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Building community and constructing identity on WhatsApp: A netnographic approach

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Abstract

The social media serve as a means of expediently connecting people across the world, fostering new connections and friendships among people living abroad. Today, technology, mainly WhatsApp, seems to proffer a new stage for diasporas to engage in diasporic identity and community construction. The study investigates the motivation behind Nigerians living in the United States (diasporas) use of WhatsApp platform for building community and constructing identity online, and how they perceive the platform. The research adopts netnography, a qualitative research methodology suited for online research. This study adopts the aforementioned research method to explore forty five (45) persons on a WhatsApp platform. Besides, the social constructivist theory was employed to guide the study. The theory reiterates how meaning is developed through the interactions of social processes involving people in the environment. Analyzing automatically archived data from the WhatsApp platform, the study discovers that members of the group imagined the platform as a home community. Furthermore, there is a considerable dependence on the platform for homeland and related information seeking, creating national identities, and companionship. The study concludes that the WhatsApp diaspora platform provides its members with a sense of community and a strong bonding that engenders national identity and consciousness. The authors of the study believe that researchers should pay more attention to the study of WhatsApp for diasporic engagement.

Keywords

Diaspora, social media, WhatsApp, netnography.

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Introduction

The continuous metamorphosis in information and communication technology has engendered a networked society where either distance or time does not hinder the transmission of information. Hitherto, information or messages can be transmitted through emails, but the emergence of social media has enabled the rapid transfer of messages while maintaining both distanced and nearby networks. Social media have evolved in an era of user-generated content (UGC); the audience now has the power to create messages which they disseminate and equally consume. Boyd and Ellison (in Udenze, 2018) affirm that social networking sites are ‘web-based services that allow individuals to:

- construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system;
- articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection;
- view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system’.

From the above definition, we can argue that social media are synonymous with fenced horses in a stable that share certain similarities. In other words, they are different social networking sites that appeal to various users. For instance, YouTube is a video sharing site, Flickr is a picture sharing site, LinkedIn is more of professional networking. Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Instagram are popular among young people. These sites allow interaction amongst people with similar interests or concerns. The word ‘social networks’ or ‘media’ is understood in its ordinary sense of ‘seeking or enjoying the companionship of others’. Hence, these are websites for making friends, relations, and connections in the online world with people who we know or who we would like to know (Goswami, 2009).

Social media have attracted massive attention from scholars, and young diasporas still need scholar attention. It is pertinent to examine particularly online diasporic communities. Just as the Internet transcends boundaries and time, it permits people from different countries or continents to be interconnected (Papacharissi, 2002; Volkmer, 2003). Today, the Internet plays a crucial role in the global public sphere by enhancing and strengthening the link among individuals who share similar ethnic origins or political opinions (Calhoun, 2004; Castells, 2001; Dahlberg, 2007). The Internet use correlates increased civic engagement (Norris, 2003). From the preceding assertions, it is evident that WhatsApp is a fallout of the Internet revolution, and its role in engendering young diasporic identity construction cannot be underestimated.

Digital diasporas are created in cyberspace and are constituted by networks of individuals who share similar values and interests. Tynes (2007) argues that

digital diaspora forms what is known as a virtual nation. He describes it as any community that communicates online, and whose collective discourse or actions are aimed towards the benefits of their home country. The study of digital diasporas is essential because they exert influence in their home countries and host societies (Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012). Brinkerhoff (2009) argues that digital diasporas exert several types of influence on the host nation and international affairs, and they foster democratic values, support integration in the host society, and also contribute to security and socio-economic development of their homeland. Besides, online diasporic communities may act as a kind of counter-information flow that resists conventional media channels (Karim, 2003), hence, sharing common ethnic or national roots with a genuine need to assert their identities.

Tynes (2007) avers that online diasporas must remain connected to each other online, and they should also produce contents that reflect their identity, beliefs, and shared values. The study of WhatsApp as a communication platform is gaining the attention of scholars. WhatsApp has revolutionized communication due to its ease of use and affordability (Church & de Oliveira, 2013; Jisha & Jebakumar, 2014; Ling, 2016; Rambe & Chipunza, 2013; Udenze, 2017; Udenze, 2019; Yeboah & Ewur, 2014; Yin, 2016). As a social networking platform, WhatsApp facilitates international communication from any country that allows WhatsApp. Similarly, plethora of studies have been carried out on the adoption of WhatsApp for different purposes (Church & de Oliveira, 2013; Gachago et al., 2015; Gasaymeh, 2017; Hamad, 2017; Jisha & Jebakumar, 2014; Khalaf, 2017; Ling, 2016, Rambe & Chipunza, 2013; Udenze, 2017; Udenze, 2019; Yeboah & Ewur, 2014; Yin, 2016), especially as regards education and learning; infusing WhatsApp into conventional learning. However, it seems no study has attempted to explore WhatsApp potentiality in terms of online diasporic communication – building community and identity construction.

Furthermore, there has been research on diaspora studies, generally, social media and diasporic studies (Al-Rawi & Falmy, 2017; Goswami, 2010; Laguere, 2010; Mainsah, 2017) but no attention has been given to WhatsApp specifically. Methodologically, there is a dearth of studies that employ netnography in researching online diasporic engagement.

The main objective of the study investigates the motivation that drives WhatsApp use of Nigerians living in the United States (diasporas). Undoubtedly, one of the main purposes is building community and constructing identity online. The study further ascertains the populations' perception of the WhatsApp group on which they congregate.

Literature review: Cyber community and ‘imagined community’

A cyber community is an online aggregation of one or more groups of people. Cyber communities may be open to anyone or to a select group of persons who share certain similarities. In regards to this study, ‘imagined community’ entails the feelings of the virtual members of a cyber community, their thoughts as a single entity. Goswami (2010) argues that it is essential to discuss three key aspects while studying the use of cyberspace by diasporic individuals for community construction. Firstly, it is crucial to understand the reasons for creating such an online community. Secondly, one should discover what happens in such online aggregations that enable members to perceive it as a community. And finally, Goswami asserts that it is essential to understand how members of an online community manage to solicit responses from many other diasporas on the platform who provide advice and companionship without knowing each other personally.

Baym (1998) argues that multiple factors like external context, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics, influence online community interaction. Thus, it is worth referring here to the most determining external context that shapes members’ interaction on WhatsApp, precisely their diasporic status. This mainly involves discussion on their efforts at orienting themselves with the logistics of living in a new country like acquiring appropriate accommodation, procuring residence permit/visa and tax-related matters, nurturing connections with their home country, and finding avenues of direct or indirect involvement such as political participation. Besides, participant characteristics also emerge as external contexts as enumerated by Baym (1998), being dominantly youth, speak the English Language, middle class, studying in a university or working, and having access to new media communication technologies. After that, the temporal structure of WhatsApp is critical, as all communication on the platform takes the form of asynchronous posts. This allows members to read as well as respond to posts and contribute to threads at any time, providing them with time for composing and rewriting messages before sending them. The temporal structure of participating in WhatsApp is also influenced by the fact that most members access WhatsApp from school as the use of social media is normally discouraged at workplaces. After that, the system infrastructure of WhatsApp allows keeping access to the communities restricted to members or open to the public. Regarding the WhatsApp group, there are restrictions on joining the community and on becoming a member; one has to be introduced to the admin(s) of the platform before he/she is added to the group.

Finally, group purposes include (as analysis of qualitative data will later demonstrate) making friends, asking for and giving advice, information sharing, discussing issues ranging from movie, religion, and politics or engaging in social chats. Members of the WhatsApp group appropriate these pre-existing structures in a manner that enables their construction of social meanings through which they are ultimately able to imagine and perceive it as a community.

Diaspora

Scholars have attempted to explain the word 'diaspora' from different perspectives. Initially, the word 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek word 'diaspeirein' which means scattering or dispersal. Ordinarily, today, people understand diaspora as the dispersion of any people across countries away from their original homelands (Dlamini et al., 2009). There are various theoretical thoughts on diaspora. This paper examines these thoughts and thereby directs its purpose to the theoretical assertion that is in tandem with this study.

Before now, Cohen (1997) associates diaspora with those whose scattering was a result of a historical ordeal, such as the Holocaust or slavery. He further describes diaspora as any migration that places a group of people away from their home country. Cohen (1997) claims that amid diverse meanings of diaspora, one aspect that is common for all diasporic communities is the acknowledgement that their homeland always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. On the contrary, Vertovec (2000) views diaspora as a social form, a type of consciousness, and a mode of cultural production. Vertovec believes that since it has been established from the onset that diaspora is a dispersed set of people, it would not be scholarly right to leave it at that, rather, diaspora should be seen as a social form, a process. Hence, this meaning of diaspora is essential in considering Nigeria's diaspora engagement on WhatsApp.

It refers to the social relationships that emerge as a result of similar origins and migration routes. It includes maintenance of collective identity based on historical experience, institutionalizing networks that transcend territorial states, maintenance of ties with the homeland, solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement, and fostering feelings of alienation and difference when not entirely accepted by 'host society'. Also, it refers to the attention of political orientation between loyalty to the homeland and that of the host country. Thirdly, it refers to particular economic strategies that diasporic groups employ to mobilize collective resources such as transfer of credit, investment of capital, and provision of services among family, extended kin, and co-ethnic members.

Digital diaspora

The importance of new technologies for migrants is well established. The ICTs are described as ‘Diasporic media’ (Tsagarousianou, 2004), and contemporary migration as encompassing both geographical and digital mobility (Borkert et al., 2010). The research area is understudied and under-theorized, characterized by rapid changes and fluctuations, controlled and shaped by changing structural conditions of migrants and the proliferation of forms of new media. Digital diasporas constitute online networks of individuals sharing similar values or interests. Indeed, the study of digital diasporas is of high importance because these communities have influence in their original home countries and their immediate societies (Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012). Tynes (2007) believes that digital diasporas form what he calls a virtual nation, which is any community that gets in contact virtually, whose collective discourse and actions are aimed towards building, binding, maintenance, rebuilding, or rebinding of a nation. Keles (2016) affirms that communication technologies are used by diasporic groups to bring together the geographically dispersed diasporas around the notion of politicized ethnicity in the diasporic spaces. This is why Johnston et al. (2013) aver that online media become a bridging tool in creating virtual relationships among migrants. Diasporic online communities also create a degree of trust and mutual reciprocity, for instance, by requesting or accepting the friendship, membership, online support, etc. and also solidarity, primarily based on shared ethnicity, memories, and experiences (Keles, 2016).

Besides, Mitra (2001) argues that migrant experiences of discrimination, isolation, homesickness, and exclusion from the labor market and political participation in foreign countries contribute to strengthening their involvement in online diasporic activities. For the Nigerian participants of the WhatsApp group, the factors of being homesick, feeling isolated, and the urge for political participation in their home country affairs may have engendered the reason for being on the platform.

Identity: An overview

In terms of modern communication, the word we utter, our non-verbal communication are all expression of our identity (Wahl & Scholl, 2014). To have a grasp of identity, we have to understand the ‘self’. Self is a complex set of beliefs about one’s attributes as well as memories that confirms such beliefs. These attributes and memories form a scheme of oneself or mental structures that contain information defining a person and ways of communication with people around them. In the 21st century, identity has taken different meanings.

Scholars have given diverse conceptions of identity. These conceptions are enlightenment subject, sociological subject, and post-modern subject.

The enlightenment subject is premised on the conception of the human being as an entirely centered, unified individual, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core which emerged when the subject was born and remained 'identical' or unchanged throughout the individual's existence (Goswami, 2010). The sociological conception of identity involves viewing 'identity' as a product of interactions between the self and society. According to this view, identity bridges the gap between the 'inside' and the 'outside'. Earlier, scholars (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) have elaborated on this 'interactive' conception of identity and self. In other words, the sociological conception of identity argues that the subject of identity still has an inner core or essence, but it is formed or modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural or outside world. This is synonymous with the sociological symbolic interaction theory. In a nutshell, identity is formed in the interaction between self and society. Identity, in this sociological belief, bridges the gap between the 'inside' and the 'outside' – between the personal and the public worlds.

The post-modern conception conceptualized identity as having no fixed, essential, or static identity. Identity becomes a 'moveable feast' that is formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are portrayed or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us (Hall, 1996). It is historical and not biologically defined. The subject assumes different identities at various times, identities that are not unified around a unified 'self'. Within us there are different identities hovering in multiple directions, so our identifications are continuously being shifted. If we feel that we have a coherent identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comfortable story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves (Hall, 1990). The fully unified, total, secure, and coherent identity is a mirage; instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation metamorphosed, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities. Goswami (2010) opines that we should note that the above conceptions of the subject are, to some extent, simplifications. As the argument evolves, they will become more complex and qualified.

Cultural identity

Cultural identity refers to the apperception or sense of belonging to a specific group situated on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. Cultural identity is created and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge like traditions, heritage, language,

aesthetics, and norms. As individuals typically interact with more than one cultural group, cultural identity is complex and multifaceted. While other scholars assumed identification with cultural groups to be evident and stable, today most scholars view it as circumstantial and dependent upon temporal and contiguous changes. In the global world, with increasing intercultural encounters, cultural identity is continuously enacted, negotiated, maintained, and challenged through communicative practices. Hall (1992) defines cultural identity as that aspect of our identities which arises from our belonging to distinctive ethnic, racial, language, religious, and above all national cultures.

Globalization is the mainstreaming of modern capitalism through economic, political, and cultural means. Globalization creates a global and homogenous culture. Giddens (1990) argues that globalization is a movement away from the classical sociological idea of a 'society' as a well-bounded system, and its replacement by a perspective that concentrates on how social life is ordered across time and space. Such a cultural intrusion is a threat that causes severe problems for some conservative states because the openness to foreign contents can destroy the traditional values and domestic cultural identity.

This overcoming of cultural experience diminishes the socio-religious identity of a country as Castle (1996) submits that globalization is the proliferation of modernity, and modernity is the precursor of identity. In the context of globalization and cultural identity, Howes (1996) asserts that cultural identity is not likely to be the easy casualty of globalization because identity is not in fact merely some fragile communal psychic attachment, but a considerable dimension of institutionalized social life in modernity.

Globalization has brought about not just an increasing rapprochement of previously exclusive societies and peoples, but equally and more significantly, almost alarming anxiety in these societies and individuals with regards to the attribute of their place and identity in the so-called global world (Goswami, 2010). In the global context, the nature of the identity of a nation or people invariably defines its space. Globalization equally means the intermingling of different people and identities as well as the penetration of the social space by distance.

Giddens (1990) refers to the transformation of time and space as the disembodiment of the social system, i.e. the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite periods and space. These new temporal and spatial features, which result in the compression of distance and time scales are among the most symbolic aspects of globalization affecting cultural identities. All means of fine writing, drawing,

painting, photography and even social media platforms turn their subjects into spatial and temporal dimensions. It is worth mentioning that greater global interconnectedness has resulted in the breakdown of all strong cultural identities and produced a fragmentation of cultural codes and cultural pluralism on a global scale.

Since identities have been theorized as constituted within, and not outside representation, new forms of media such as social networking sites allow constituting diaspora as new kinds of subjects and enable them to discover places from which to speak. WhatsApp can be identified as such a place where diasporic individuals find a way to create (and recreate) their identity, as it allows them to recognize their different parts and histories, to construct points of identification and positionalities, which they call their 'cultural identities' (Hall as cited in Mirzoeff, 2000).

Theoretical framework

The paper adopts a social constructivist approach, which reiterates understanding the multiple meanings individuals make of the phenomenon under study. Social constructivism is a humanities theory that explores how knowledge and understanding of the world are developed by people. The theory assumes that understanding, significance, and meaning are developed in coordination with other human beings (Amineh & Asl, 2015). In the cyberspace, the apparent absence of a pre-discursive reality encourages the adoption of constructivist frameworks. Social constructivists affirm the effect of the social environment, culture, identity, and religion on how people construct their realities about their world. Meaning is developed through the interactions of social processes involving people, language, and religion (Berger & Luckman as cited in Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004). They see people as developing meanings for their activities together; that is, people 'socially' construct reality (Williamson, 2000). Also, social constructivists state that meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities such as interaction and collaboration (Amineh & Asl, 2015). In this research, WhatsApp provides the immediate (technological) context of interaction apart from the social context of members' diasporic status as Nigerians. A constructivist approach explores the meanings that members socially construct through their interaction on WhatsApp platform and brings to bear their diverse perceptions. According to Shunk (2000), one emphasizes peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, web quests, anchored instruction, and other methods that involve collaboration with others. Hence, it was critical to adopt the social construct theory as the

theoretical framework through which the methods in this study were applied and the data interpreted.

Thus, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the motivations for identifying with the WhatsApp group?
- How do diasporas perceive the WhatsApp group?

The cyberspace is a bottomless pit capable of retaining a huge amount of information, and in most cases this information are automatically archived, so online researchers have a quantum of data at their disposal. The paper employs netnography; an online qualitative research method originated by Kozinets (2010, 2015). Netnography is an online research method that is coined out of ethnography. Precisely, it is used to explore virtual communication, and it is rooted in participant/non-participant observation. Since computer-mediated-communication (CMC) is growing at an alarming rate, there is a need to have a research method that is cyber-centric, and netnography is ideal. The study adopts netnography due to its affordance and the flexibility of investigating the WhatsApp platform because the needed data for the study have been automatically archived online. The methodology could be described as a multiplicity of qualitative methods (Udenze, 2019). Furthermore, Schau & Gully (as cited in Udenze, 2019) write that netnography breaks down the self-presentation strategies that are used to construct a 'digital self'. WhatsApp is computer-mediated, and the information on the platform is multimedia. WhatsApp allows a maximum of 256 members in a group, and it permits these individuals to chat simultaneously. Also, the information that is shared on WhatsApp is automatically archived. The WhatsApp platform was investigated adopting non-participant observation, and conversations on the platform which form primary data for this study were downloaded and analyzed. This approach is taken to understand the rich and complex interactions that occurs on the WhatsApp platform and the perceptions of its members as a community, and as conduit pipe for constructing identity.

The study adopts a qualitative research design approach. We used Kozinets' steps in conducting a qualitative netnographic study:

- Planning an entrance: This is the first stage of conducting a netnographic research. This entails identifying a suitable online space for the study. The papers shows that we identified a diasporic WhatsApp group and decide to explore it.
- Data collection: After identifying the study space, data collection started immediately. The study collected three types of data automatically archived written communication that occurs on the platform, the

authors' self-authored field notes, and one-on-one interviews. The data collection period lasted for four months from February to May 2019.

- Data analysis: A mixture of narrative and thematic analysis were employed in analyzing data from the platform. However, scholars recommend various methods of data analysis.
- Reporting the finding: The final step is reporting the findings from the data analysis.

This paper explores WhatsApp, its uses and understanding in everyday settings for identity and community construction by Nigerians in the diaspora. A netnographic study of the platform appears to be an ideal methodological starting point and the netnographic site for this study. Since the aim of this research has been to examine the online diasporic space of Nigerians on WhatsApp through the eyes of its members, a netnographic study encompassing qualitative methods of online interviews and observations, along with the study of archived comments, helped generate data that were analysed through the methods of coding, narrative analysis and interpretation.

Since the primary objective of this study assesses the online diasporic space of Nigerians through WhatsApp, a netnographic study that encompasses qualitative methods of online interviews, observations, and the analysis archived comments helped generate data that were analyzed through the methods of coding, narrative analysis, and interpretation. The comments were analyzed using cross-case and within the qualitative textual analysis, also known as thematic analysis.

It is pertinent to reiterate that for ethical concern, the study used pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the members of the WhatsApp group. Besides, we demanded permission from members of the group before quoting their comments. This is essential in order to assure the research participants that the extracted comments are solely for research purpose and nothing more.

The population of the study is young Nigerians in the United States, specifically, students. The number of persons on the WhatsApp platform is forty five (45), the study purposively adopted this number as the sample size. The justification for adopting the number as the sample size is due to the fact that it forms a census of a small population.

Despite the efforts put into conducting the study, there is some limitation to the study. Firstly, the population of the study is one limitation that further studies should improve upon. Secondly, the timeframe (4 months) is equally a limitation. We would like to see further studies that would take longer periods investigating a similar phenomenon. Eventually, the study adopts a qualitative

approach. It is pertinent to explore other methodological approaches, say, quantitative, dual methodology, amongst others.

Findings/Discussion

This section starts with the analysis of interviews, the strategy of coding was employed, whereby themes that were dominant in the interviews were adopted and further analyzed. For instance, in order to address the core research question, we asked the interviewees about their motivation for identifying with the WhatsApp platform and their perception of the platform as a 'community'.

The theme discussed below emerged when the participants were asked their reasons for identifying with the platform.

Sense of belongingness, 'Nigerianness'. All six interviewees attest that they needed a sense of belongingness that is why they joined the group. Since almost every person on the WhatsApp platform is Nigerian, there is this feeling of 'Nigerianness' that exudes in the group. A respondent puts it thus: '... of course most of us, if not all of us are Nigerians. That sense of oneness in our discussions...' Another research participant says: 'When I was introduced to this platform I felt at home, and in fact, the discussion about "naija" is so interesting, and of course being among your fellow students there is that togetherness it creates'. Since the majority of the members on the group are Nigerian students, there is this feeling of oneness as reiterated by the interviewees. Interviewee number 6 confirmed the opportunity the platform provides in terms of companionship. These comments indicate the construction of the Nigerian identity. It is obvious that 'Nigerianness' resonates in their statements; '... the group is a great companion at all time, and with your mobile, it is always there for you. The fun, the chit-chat and jokes all bring us together. And something when you miss out of a joke you have a feeling that you are not the part of the platform'. This discovery corroborates Mistry's (2001) assertion that isolation and being homesick may engender robust diasporic online engagement.

To be informed/Seeking information. This theme reoccurred in six interviews. The interviewees aver that the group is a huge source of information. Keles's (2016) thought about the tendency for online diasporic communities to create a degree of trust and mutual reciprocity by requesting or accepting friendship, membership, online assistance amongst others based on common ethnicity, memories and experiences buttresses this finding. According to Interviewees 2, 3 and 4, information is needed in everyday navigating of the city and even school. Interviewee 2 says: '... most times I have to ask questions on the platform about my movement in the city and school <...> like when I was

searching for accommodation this group helped me a lot. I was new here, and I didn't know much about this place', says Interviewee number 4. Interviewee number 3 posits that they were able to do their documentation in school because of the information they garnered from their fellow school mates on the platform. From the response of Interviewee 1: '... there numerous information on our group, from job postings, news and gossips. Just sieve through and you may find contents that concern you...'

Networking. Majority of the interviewees submit that the platform encourages networking, the building of strong ties. Some of the members do not know one another face-to-face but the platform has engendered some sort of close and strong ties. According to Interviewee number 5, '...we talk about our aspirations and careers, and share ideas that may be beneficial to us in the future <...> I have met so many inspiring persons on this platform, and I have made them part of my strong networks. I don't know where I might need their assistance tomorrow (*laughs*)'. Interviewee number 1 avers that '...arguments may ensue sometimes but I don't treat anybody on the group with disdain. I respect everyone's opinion because you may not know anyone's worth at the moment...' These salient responses confirm the platform's ability to engender networking, though it is for the members of the group to make a conscious effort in making sure they put it to good use just as Interviewee 1 observed. According to Interviewee number 3, '... this is a community of diverse opinions with different personalities, and one has to be careful so as not to strain relationships...' These thoughts serve to reiterate what Tynes (2007) avers, that online diasporas must remain connected to each other online, and they should also produce contents that reflect their identity, beliefs, and shared values.

Pastime and socializing. All the interviewees submit that the platform enables them to enjoy fun time and equally socialize; '...whenever I am bored I always pray that some jokes and chatting are going on the group...'; '... of course making friends and cracking jokes is part of what I love about the platform'; '... especially in the evening, after school hours, the rate which laughable chats drop is alarming, and sincerely it is part of my evening, though I don't participate that much but I read almost every comment and have a good time all by myself...' Interviewee number 6 opines, '... we fraternize a lot and the hobnobbing, especially at weekends, is so interesting, and whenever someone drops a controversial statement...'. As stated earlier, Johnston et al. (2013) confirm that online media are bridging tool in creating virtual relationships among migrants. This affirms the findings of the study on how the participants socialize on the WhatsApp platform.

Sense of community. The interviewees agree that the online WhatsApp platform creates a sense of community among them. Respondents 2, 4, 6 aver that in as much as they share similar features, the platform facilitates a sense of community in them. In the thought of Respondent number 4, ‘... I feel at home on this group, in fact, I feel that I am in Nigeria whenever we discuss especially when it has to do with Nigerian topics’. And Respondent number 6 says: ‘... being from Nigeria and almost everybody in this group is Nigerian, I am compelled to have this nostalgic feeling of home, and it is like “naija” on WhatsApp...’ The above responses exemplify Vertovec’s (2000) explanation of diaspora as a social form, underlining that social relationships in the diaspora emerge as a result of similar origins and circumstances and involves solidarity with co-ethnic members in their collective longing for their country. Similarly, Interviewee 2 posits that ‘this virtual community to me is like a real community because I get supports from members of this group <...> and the collectiveness of doing things is very encouraging’. Furthermore, these assertions reveal that members are guided by the common circumstances and that they are able to create an imagined community which carries some characteristics of their homeland culture.

Clique formation. Though members confirm that the group serves as a community but there is the challenge of selected responses. Respondents 1 and 5 reiterate that there are cliques on the platform, and these cliques sometimes do not respond to posts from non-clique members. ‘I remember when I was new to the group, it was as if I wasn’t making sense whenever I make a post on the platform <...> I also noticed that some members of the group respond to a certain post regardless of the content as far as it is from some person’, Respondent 5 asserted. According to Respondent 1, ‘though it is a sort of community for people like me, I feel like I don’t have the utmost acceptance in the group <...> it took some hours or even days for my comments to be responded to’.

Face-to-face contact. Despite their living in an imagined community, some respondents still believe that having face-to-face contact is essential. In the words of Respondent 2: ‘I wish we could all meet someday and have a natural discussion’. Respondent 4 says: ‘Did we all know each other very well, we could probably arrange a “get-together” but most of us live far away’. These thoughts portray that members of the group wish they could meet face-to-face, but as exemplified in literature, time and space it is a challenge in this regard. Giddens refers to this challenge as the transformation of time and space and its disembodying of the social system, that is, the dismembering of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time and space. These responses corroborate Giddens assertion.

Analyzing conversation thread

After observing the WhatsApp platform as non-participant observers, the paper shows comments that capture the research questions. For convenience of analysis, we copied the automatically archived comments from the platform. This analysis starts with considering the theme ‘To be informed/Seeking information’ as discovered in the interview. The comments below buttress or corroborate the theme.

Informed/Seeking information

[6:14 AM, 6/3/2019] JJ Nile: Pls can some1 help me with the location of where I can buy I good battery for my phone. I nid assistance ASAP...

[7:14 PM, 10/3/2019] D Boss: Does anybody hv the current gmat brochure, soft copy will do. Am planning to wryt an exam. Please guys help me out I must not fail oo.

[11:20 AM, 11/3/2019] D Boss: Tnx @ Rocket Guy, I got the material God please you

[9:12 AM, 15/4/2019] Amaka: Good morning. Does anyone know a good neighbourhood in Houston for a gud n affordable accommodation? My cuzin is seriozly searching for one. He doesn't mind sharing with 1 or 2 pips...

[10:12 PM, 15/4/2019] Dulls: @ Amaka, I know som guyz in HS I will PM u later. I hope it helps

The statements above are excerpts from the WhatsApp platform. These comments go further to corroborate statements from the interviews as discussed earlier. From the above statements, we can ascertain that the members are seeking for information, and they got some responses.

Identity: ‘Nigerianess’

[11:32 AM, 7/3/2019] Wuraz: My egusi has finished oooo, wahala dey! Any G close by dat wud dat will help a broda with som...

[12:12 AM, 7/3/2019]: Mustify\$: My guy you rily have 2 get dis egusi ooo. I have som sha but hw do I send it to u. I am in Utah ooo

[12:25 AM, 7/3/2019] Wuraz: Dats some distance 4rm my end here @ Mustify. America wahala. I hv to endure. D pro is dis stuf is expensive here...

[1:12 PM, 7/3/2019] Emekus: Dat's why naija is bae. U won't be looking for dis stuff lyk dis in naija oo. D nearest mart U ve got wat u want. But here! Na problem...

Studying the comments above, we can come to the same argument on identity, particularly cultural identity, as Hall (1992). Hall asserts that cultural identity is the aspect of our identities which arises from our being a member of

a distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and above all national culture. Apparently, Egusi soup is synonymous with Nigeria's ethnic groups, hence its cultural identity.

The comments below were discussed during the just concluded 2019 Elections, and it is certain that the commentators exhibited their identity and 'Nigerianness'.

[10:02 AM, 16/3/2019] Bilal: Naija wil be boiling now, electns at the corner. Who r usupporting??

[10:08 AM, 16/3/2019] Dulue: Suppoting? Wen I cannot vote 4frm here. But it seems Atiku is pulling some stunts...

[10:11 AM, 16/3/2019] Bilal: Even if we r not voting I know som of us alrdy hv a candidate at hrt. ObvioslyDulue is rooting for Atiku. Atikulating thins

[10:14 AM, 16/3/2019] Debbie: U can imagine, becos we r nt in naija @ d moment we r alrdy disenfranchised. But we r Nigerians. Pple in diaspora shud be able to vote

[10:16 AM, 16/3/2019] Kisha: Diaspora voting? Wen will it happn? Dis guys r not rdy to include doz in diaspora in politics. We r just neglected.

[10:18 AM, 16/3/2019] Dubem: By d way if u calculate d remittances pple in diaspora are doing u will be maveled. Since am nt voting aint worried.

[10:21 AM, 16/3/2019] Kisha: @Dubem, exactly!

These comments reiterate the interest diasporas have in politics. They are not ignorant of their contributions to their homeland. There have been calls for diaspora voting in Nigeria but these agitations have not been implemented. These assertions confirm Brinkerhoff (2009) argument that digital diasporas foster democratic values, and also contribute to security and socio-economic development of their homeland.

Socializing/Pastime. Having studied the platform for a number of months, it was discovered that members enjoy the pleasure of social camaraderie. Observing the comments latently, the study shows the excitement that members exhibit in the group. Excerpts below prove our statement:

[8:44 PM, 6/5/2019] Kings: Listening to a naija song now n cant undastnd wat d nigga is trying to say. Some artists shud calm dwn n lrn from d legends abeg...

[8:45 PM, 6/5/2019] Bilal: whchartistisalegndinNigeria?

[8:47 PM, 6/5/2019] Rob ^ ^ : Ask him oooo

[8:49 PM, 6/5/2019] Kings: 2baba is there naa, Whizkid, Davido....

[8:50 PM, 6/5/2019] Bilal: 4get Daviso. I don't regard as a legnd. I can manage Whizzy. 2baba is a true legnd

[9:03 PM, 6/5/2019]: Wuraz: Despite wat, naija musicians r trying. Dats a big industry mypple...

Overall, most discussions in the group exude socialization and fun. Other excerpts from the platform as discussed above are equally fun and interesting. There is a huge amount of automatically archived data on the group, but we tried to choose the most indicative and diverse comments.

Conclusion

The main objective of the study investigates the motivation behind Nigerians living in the US (diasporas) use of WhatsApp for building community and constructing identity online and how they perceive the platform. To tackle this research objective, two themes were identified from the questions in the interviews: the motivation to identify with the platform and its perception as a community. It is pertinent to state that the identified themes coincidentally formed the research questions of the study. Consequently, seven themes were generated from the interviewees' responses to the interview questions, which serve to present their experiences and understanding of the platform. The themes – 'Sense of belongingness; Nigerianness', 'To be informed/Seeking information', 'Networking', and 'Pastime and socializing' – described their motivations for identifying with the group. While the themes of 'Sense of community', 'Clique formation', and 'Face-to-face contact' emerged as their perception of the WhatsApp group as a community and the resulting camaraderie on the group.

Additionally, the study enquired how members engage in the construction of diasporic identity through their online interaction. In answering this research question, the study relied on online interviews, observation, and analyzed thread/comments from the group. The complete analysis showed that members use the platform for discussing issues that directly and indirectly relate to development of Nigeria, and also the articulation of their Nigeria identity. The youngsters construct their diasporic identity in a new country, via interactions that strengthen their sense of national identity and regular discussions on Nigeria cuisines, 'naija' music, and Nigerian politics demonstrate their allegiance to their homeland. It can be argued that although diasporic groups on social media like WhatsApp do emerge as a substitute space for the diaspora to engage in identity and community construction, there has not been much research in this area. It is recommended that there should be more scholar attention to the study domain.

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