a vibrant, critical resource input in the development process of any nation. It is, therefore, imperative that their health and well-being be safeguarded in the pursuit and sustenance of the socio-economic transformation of any society. With the unabated high prevalence of HIV and AIDS among this age cohort, communication campaigns must be re-strategized, diversified and focused on effecting change in the behaviours that predispose young people to HIV infection. Providing youths with requisite information through social media has the potential of stemming the scourge of the virus. The paper critically examines the use of social media as a potentially veritable tool for campaigns aimed at combating the spread of HIV among Nigerian youths.

Key Words: Social media, Youths, Campaign, HIV/AIDS.

Introduction

The emergence of new communication technologies has influenced the processes of information acquisition and dissemination. Although the utilization of new media has its strengths and weaknesses, it has potential for effective HIV and AIDS campaign among young people, who are the most vulnerable to HIV and AIDS infections in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. There is a widespread assumption that the recent advances in Internet technologies (Web 2.0), particularly the participative Internet (known as social media), have changed the pattern of communication, including health-related communications (Gunther cited in Chou, Hunt, Beckford, Moser and Hessee, 2009). Social media have increased individuals' connectivity, enabled users' direct participation and interaction of contemporary issues (Chou et al., 2009).With the increasing prevalence of HIV and AIDS in Africa, it is important to address the social, health and media changes in contemporary society and adapt communication to suit the information and health needs of young people in a changing world. What is the implication of these changes to campaigns aimed at stemming the menace of HIV and AIDS? Could social media be harnessed in sensitizing the populace, especially the youths, about the disease? These questions are pertinent in addressing the problem, especially as there is no effective vaccine for the virus and no cure for disease.

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HIV and AIDS issue has remained a menace dominating the global arena due to the associated tragic human loss occasioned by its spread. Since the first case was reported in the USA, a staggering 30million people have died of AIDS, while an estimated 34 million people are living with HIV (UNAIDS World AIDS Day Report, 2012). In 2011, an estimated 2.5million people were newly infected with HIV, children under the age of 15years accounted for 330,000 (AMFAR, 2013).The vulnerability of young people to HIV cannot be ignored as almost half of all new infections globally occur among people under 25years (UNAIDS World AIDS Day Report, 2012). The report also revealed that globally, about 5.4million youths are living with HIV.

Although HIV and AIDS messages flooded the Nigerian media air space at the initial stages of the disease in the country, there is a drastic reduction in HIV content in the media (Obono, 2011). The epidemic remains extremely dynamic, growing and changing character as the virus exploits new opportunities for transmission (UNAIDS Report,2004). Accordingly, new communication strategies should be explored to correspond with the changing social structure and dynamics of the disease condition. As the world grapples with both human and material tragedies of the disease, there are potentials for tackling the menace through social media.

Perspectives on youths and HIV/AIDS pandemic
The prevalence of HIV and AIDS disease seems not to be abating even after three decades since the first case was reported in the United States of America. The first recognized case of AIDS was identified among homosexuals in US in 1981 (Grmek, 1990). The HIV pandemic continues to pose unprecedented challenges to individuals, families, health services and governments (Ciccio, 2010). An estimated 34million people are living with HIV, out of which 2.5million became newly infected with HIV in 2011 (UNAIDS, 2012). The breakdown of this figure shows that 3.3million are children under 15years, while about 16.7million are women. About7,000 persons became infected with HIV and close to 5,000 persons died from AIDS (UNAIDS, 2012). Out of this total figure, more than two-third (69%), that is, 23.5million people live in sub-Saharan Africa.

Globally, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among youths is worrisome as things look grimmer for them. Youths are, particularly, affected as almost one-quarter of people living with HIV are under the age of 25 while 45% of all new HIV infections is concentrated in this age cohort(Advocate for Youth, 2012). The report further revealed that globally, almost 3500 youths aged 15-24years were daily infected with HIV. Regional estimates also show that nearly 3.3million youths in sub-Sahara Africa are living with HIV/AIDS.

The situation in Nigeria is not totally different as an estimated 700,000 young people aged 15-32years (nearly one-fifth of the total population of HIV positive people in the country) are living with HIV (Sidibe, cited in Olokor,2012). Only 24% of young people have accurate knowledge that could help them adopt behaviours aimed at reducing risk of HIV transmission. Sidibe cautioned that Nigerian youths stand the risk of new HIV infections if they are not properly

educated about the effects of the virus. This latest attention on this disturbing trend corroborated Onyegegbu and Nwagbo (2009) earlier, warning that the incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and AIDS is not only high but increasing, especially among young people of ages 15-29 years. Worldwide, Nigeria has been identified as having the second highest number of new infections yearly (Avert, 2013).

The rate of infection among youths globally indicates that they engage in activities that predispose them to the virus. Large numbers of youths are not only sexual explorers, but are also equally sexual risk-takers (Cates, 1991).Sexual risk factors (which are the driving force) identifiable with the youth include sexual initiation at an early age, unprotected sex, male-to-male-sex, sexual abuse, and having old sex partners. Besides sexual risk factors, attention has been drawn to lack of information about HIV and AIDS, lack skills and access to services for youths as the other factors that fuel the epidemic (Advocate for Youth, 2008).

The consequences of high rates of HIV and AIDS infection among the youths are grievous as the very fabric of the society is being threatened. The future work force of any nation lies with the youth population, so, if life expectancy among the adolescent is abbreviated, there will be a proportionate decline in the number that would mature into the adult working population. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has projected that the labour force in 38 countries (all but four being African countries) will be between 5% and 35% smaller by 2020 because of AIDS (UNAIDS Report, 2004). This portends impending doom that will certainly threaten the socio-economic development of any nation, including Nigeria. With a population of over 140 million, Nigeria has a predominantly youthful population, with about 33% of her citizenry aged between 10-24years (ARFH,2013).Unless this issue is confronted, the country may be at risk of a sudden health explosion. Although anti-retroviral drugs are improving the lives of infected people all over the world, thereby reducing the death of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), their counterparts in Nigeria are dying in large number due to the high cost and unavailability of drugs, among others.

As the rate of infection varies with countries, so do major routes of transmission. In North Africa and the Middle East, sexual intercourse and injection drug use are the major routes of transmission, while in Latin America and the Caribbean, unprotected sex between men remains an important factor in the pandemic among youths (Advocates for Youths, 2008). Furthermore, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, injection drug use accounts for 62% of new infections, while in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, sexual transmission is the main route of transmission among youths. To what extent are the appropriate communication tools exploited in minimizing sexual transmission of the virus and its prevalence among young people? It is therefore imperative to examine the potential of social media in the fight against HIV and AIDS among youths in Nigeria.

HIV/AIDS media campaign in Nigeria

Any country ignoring socio-economic burdens arising from HIV and AIDS pandemic would simply amount to nothing but embarking on a suicidal mission. As HIV infections persist, no region, country, race, sex or age group is left unaffected. The disease has to its credit dwindling global economies, overstretched health facilities, dissipated family resources, as well as dislocated relationships. The International Monetary Fund (2008) captured the situation succinctly:

> HIV/AIDS is a major development crisis. Since the pandemic began, it has killed millions, separated families, and destroyed and impoverished communities. In some countries, life expectancy has fallen by more than 20 years. The scale of the epidemic is causing informal social safety nets to collapse. Overall health care is under pressure as health services struggle with mounting demand. Workforces are being decimated, with severe consequences for investment, production, and per capita income.

Controversies and denials regarding the reality of AIDS at the initial stage of the disease in Nigeria were made based on some political as well as economic reasons (Okesola, 2001). Kanki and Adeyi, cited in Avert (2012) alleged that although Nigerian government was slow to respond to the increasing rates of HIV transmission, the Federal Ministry of Health made the first attempt to assess the HIV and AIDS situation in the country in 1991(Avert, 2013). "Nigeria continues to have the second largest number of people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa" (WHO, UNAIDS/UNICEF, 2011:25).Nigeria is adjudged to be the largest oil producer in Africa and the 7th largest in the world yet it has the 3rd largest number of poor people in the world, after China and India (INEC,2012).The HIV and AIDS status of the country coupled with the population of the country put at over 150million could further impoverish the people.

In order to forestall the decimation of the Nigerian populace, aggressive campaign strategies focusing on curbing the menace of the disease should not be a negotiable option. Nigeria is a populous country with a vast land mass; therefore penetrating into the nooks and crannies of the country with campaign messages requires tapping into the vast opportunities inherent in the media. The media have an inalienable role to play in mobilising public response towards combating the spread of HIV and AIDS (JAAIDS, 2005). It is not surprising that media campaign efforts are focusing especially on the youths since they bear the greatest brunt of HIV and AIDS(Ransome-Kuti,1996). Entertainment media was mostly used to convey the messages and the channels of communication included radio, television, films, outdoor media, (Obono, 2011).

A radio serial broadcast, "Future Dreams", created by the Society for Family Health was aired in nine languages on 42 radio channels. The message of the campaign focused on consistent condom use, increasing knowledge and skills for condom negotiation in single men and women aged between 18 and 34. The UN

Children's Fund (UNICEF) took advantage of the surge in mobile phone use in Nigeria to launch the HIV and AIDS campaign. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news cited in Avert (2012) stated that nine million young Nigerians were sent text message in order to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS. Another HIV and AIDS campaign on billboard featuring a famous Afro beat musician, Femi Kuti, was a regular feature along major Nigerian roads. A simple but instructive slogan on it read, "AIDS no dey show for face", which translation means that you cannot tell who is infected with AIDS by mere appearance. This campaign message could only be true to the extent that anyone who contracts the virus appears healthy until down with full blown AIDS. The medium of film is currently being employed to raise awareness campaign against the deadly disease. According to Nigeriafilms.com (2012), the ace film maker and actor, Zack Amata is scripting a film to campaign Preventing Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) of HIV and AIDS and also Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC). Although Amata's contribution in the fight against the disease is not focusing specifically on youths, they invariably are part of that population.

HIV and AIDS media strategies utilized an integrated communication approach as information dissemination was not limited to the uses of traditional media but incorporated new media technologies to raise more public awareness (Obono, 2011). However, considering the vast population of the country and its diversified publics, these few and dying media campaigns are incompatible with the impending health hazards that may be associated with the rising number of new infections in the country. The unabated new infection rate among the youth population is a strong indication that they have continued to engage in risky behaviours that predispose them to HIV infections. The need to diversify media campaign efforts aimed at curbing the spread of HIV cannot be overstressed. One of the untapped options is social media, especially among the youths.

Concept of social media
Social media are forms of information and communication technology disseminated through social interaction. It is a social instrument of communication that consists of computerized, interactive, networked information and communication. The term, social media, refers to the means of interactions among people who create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Ahlqvist *et al*, 2008). It is an Internet-based application that depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create and exchange user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Abroms *et al* (2008) define it as media based on the use of digital technologies like the Internet, digital video and mobile devices. Social media is therefore viewed as new media with a social networking focus.

Social media is a two-way method of communication that grants people access to interact with friends or engage in complex social, economic and political discourse. It integrates technology, social interaction and content creation to collaboratively connect online information. It is a highly interactive platform that enables individuals and communities to create, share, discuss, and modify information, which transforms users from being content-consumers to

content-producers. Chou*et al*, cited in Haris *et al* (2013),noted that unlike traditional media, social media are lower cost, reach a more targeted audience, and facilitate dialogue between senders and recipients of information. Social media technologies take on many different forms, including Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, social networks, and podcasts.

Mobile social media run on mobile devices. According to Kaplan (2012), mobile social media applications can be differentiated by Space-timers, which is the exchange of messages with relevance for one specific location at one specific point-in time; space-locators which deals with exchange of messages, with relevance for one specific location, which are tagged to a certain place and read later by others; quick-timers (only time sensitive), which involves the transfer of traditional social media applications to mobile devices to increase immediacy and slow-timers (neither location, nor time sensitive) concerns the transfer of traditional social media applications to mobile devices.

The use of social media has grown rapidly. While Facebook is very popular among users, daily usage of Twitter has increased from 5000 "tweets" per day in 2007 to 50 million in 2010 and 140 million per day in the first quarter of 2011 (Twitter, 2011). These two are also considered popular networking sites that are widely used by most young people in Nigeria for information sharing, interaction and transaction. Accordingly, they could be easily explored for effective HIV and AIDS information, education and communication, including awareness, management and health development. Social media can also facilitate professional networking and information sharing among youths in Nigeria.

Social media and information dissemination
Web-based social media sites are increasingly being used by the public to find and share information. They have been useful for sharing information and supporting online communities and dissemination of research information (Terras, 2012; Weitzman, 2011). The frequency of downloading blog and tweet materials show their effectiveness in research information dissemination relative to print media (Terras, 2012). This is not limited to socioeconomic and political discourse but development of a robust preventive society against diseases and viruses. With the revolution in communication and information technology, social media are currently used by healthcare providers and public health organizations to provide health information, track outbreaks of disease and disseminate health information (Avery *et al*, 2010; Corley *et al*, 2010; Schein *et al*, 2010).

With social media being pervasive in virtually all aspects of society, public health organizations are finding web-based social media sites like Twitter and Facebook useful tools for the spread of public health information. Health-related social media activities in the West have grown and are being used for improving health outcomes and solving HIV- prevention related problems. Social media sites offer means of health information sharing (Scanfeld *et al*, 2010) to promote positive behaviour change. Facebook and other social networking technologies have been effectively exploited for interaction and dissemination of information among physical and virtual friends. The media could be effective for preventing

HIV infection among at-risk groups and health information posted could potentially reach a large audience, including people from hard-to-reach lower income populations (Avery *et al*, 2010; Kamel&Wheelert, 2007). Accordingly, state health departments in the United States use Facebook and Twitter as tools to share health information, create transparency, and engage community members on national health (Harris et al, 2013). Facebook has been particularly useful in the health arena for marketing, instant feedback and targeted recruitment (Patison, 2009). In addition to information transmission, interaction and transaction, health-related Facebook groups could be created to discuss, inform, educate and disseminate HIV and AIDS knowledge and behaviour change mechanisms to confront the virus.

In advanced economies, social media have helped professionals in remote areas to connect to urban clinical centres through vodcast trainings and Web conferencing (Kamel&Wheelert, 2007). Using Web 2.0 application, patients and clinicians can securely and simultaneously access records across multiple institutions and so potentially improve clinical outcomes (Huvane, 2009).

Social media culture among youths
The communication environment of youths has changed. Most of them have access to computer-mediated communication and cellular phones with the Internet have been adopted and integrated into their daily lives. Contemporary youths create and use digital spaces for social interaction, identity, media production and consumption. Their lives are characterized by media privatization in a multimedia environment that makes them become multimedia producers and not mere consumers (Livingston *et al,* 2001). Youths are thus described as "Net-generation," "millennium generation," and "digital natives" because they have been immersed in a media-rich environment where they use computers, play online games, and constantly communicate and connect with friends (Prensky, 2001&Tapscott, 1998). The Internet has thus created a generation of young people with sophisticated knowledge, skills and values that support learning and creation of a culture in a digital space. Among those with internet access, social media use in the U.S. is significantly higher in younger groups and useful for reaching some disadvantaged groups (Avery *et al*, 2010; Pew, 2012).

The role of technology in society can be captured in technological determinism and the social construction approaches of technologies. The internet is presented as an innovative force that has profound influence on children who are simultaneously social products (Smith, 1985). Technology generates new patterns of expression, communication, motivation and drives social change (Mesch, 2009). Youths are active participants in the creation of media content and the advent of Web 2.0 increases their ability to become active creators and contributors. Accordingly, youths are actively involved in web production and tend to appropriate and convert portions of them into youth zones. For a majority of adolescents, the Internet is being used mostly for relationship formation and maintenance of existing friends (Mensh, 2009).

Social networking sites such as Facebook, My Space, 2go, twitter, blackberry messenger, among others, enable social interactions among youths in Nigeria.

These sites have changed the way young people communicate, with the advantage of sharing information on the spur of the moment. Different bloggers like Nigerian News desk, 24/7 news, Daily Post Nigeria and Information Nigerian write current news on their blogs for readership and this can be exploited for health information.

Social media thus offer youths the platform for entertainment, communication, meeting friends and advertising. As an essential tool of communication among peers, Facebook has become the most popular means of communication among young people, especially those aged 18-25 years and ranked number one social network (Lee *et al,* 2011). In Nigeria, most young people engage in mobile social media, that is, social media used in combination with mobile devices.

Potentials of social media for HIV/AIDS campaign
The nature of HIV and AIDS and the changing youth culture necessitate a reorientation of health communication. The interplay of these key variables point to the potentials of utilizing social media for HIV and AIDS campaign in Nigeria. Although skeptics have argued that the Internet and the World Wide Web have been dubbed rather prematurely as the medium of the future, Johnson and Kaye (1998) observe that one cannot deny the interest and excitement generated by such environments. Close to two decades after the fears were expressed, such arguments may be unfounded going by the popularity of some of the tools, such as social media, that run on such platforms. For instance, the use of social media has grown rapidly. While Facebook is very popular among users, daily usage of Twitter has increased (Twitter, 2011). Their argument may have been based on hasty presumption in making an over exaggerated assessment of potentials of the new media. Although a lot of lessons still needs to be learned with the passage of time, this will not discountenance the inherent potentials of social media that can be tapped into in carrying out HIV and AIDS campaigns.

The culture of social media use among Nigerian youths has been observed (Okolo, 2012; Ogbe, 2014; Adeyanju, 2014) and it is not surprising that the digital age is widely believed to belong to the youth since they remain the most prominent users of the social media (Ogbe, 2014). In Nigeria, new media have greater impact on the youth who are more IT enthused with the intractable zest to know (Okolo, 2012). This culture is not peculiar to Nigerian youths as 73% of wired American teens aged 12-17 years as well as young adults aged 18-29years use social networking websites (Lenhart, Purell, Smith &Zickuhr, 2010). It is, therefore, not surprising that youths have been described as "Net-generation" (Prensky, 2001). These various social media platforms can be employed in reaching youths with HIV/AIDS messages. Information posted on these platforms could easily be accessed by youths and their friends. However, the uniqueness of each platform must be taken into consideration in order to maximally benefit from its potentials. This fact was aptly captured in a statement attributed to an Arab Spring Activist from Egypt and cited in Kassim (2012) that Facebook was used to schedule protests, twitter was used to coordinate and YouTube to tell the world.

Social media provide a superb kind of networking and connectivity that are so far unequalled and unbeatable. The barrier of distance in communicating is no longer tenable with social media platforms like Facebook, BBM, YouTube, Twitter, 2go, Skype, which enable one to establish link with people all over the globe just at the click of a button. This new phenomenon in communication, which has reduced the world to a global village, makes it possible for information disseminated in a lightning speed to be accessed globally. Establishing links on these platforms makes it an exciting experience to reach individuals as well as groups, increasing the contact ability with one's friends at minimal cost, time and effort (Ogbe, 2014). The social media not only guarantee platform for users to get connected but also awake interest to generate content. The rapidly growing platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter facilitated users' desire to make connections and exchange self-generated content (van Dijck, 2013).

The Arab Spring is a case that is worth mentioning. The events in the Middle East and North Africa, led primarily by the region's youths, were fueled by social media (Kassim, 2012). Through the social media, youths in the Arab region were able to connect with and update the entire world on their struggle as well as receive people's reaction on the entire saga. Since social media was used to make a political case, it is also possible to use the platform for health reforms, especially among young people in Nigeria. As HIV is spreading, there is urgent need to adopt a strategy that will ensure fast and efficient means of conveniently spreading HIV and AIDS messages. Since there is neither vaccine for the virus nor cure for AIDS, emphasis should, therefore, be on spreading the information rather than the virus.

Adeyanju (2014) posits that an exciting brave world of information democracy is imminent as social media becomes a veritable tool with a vast potential for awareness creation, sensitization and social mobilization. Tapping into this potential for AIDS and HIV awareness creation, sensitization and mobilization can be achieved with young people since they use the social media to network and connect with each other. Adeyanju alluded to the fact that youths in Nigeria are heavy users of social media for networking. The connectivity and networking features of social media would ensure that information is passed on from one person to another and then becomes viral.

This suggests a high level of interactivity that not only allows users to access information but also gives them the opportunity to make their own input. Through these platforms users, including youths, can enter into meaningful interaction irrespective of distance in communication encounters. Virtual communities are formed on these platforms and these can afford those affected and infected with HIV and AIDS a good avenue to interact with one another, sharing experiences, drawing needed support and encouraging one another. The freedom and privacy that social media users enjoy can guarantee some level of openness. The lack of openness tends to fuel the spread of the disease because of the fear of being stigmatized. People who are infected and affected could interact with people who are thousands of kilometers away from them without any inhibitions. Social media could provide an avenue for infected persons to express themselves without fear of stigmatization.

The potentials identifiable with social media do not in any way negate the fact that there are some challenges to contend with by users. Social media platforms can only be accessed through the Internet facility which may not be readily accessible in some rural areas in Nigeria. Accessing the Internet anytime and anywhere requires possession of digital Web-enabled mobile devices such as smart phones, tablets, and notebooks, among others. These devices cost money to acquire and may go beyond the financial reach of the poor, especially the youths. Indeed, these factors put together, could deny the poor youths access to such facilities and consequently cost them the opportunity to join in the conversation on HIV and AIDS. The voice of the rural poor remains dim and under-represented because Internet access is not fully equitable (Adeyanju,2014).

It is also not uncommon to observe a misuse of the social media among youths, which may have sexual connotations as well as security implications as captured by Adeyanju (2014):

> As usual, youthful exuberance or perhaps unguarded youthful exuberance has taken over the airspace; unclad, offensive, sexually appealing and sexually abusive pictures are the new strategies inhibiting the youths from productive use of the social media. Youths in their crave to attain cheap fame, tend to step over the line by introducing this technique to attract and expand their network base. How this translates to success beats my imagination. Proponents of this trend argue vigorously that the social media network is strictly for matured minds only, thus, the age limit requirement imposed on all prospective clients while registering, but as we all know, youths falsify their ages in order to register on these social network sites.

Irrespective of these shortcomings, the potentials of social media for HIV and AIDS campaign are enormous. The expected results would be outstanding and use will have implications on the incidence of HIV in the country, especially among adolescents and young people who are the most vulnerable. Urgent action is imperative in tackling the menace of HIV and AIDS.

As the world awaits a divine breakthrough in HIV vaccine and cure for AIDS, efforts should be geared towards creating awareness and providing relevant information in order to stem the menace of the disease. In reaching out to youths in this fight, appropriate media should be employed. Indeed, the preponderance of social media users among this cohort is not in doubt. Social media have a lot of potentials that could be tapped into in carrying HIV and AIDS campaigns targeting youths. With the social media, the barrier created by distance is eliminated, networking and connectivity is assured, and interactivity is guaranteed among users. Considering that stigmatization of infected and affected individuals is still an issue to contend with, tapping into the great potentials of the social media would enable youths to network, connect and interact with

people all over the globe. Indeed, they can do all these, using the social media without fear of being stigmatized.

Conclusion

The paper prescribes the potential of harnessing social media for HIV and AIDS campaign among youths in Nigeria. It describes the previous media utilized for the campaign as well as the strengths of the new media in disseminating health information. Although some limitations of the social media were highlighted, the strengths far outweigh the weaknesses, hence, social media remain a vital tool for reducing HIV prevalence rate. It is, therefore, recommended that social media be exploited for HIV and AIDS information dissemination and no Nigerian youth should be segregated based on class or location for effective media reach. Hence, Internet services should be made available to rural and urban dwellers to promote easy connection, interaction and health management.

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