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COMMUNICATING FOR CHANGE: UTILISING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

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Abstract

Development communication is central to the accomplishment of sustainable change and social media has become an integral part of modern society's daily life. With the rapid development in Information and Communication Technology, social media platforms is shaping public communication and influencing behavior change through the way people interact, share information and express their views. This paper examines how social media can be utilized in development communication and sustainable change. The study uses survey research design. The study population is the entire 301,657 population of Awka metropolis. The sample size of the study, determined through an online sample size calculator is 384 and is purposively selected from the population of Awka metropolis. The study uses simple frequency and percentage tables to analyze data. The findings of the study shows that, even in the face of the challenges involved in using social media platforms, it can be effectively utilized in development communication to ensure sustainable development through social media campaigns. The study recommends that social media should be used by development communicators to raise the awareness of both the people and the relevant development agencies in Nigeria on the need for a behavioral change for sustainable change and development.

Keywords: Social Media, Development Communication, Sustainable Change, Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Introduction

In bringing about sustainable change in any society, development communication is a powerful catalyst. Without such communication, there can never be any significant economic, social, educational, cultural, or even personal change in society. In today's era of information and technology, no society will reach its full potential without the proper application of development communication in the process of development of the society. This means that all development programs or policies depend on a strong communication framework to excel (Nweze, 2019). Development communication is about effectively communicating development messages to people (Ono and Ono, 2021). No meaningful development or lasting change can occur without adequate and effective communication. In fact, communication can be considered the foundation of sustainable development and change (Ghozeil, 2023). Many development projects have failed because the change agents (development communicators) did not communicate effectively with the people for whom the development projects were intended before the project was initiated.

With development being the process of continuous or sustainable change, which has the role of improving the quality of life of all or most people without being violent with the natural and cultural environment in which it exists (Okunna, 1994; Slim, 1995), and communication being the process of sharing ideas, information, opinions, feelings or experiences between two or more people or a group of people through a common language and tools (Ntara et Evans, 2023), development communication therefore, refers to the use of communication to facilitate development in a society (Szecsy, 2011). According to the author, development communication techniques include: information dissemination and education, behavior change, social marketing, social mobilization, media advocacy, communication for social change and community participation.

In our current environment, marked by rapid advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), it is undeniable that social media has become an inseparable part of the daily routine of modern society (Wahyoedi et al. 2023). Its various forms, such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram and TikTok, have brought about fundamental changes in the patterns of interaction of people, the patterns of information exchange and the way they express their opinions (Tarigan et al. 2023, in Ausat, 2023). The ease and speed of interaction between social media users has paved the way for the rapid dissemination of information and ideas and the overcoming of geographical and cultural boundaries. This phenomenon creates a new dynamic in which public discourse involving complex issues ranging from social, medical, political to economic dimensions becomes more open and accessible at different levels of society, without being bound by physical or time constraints (Ausat, 2023). Social media is not only a means of sharing opinions, but also serves as a place where different perspectives can meet, mingle, and influence each other (Saaida, 2023). With these types of opportunities, social media has become more than just a communication tool; it has become an active force that plays a significant role in shaping public discourse, guiding decision-making, and even influencing behavior change.

The impact of social media on the economic decision-making process of individuals and groups is an increasingly striking development. The emergence of this shift has become increasingly evident as social media accelerates the flow of information about products, brands, services and investment opportunities through its increasingly sophisticated platforms (Ferine et al. 2023). As a result, the potential to influence individual or collective purchasing decisions becomes greater and more significant (Ausat, 2023). In this context, social media is not only a means of communication but also a strategic stage where marketers, businesses and consumers interact, influence each other and ultimately shape the changing trends and direction of the Nigerian economy. Little wonder, Hamzat and Otulugbu (2020) describe social media as a platform composed of many actors, all working in the communication process.

However, it is important to recognize that social media is not always used in a positive way. There are challenges associated with its use for communications. With the apparent freedom enjoyed by everyone in creating and disseminating information on social media, fake news is almost unverified. There is also the challenge of the social media echo chamber, where users are expected to encounter information and opinions that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs without encountering opposing perspectives, which can lead to confirmation bias (Auxier and

Vitak, 2019). Another challenge with the use of social media for communication is the digital divide. This is the gap created by unequal access to modern communication technologies between different demographic groups and regions (Taylor, 2024).

It is against this backdrop that this study examines how social media can be utilized in development communication and sustainable change.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing popularity of social media, development communication initiatives often struggle to effectively utilize social media platforms to engender sustainable change. This according to Dinescu (2023) is largely caused by limited understanding of how to harness social media, in the face of its challenges, for development communication and inadequate engagement with target audience on social media. As a result of this, development communication initiatives have failed to further promote positive behaviour change among its audience and record more progress towards sustainable change through social media platforms.

This study aims to examine how social media can be effectively utilized in development communication and sustainable change by addressing the knowledge gaps and challenges mentioned above.

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the study is geared towards:

1. Ascertaining the roles social media play in development communication.
2. Examining the current challenges involved in using social media for development communication.
3. Ascertaining how social media can be effectively utilized for development communication and sustainable change.

Research Questions

1. What are the roles social media play in development communication?
2. What is/are the current challenge(s) involved in using social media for development communication?
3. How can social media be effectively utilized for development communication and sustainable change?

Review of Related Literature

Development Communication and its Evolution in the Digital Age

Development communication as defined by Quebral (2011) is an art and science of human communication that is applied to the rapid transformation of a country and its population from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that enables greater social equality and greater development of human potential. Development communication can also be defined as a practice or method of systematic and strategic application of communication principles, theories, processes and strategies to bring about planned, targeted, sustainable and positive social change and transformation (Singh and Bharti, 2021). In defining development communication, Paolo (2008) says that it is an "integration of strategic communication into development projects. The aim is to change behaviors and not just to disseminate

information, educate or raise awareness. While these are necessary components of communication, they are not sufficient to make people change long-established practices". It is no wonder that Childers (1966); in Singh and Bharti (2021) consider development communication as development support communication, a discipline of development planning and implementation in which human behavioral factors are best considered in the design of development projects and their goals.

Development communication includes the following elements: recognition of the power of communication as a catalyst for change; dissemination of information about development programs and projects through interactivity; generating sustainable and positive changes in social, political, and economic behavior and translating information into actions that lead to a better quality of life. In short, development communication is any type of communication effort that is fully and continuously oriented towards sustainable planned change in a society.

Historically, the practice of development communication began in the 1940s, but its widespread application came after World War II (Kumar, 2023) through international aid interventions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that targeted challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, and poor health (Katunga, Njenga, & Audenhove, 2023). The goal of development communication at that time was to prepare local populations for rapid social change by influencing their attitudes and behaviors toward modern innovations (Melkote, 2018). Mass media – radio, magazines, newspapers, television and cinema, which emerged later – were used to disseminate persuasive content through biased top-down channels (Rogers, 1976; in Katunga et al. 2023).

Over the past fifty years, the practice of development communication have continued to evolve (Melkote, 2018), and with the use of Information and Communication Technologies for development (ICT4D), a concept that refers to the role that new media technology, digital media in particular, can play in development communication to empower people and to further advance the overall development projects (Kabir, 2014), social media, a digital media enabled platform, are capable of distributing specialized information to specific, large audiences (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013; in Katunga et al. 2023). What differentiates social media from other forms of media is their capacity to foster collaborative and participatory engagement, while giving voice to virtually everyone. In the digital age and with the digital media, development communication has evolved from one-way or top-down persuasive channel to collaborative and participatory bottom-up two-way channels (Akashraj and Pushpa, 2014). Social media has ensured participatory engagement in development communication.

Role of Social Media in Development Communication: Its Challenges

As a concept, social media is a form of mass communication on the Internet (such as social networks and microblogging websites) through which users share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (such as videos) (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). This is why Dollarhide (2024) saw it as a digital technology that enables the exchange of ideas and information generated by users in the form of text and images, which lends itself to engagement through liking, sharing, commenting and discussion via virtual network communities.

Perhaps the most obvious role that social media plays in development communication is its potential to compete with conventional or mainstream media, giving people a voice on their own terms (Parkyn, 2017). They can give visibility to their experiences, provide a place for discussion, and provide a platform for direct participation, even allowing people to speak directly to those in power. Due to their built-in multiplier effect (reposting and sharing of content), social media significantly accelerate the spread of information, ideas, practices, values, and norms that support positive change (Katunga et al. Social media is a tool for organizing and taking action (Hamzat and Otulugbu, 2020). This is essential to achieving what many see as its transformative potential: it allows people to unite around solutions to problems exposed elsewhere in the media (Parkyn, 2017). An instance here is the birth and activities of the *Obidient* Movement – a political support group that believes Mr. Peter Obi is the right presidential candidate to succeed former President Buhari during the 2023 presidential election. Social media platforms, mostly Facebook and Twitter are all that were needed for many Nigerians to have a change of heart and decide to support the presidential bid of Mr. Obi. This led to the movement, taking the center stage in the nation's national politics. Like a political tsunami, an idea created on social media became a major player in the election. It is not surprising that Ihsaniyati et al. (2023) argue that social media serves as a strategic and methodological concept in development communication, while opening up opportunities for dialogue and discussion among development actors. Furthermore, knowledge sharing enables people to interact, learn, communicate, innovate, change and collaborate (Ihsaniyati et al. 2023).

Despite the promising roles social media play in development communication, it is saddled with challenges that can hamper its effective use for development communication. There is high rate of fake news dissemination on social media and it has misled many social media users. In the words of Micich (2024), fake news is created and shared across social media particularly during significant developmental events. An example is the potpourri of fake news evident on social media during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Fake news being a false information that spreads, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead (Benjes-Small, 2021) is flowing unchecked on social media. Digital divide is another challenge bedeviling the use of social media by development communicators. The gap between people that have access to the internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) and those who do not or who have limited access poses a great deal of challenge to the impact of development communication initiatives on social media. Due to the fact that anybody on the Internet can quickly find like-minded people and perspective via social media, a development communication initiative on social media may not optimally record the desired level of behaviour change because of the effect of echo chamber. Echo chamber is an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own (BBC, 2024). It can create misinformation and distort a person's perspective so they have difficulty considering opposing viewpoints and discussing complicated topics (Auxier and Vitak, 2019). Therefore, any development communication initiative on social media that runs contrary to a person's echo chamber will definitely fail to achieve the desired result(s).

Utilizing Social Media for Development Communication and Sustainable Change

Reviewing researches on the use of social media for knowledge sharing in the context of development communication and social change by Ihsaniyati et al (2023). They based their

research on a systematic literature review using the PRISMA protocol. The research found out that there are gaps in research on the use of social media for knowledge sharing in the context of development communication and social change, which can be utilized for further research. Following the finding of this study, the current paper intends suggesting ways social media can be effectively utilized for development communication and sustainable change.

Social media no doubt offers advantages in disseminating messages quickly and broadly and for social media to become an effective tool in carrying out sustainable measures for enacting sustainable change (UNDP, 2024), development communicators must be fully committed in using this tool to create educational content (Social Sector Network, 2019). Before people can effectively conform to the dictates of a development communication campaign or initiative on social media, they must learn about the goals and positive changes such initiative is promising people. Since education is vital, a development communicator can focus on promoting one or two specific goals and changes at a time, while using facts and figures to teach people about the goals and changes in their economic, social, cultural, political or personal lives.

Creating of inspirational stories is another way development communicators can effectively utilize social media for development communication and sustainable change. This can be done by discovering people or organizations that are helping in achieving the desired sustainable change in the society (Social Sector Network, 2019). Real-world examples perform miracles when it comes to motivating people to pay attention and get involved with sustainable development (King, 2017). Stories that resonate with audiences and address their perspectives are key to creating lasting impact (Mossi, 2024).

Development communication initiatives serving as call-to-action initiative is yet another way to use social media platforms for development communication and sustainable change. Running a challenge or fundraiser aimed at getting people involved with any sustainable development helps development communication initiatives record huge and positive impact (Social Sector Network, 2019). To promote a cleaner environment, a development communicator could challenge people to post pictures of themselves picking up trash on their environment or encourage them to donate to a cleaner environment initiative. Once a development communicator effectively uses social media to convince people to make public and voluntary commitments, they will feel a psychological pull to continue supporting sustainable development change (UNDP, 2024). Small actions can lead to massive impacts.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive theory was developed in the 1960s as an alternative theory to explain human behavior (Brinkmann, Hurst, & Levitas, 2023). This theory suggests that human behavior is learned and developed through interactions with other people and the world around an individual. Social cognitive theory (SCT) suggests that an individual's behavioral choices are determined by internal and external factors, such as the environment, role model selection, and past experiences (Nickerson, 2024). Regarding human learning, SCT suggests that an individual does not learn behavior through conditioning, but rather chooses behaviors based on the desire to achieve a certain outcome (Brinkmann et al. 2023). This theory views individuals as active agents who can influence and be influenced by their environment (LaMorte, 2022). Rather than passively absorbing knowledge from environmental inputs, this

theory argues that individuals actively influence their learning by interpreting the outcomes of their actions, which in turn influence their environment and personal factors, thereby informing and changing subsequent behavior (Schunk, 2012; in Nickerson, 2024).

The central tenet of social cognitive theory is that an individual does not learn behavior through conditioning, but rather chooses behaviors based on the desire to achieve a certain outcome. Therefore, this theory suggests that development communicators, while using social media platforms for development communication and social change, they communicate for people to select behaviors that leads to desires to achieve sustainable change in the society.

Research Methodology

This study's research design is the survey research design. It entails gathering data from the residents of Awka metropolis. The city of Awka is of the population of 301,657 people. This is according to the 2016 population estimate cited in The Editors of Encyclopaedia of Britannica (2023). The sample size for this study was determined by the researcher using an online sample size calculator obtained on Qualtrics (2023). The sample size of this research work is 384 residents of Awka metropolis.

In this study, 384 diverse and knowledgeable respondents, largely media practitioners at Anambra Broadcasting Station (ABS), Awka; academic staff in the field of communication of Nnamdi Azikiwe University and communication students were purposively chosen by the researcher for this study. This is due to the fact that, not all residents of Awka Metropolis are conversant with the way social media can be utilized for development communication. Respondents in Awka metropolis received the copies of questionnaire directly from the researcher. The researcher used the availability sampling technique to administer the questionnaires to the respondents.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Out of the 384 questionnaires administered to the respondents, 379 were completed and returned, representing a 98 percent response rate. The data collected is presented and analysed using the frequency and simple percentage tables. The data is hereby presented below:

Demographics

Table 1

Variables		**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Sex	Male	237	62.5
	Female	142	36.8
	Total	**379**	**100**
Age	20-30	132	34.8
	31-40	151	38.9
	41-50	66	17.4
	50 and above	30	7.9
	Total	**379**	**100**
Marital status	Single	158	41.6
	Married	221	58.3
	Total	**379**	**100**
Educational Qualification	SSCE	41	10.8
	ND/HND	87	22.9
	BSc	108	28.4
	Others	143	37.7
	Total	**379**	**100**

Information in table 1 shows that 237 (62.5%) of the respondents are males, while 142 (36.8%) of them are females. Obviously, most of the respondents are young. This is because, majority of them are between of the ages of 20 and 40, forming more than 70% of the study's respondents. The respondents between the ages of 20 and 30 are 132 (34.8%), while those between the ages of 31 and 40 are 151 (38.9%), the respondents between the ages of 41 and 50 are 66 (17.4%), while respondents that are 50 and above are 30 (7.9%). Moreover, 158 (41.6%) of the respondents are single, while 221 (58.3%) of the respondents are married. SSCE holders are 41 (10.8%), ND/HND holders are 87 (22.9%), BSc holders are 108 (28.4%), while, 143 (37.7%) are holders of other degrees. This also shows that majority of the respondents are degree holders.

Research Question One. What are the roles social media play in development communication?

Table 2: Respondents' Response

Responses	**Frequency(n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Agent of knowledge sharing	62	16.3
A tool for organizing and taking action	54	14.2
A voice to the voiceless	29	7.7
All of the aforementioned	234	61.7
Total	**379**	**100**

Data in table 2 shows that 62 (16.3%) respondents said social media plays the role of an agent of knowledge sharing, 54 (14.2%) of them said it serves as a tool for organizing and taking

action, 29 (7.7%) of them said its role is that of being a voice to the voiceless, while 234 of the respondents said social media plays all the aforementioned roles.

Research Question Two. What is/are the current challenge(s) involved in using social media for development communication?

Table 3. Respondents' Response

Responses	**Frequency(n)**	**Percentage (%)**
It is source of fake news	81	21.3
Digital divide (the challenge of unequal access to social media platforms)	204	53.8
It promotes echo chamber (accessing only conforming information on social media)	38	10
All of the aforementioned	56	14.7
Total	**379**	**100**

Information in table 3 indicates that 81(21.3%) respondents said social media being a source fake news is the challenge involved in using it for development communication, 204 (53.8%) of them says it is digital divide, 38 (10%) of them said the challenge lies in social media's ability to promote echo chamber, while 56 (14.7%) said the challenge lies in all of the aforementioned.

Research Question Three. How can social media be effectively utilized for development communication and sustainable change?

Table 4. Respondents' Response

Response	**Frequency(n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Through posting of educational contents related to developmental change	48	12.6
Through posting of inspirational stories on sustainable development	42	11
Through posting of call-to-action contents that can ensure positive behaviour change	97	25.5
All of the aforementioned	192	50.6
Total	**379**	**100**

Data in table 4 shows that 48 (12.6%) respondents said, social media can be effectively utilized for development communication and sustainable change through posting of educational contents related to developmental change, 42 (11%) of them said, it can be effectively used through posting of inspirational stories on sustainable development, 97 (25.5%) of them said, it can be effectively utilized through posting of call-to-action contents that can ensure positive behaviour change, while 192 (50.6%) said, it can be effectively utilized through all the aforementioned ways.

Discussion of Findings.

The findings of this study are hereby discussed:

Research Question One. This study supported the view that social media serves or plays the role of being an agent of knowledge sharing; a tool for organizing and taking action and a voice for the voiceless in development communication. This finding clearly underscores the reason Parkyn (2017) maintains that the most obvious role social media plays in development communication is its potential in giving voice to people on their own terms. This finding is also in line with the positions of Katunga et al. (2023) and Hamzat and Otulugbu (2020) when they said, social media, asides being a tool for organizing and taking action, it vastly speeds up the diffusion of information, ideas, practices, values and norms that support positive change.

Research Question Two. The result here shows that digital divide, among other challenges is the major challenge involved in using social media for development communication, as over 50 percent of the respondents said so. This finding supports the researcher's viewpoint when he said that the gap between people that have access to the internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) and those who do not or who have limited access poses a great deal of challenge to the impact of development communication initiatives on social media.

Research Question Three. It is obvious that social media can be effectively utilized for development communication and sustainable change through posting of educational contents related to developmental change; through posting of inspirational stories on sustainable development and through posting of call-to-action contents that can ensure positive behaviour change. This is in line with the position of Social Sector Network (2019), when they said that development communicators must be fully committed in using social media to create educational content, inspirational stories and call-to-action initiatives in other to enhance development communication and foster sustainable change.

Conclusion

Development communication has to do with communicating the development messages to the people and in the digital age characterized by the central role of social media, it can be concluded that social media, in the face of its challenges, has significant role and utility value in development communication and sustainable change. Even though, social media usage for sustainable development is being challenged by the existing digital divide in the digital world, it is a resourceful tool in development communication, for it can be used for knowledge sharing, organizing and taking action and it can serve as a voice for the voiceless through its ability to disseminate development communicator's educational contents, inspirational stories and call-to-action initiatives. Based on this, this study is saying, social media a necessary evil development communicators must utilize to further drive development communication for sustainable change.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the research, the following recommendations were made:

1. Development communicators, among other communication channels they use for development communication, should add social media to it. This is because, social

media has become an active force that has significant role in shaping public discourse, directing decision-making and even influencing behaviour change.

2. Since there are challenges of using social media for development communication and digital divide is the most of them all, development communicators should use social media when communicating with urban dwellers and other forms of communication for people in the rural areas, as they are on the negative side of digital divide. This will even make the development communicator's work easier.
3. Development communicators should either develop the knack for effectively using social media for development communication or employ those who have the requisite knowledge of communicating effectively through social media. This will help achieve the needed sustainable change in people and relevant development agencies.

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