Cyber Behavior

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet and mobile phone have become the major ways of socializing in the 21st century. These media act as the social lifeline for users. The space or domain provided by the network of computers through satellite and telephone is typically referred to as the cyberspace. The cyberspace is therefore the domain for the exchange of data via networked systems. In the cyberspace, there is an interconnection of human beings through computers and telecommunication, without regard to physical geography. It is an intangible, virtual-reality domain. The cyberspace has been described as a new social space in which "young people congregate and affiliate to express their identity" (Cotrau, 2007, pp. 152). Many young people regularly engage in interactions through online media, such as: *Yahoo, Google, LinkedIn, Skype, Facebook, Blackberry, Twitter, Wikis, Whatsap*, and so forth, The reality of the digital age is that almost everything people do, especially in the technologically-advanced places is technologically-mediated: relationships, education, career, health, financial management, information dissemination, governance, and so forth. In the course of interacting through these media, participants manifest different kinds of behavior that are somehow similar to those they exhibit in their daily face-to-face interactions, as they engage in leisure, play, work, shopping, sharing ideas and learning from others.

Cyber behavior covers a range of activities that go on in the cyberspace. These include social networking, blogging, Internet chats and discussions, e-mailing, e-learning, e-banking, e-voting, e-shopping, and many others. These behaviors are typically linked with identity management issues. Since the cyberspace is seen as a network of communities of people, participants exhibit different kinds of identity, which are most times different from their real life identity. While real life identity is shaped by factors such as class, race, level of education, occupation and so forth, online identities are subject to being re-defined by participants. This re-definition may involve deception, which could manifest as multiple identities, gender switch, masking, identity theft, the use of pseudonym, and so forth. The cyberspace therefore parades all manner of persons with different and sometimes unreliable identities. Identity online is closely linked to the high degree of anonymity, which increases the participants' sense of impunity and loss of self-awareness. Scholars have observed that people generally loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly when communicating online. This is described by Suller (2004) as "the online disinhibition effect" (pp. 321).

The objectives of this article are to define and elaborate on nature of the different kinds of cyber behaviors. The article will also specifically discuss cyber behavior of non-Western Internet users, especially Africans, as it is believed the cultural terrain of Africa may impact on cyber behavior of the people of the region. Lastly, the article will discuss the current focus of research on these behaviors as well as future research directions on them.

BACKGROUND

Social networking refers to the use of the Internet to connect with people generally and build a network of friends, professional colleagues, business associates, and so forth. Some of the popular social networking sites are: *Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc*. *Facebook* is one of the most popular social networking sites among Internet users all over the world. Blogging is the act of hosting a personal website which is updated with information and allows for discussion and interaction with other web users. Networking on the Internet facilitates other behaviors such as Internet chats instant messaging and discussions.

Other aspects of cyber behavior include those activities which have been parts of the conventional behavior in societies, but which are gradually becoming major features on the Internet in the digital age. These include education, banking, voting, shopping, and dating, to mention a few. The transfer of skills and knowledge via cyber space has become a major way of learning in recent times. This is popularly referred to as e-learning, whose applications and processes include web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaborations. E-learning can take place through the platform of synchronous (real time) online platforms, where participants must be logged on simultaneously, such as Internet chats or asynchronous. It can also be asynchronous, which does not require that users be logged on at the same time in order to send and receive messages. According to Taiwo (2010), e-learning favours the use of discussion forum, which is a kind of asynchronous platform. Forums are described as socially constructive learning tool which can motivate positive and collaborative learning for students (Althaus, 1997; Markel, 2001; Larkin- Hein, 2001; O'Reilly & Newton, 2001). They have been discovered to be more effective in promoting a richer lexicon and syntactically more complex output than face-to face classroom learning because the delayed nature enables learners to have more time for choice of appropriate words (Warschuer, 1996; Sotillo, 2000).

Just like in education, the cyberspace has become a major domain for carrying out automated banking transactions such as withdrawals through cash dispensers, bank enquiries, bills payment, funds transfer at point of sale, and several other financial management processes. Banks in modern days have the choice to offer their services through various electronic distribution channels technologies such as Internet technology, video banking technology, telephone banking technology, and WAP technology (Daniel, 1999; Karjaluoto et al., 2002). This is popularly referred to as electronic banking. Research efforts on e-banking have centred on customers' attitude (Liao & Cheung, 2002), perceived security (operational and reputational) (Nsouli & Schachter, 2002; Smith, 2006); privacy risks (Cunningham *et al.*, 2005), and trust (Avinandam & Prithwiraj, 2003). Through the e-banking services, the cyber space has also provided opportunities for purchasing goods and services on the Internet. Internet shopping has grown in popularity over the years, mainly because people find it convenient and easy to bargain shop from the comfort of their home or office.

In order to enhance a more efficient democratic practice through the speed of election results processing and security of ballots, electronic voting (e-voting) has been introduced. International IDEA (2011, p. 6) defines electronic voting as "systems where the recording, casting or counting of votes in political elections and referendums involves information and communication technologies." Due to the digital divide some scholars have suggested that e-voting should be considered only as a complementary means to the traditional election processes (Gritzalls, 2002). One major issue that occupies scholars' attention in the research of e-voting is voter authentication, vote confidentiality and integrity (Lauer, 2004).

Online dating or Internet dating is another popular cyber behavior. It is a new way the adolescents employ for initiating romantic relationships in the virtual context. Scholars have found that online dating sites are fertile ground for deception (Hancock, Tomac & Ellison, 2007; Tomac, Hanson, & Ellison, 2008; Hall *et al.*, 2010). Since the online environments offer individuals an increased ability to control their self-presentation, there are greater opportunities to engage in misrepresentation and deception (Bowker & Tuffin, 2003; Joinson & Dietz-Uhler, 2002). Participants in online dating are able to post personal pictures and personal information about themselves, which are sometimes meant to be rated by other members. Individuals with positive high ratings have the potential of having their self-esteem raised, while those who receive a lot of negative ratings experience low self-esteem (Patchin & Hinduija, 2010). This means that in addition to being fertile grounds for deception, online dating sites are also suitable space for cyberbullying and harassment. Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) note as that the "online dating forum is qualitatively different from many other online settings due to the anticipation of face-to-face interaction inherent in the context" (pp. 416).

So far, we have examined a number of popular human activities, which have migrated into the cyber space in order to save time and enhance efficiency. It is important to state here that these activities may encourage users to exhibit some other human behaviors.

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