

Self-Esteem as a Mediator between Social Media and Communication Skills: A Case Study of Undergraduate Students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania, Mwanza Campus

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Abstract- This study seeks to investigate the extent to which self-esteem plays a mediating role between social media and communication skills among undergraduate students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania, Mwanza Campus. It aims to achieve this by (1) Identifying the extent of the use of social media by undergraduate students (2) Exploring the nature of information shared among undergraduate students in social media (3) Determine the extent of the interrelationship between use of social media and communication skills (4) Examine the extent of the interrelationship between social media and communication skills as moderated by self-esteem (5) Assess whether social class moderates the relationship between self-esteem and communication skills. In view of the background and literature review, it was found that students use and access various kinds of information on social media which influences their self-esteem. Also, self-esteem plays a role between social media and communication skills. It was also found that social class moderates both self-esteem and communication skills of social media users. The study concluded that social media has a profound influence on the self-esteem of online users. There is need by users to ensure that they use social media to boost their self-esteem and thus enhance their communication skills. There is also need to ensure that regardless of social class, self-esteem and communication skills should be improved at all times.

Index Terms- Social media, self-esteem, undergraduate students, university, youth, communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media has become popular all over the world with more people especially youth in various higher learning institutions using it to communicate to their friends, relatives, colleagues and business partners among others (Berkman, 2013). Social media continues to play an increasingly important part of their lives, also, it has become of age and continued to evolve with new applications and uses (Berkman, 2013). The curiosity into other people's personal and social lives has created a massive social gathering on the World Wide Web (Smith-Duff, 2012). This curiosity and use of social media can influence their self-esteem and eventually have a bearing on their communication skills (Ahn, 2011; Pomery, *et.al.*, 2012). The

youth construct their identity by carefully articulating their personality and paying close attention to how they present themselves to others (Sundar, 2008). The advent of social media has enhanced the need for this self-articulation as youth project online personalities that may not necessarily be accurate (Ellison, *et.al.*, 2007; Heine, *et.al.*, 2008). Social media users are often exposed to details about their peers' lives which makes them compare their achievements (Zuo, 2014) which can either improve if their peers have achieved less or destroy their self-esteem if these peers appear to be more successful in life than them (Toma, *et.al.*, 2013; Pomery, *et.al.*, 2012).

Communication and self-esteem have an interrelationship (Aslan, *et.al.*, 2009; Rajab & Attirah, 2010). Our self-esteem affect not only the way we feel about ourselves, the way we interpret messages and our personal performance but also the way we deliver messages and treat other people (Pearson Education, 2009). People with high self-esteem tend to have better communication skills and effective relationships while those with low self-esteem lack confidence and effective communication skills (Van Thompson, 2014). This study therefore seeks to investigate the extent to which self-esteem plays a mediation role between the use of social media and one's ability to communicate effectively.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Social media has immense contributions to the world of communication and therefore cannot be disputed (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Distance is no longer a major issue since people can easily communicate at the click of a respective communication gadget such as I pads, mobile phones, laptops or desktop computers among others (Volkmer, 1999; Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). University students all over the world utilize the benefits of social media when sharing a variety of issues they deem important (Council for Advancement and Support in Education, 2013). In spite of the benefits accrued by undergraduate students in the use of social media (Henderson, 2012), there seems to be a negative effect on their communication skills (Van Thompson, 2014) which could be attributed to their self-esteem. Mientka (2013) argues that social media users may portray a highly accurate sense of self from the images created and maintained online. Also, people with lower self-regard tend to worry more about what others post about them

on social networks, whereas those with higher self-esteem tend to spend more time building their personal brand, adding increasingly more information about their likes, dislikes, opinions, and perceptions and in effect, those people exhibit a greater sense of personal agency (Mientka, 2013). Conversely, those with more neurotic tendencies spend more time monitoring their Facebook wall, deleting unwanted posts from others (Mientka, 2013). According to Soltero and Kierce (2012), all forms of social media to some extent measure the levels of popularity, reach or 'effect' that each of their interactions has with their online community such as likes, comments and shares. Soltero and Kierce (2012) also point out that self esteem of individuals suffers when they compare their own achievements to those of their online colleagues who seem to be more successful in various spheres of life. A student with low self-esteem experiences intense emotional effects since they have less confidence or control over their lives and may be easily influenced by others (Southern Connecticut State University, 2013). Many times, others can identify someone with low self-esteem and take advantage of them by coercing them into doing things they wouldn't normally do (Southern Connecticut State University, 2013).

Low self-esteem can affect a student's relationships with significant others since they do not like themselves and as a result, it is difficult to truly like others and share themselves with other people (Southern Connecticut State University, 2013). Academic success can also be adversely affected because students with low self-esteem may lack the motivation and confidence to succeed in their studies and may even prevent them from completing projects and engage in self-sabotage so that they purposely fail (Southern Connecticut State University, 2013). In addition, they may end up engaging in drug addiction and other related behaviors and even take out their frustrations on others (Southern Connecticut State University, 2013). On the other hand, undergraduate students whose self-esteem has been adversely affected as a result of using social media lack effective communication skills which can also negatively affect their interpersonal relationships (Baldwin, *et. al.*, 2004). This is because they cannot handle criticisms objectively because they perceive themselves as inferior to those they interact with in social media and who post information and images about their achievements (Baldwin, *et.al.*, 2004).

In addition, low self-esteem undermines a person's ability to communicate confidently and effectively in different contexts and if it is a student, academic performance will be negatively affected (Baldwin, *et.al.*, 2004). This is mainly because academic success not only relies on proper interpretation and articulation of issues but also in the ability to apply the same knowledge into various spheres of life (Baldwin, *et.al.*, 2004). Having a low self-esteem negatively influences a students' courage to express ideas since they believe they are not worthy, which in turn makes them send a contradicting message (Baldwin, *et.al.*, 2004). In addition, they lack the assertiveness to express themselves adequately (Baldwin, *et.al.*, 2004).

In the foregoing scenario, self-esteem seems to be influencing communication skills of social media users. However, to what extent does it play a mediation role between use of social media and one's ability to communicate effectively? How does it play the mediation role? These and many other

questions prompted the researcher to delve into this study with specific reference to undergraduate students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania, Mwanza Campus.

1.2 Objectives

The study had five objectives;

- (i) To identify the extent of use of social media by undergraduate students.
- (ii) To explore the nature of information shared by undergraduate students in social media.
- (iii) To determine the extent of inter-relationship between social media and communication skills.
- (iv) To examine the extent of inter-relationship between social media and communication skills as moderated by self-esteem.
- (v) To assess whether social class moderates the relationship between self-esteem and communication skills.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND (LITERATURE REVIEW)

1.1 Extent of use of social media

Social media sites provide various literacies (Richardson, *et.al.*, 2007). First, social media provides users with *technological literacy* where users develop simple skills (Fuentz, 2013). All social networks rely on advanced Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that work to build and support technological literacy for people which in turn helps learners to link in an economy and become valuable contributors (Fuentz, 2013). Secondly, social media provide *critical content literacy* which is the ability to effectively use search engines and understand how they "order" information, who or what organizations created or sponsored the information and where the information comes from and its credibility and/or nature (Richardson *et.al.*, 2007). Third is the *Communicative and social networking literacy* which involves an understanding of the many different spaces of communication on the web namely the formal and informal rules that govern or guide what is appropriate behavior, level of privacy (and therefore level of safe self-disclosure for each) and how to deal with unwanted or inappropriate communication through them (Richardson *et.al.*, 2007). Fourth, *creative content and visual literacy*, which is in addition to the skills to create and upload image and video content which includes an understanding of how online visual content is edited and "constructed," what kind of content is appropriate and how copyright applies to their activities (Richardson, *et.al.*, 2007). Lastly, in terms of literacy is *Mobile media literacy* which involves familiarity with the skills and forms of communication specific to mobile phones (for instance, text messaging), mobile web literacy, and an understanding of mobile phone etiquettes (Richardson, *et.al.*, 2007).

Social media provide education as shown in much interest in schools, universities and other higher learning institutions in the potential of social media to leverage or complement formal educational activities and enhance learning outcomes (Notley & Tacchi, 2005). Although e-learning frameworks are now integrated into most educational settings, the use of social media is less comprehensively utilized (Notley & Tacchi, 2005).

Social media allow *creativity* (Collin, *et.al.*, 2010). Rapid uptake of digital technologies has opened up unprecedented possibilities for amateur users to create and distribute content (Burgess *et.al.*, 2006) such that media users have become producers (Bruno, 2008). User-generated content describes both the generation of original creative content and remixed content that creatively reworks or repurposes existing content (Collin *et.al.*, 2010).

Social media are increasingly important for the expression of identity (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This articulation is not merely narcissistic, but supports critical peer-based sociality (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Because social media are essentially flexible and designed to promote individual customization young people use social media to experiment as well as find legitimacy for their political, ethnic, cultural or sexual identity (Valtysson, 2010).

Young peoples' use of social media is important for strengthening interpersonal relationships, especially when online and offline worlds converge (Collin *et.al.*, 2010). Having positive interpersonal relationships is an important predictor of well being (Hartup & Stevens, 1999) and can buffer individuals from many of the key stressors that characterize the transition from childhood to adulthood (Hartup, 2000).

Social media constitute new spaces for civic engagement and political participation including information sharing and bringing together new networks for action utilizing email, user-generated content and other networking practices (Vromen, 2007). For young people who do not consider their participation in civic or issue-based activities as "political" in the traditional or institutional sense, SNS are considered more important than "civic sites" (Collin *et. al.*, 2010).

Social media functionality has a key role to play in strengthening social connectedness, self -efficacy, general knowledge and/or life skills and is critical for the promotion of young peoples' overall mental health and wellbeing (Burns & Morey, 2009). The personalization of social media profiles is not only important to young peoples' relationship with others but is positively associated with the individual's sense of self -efficacy or personal agency (Notley & Tachhi, 2005).

1.1.1 Use of social media in Tanzania

Tanzania has seen an increase in online publishing (Nalwoga, n.d). Currently, politics in Tanzania dominates social networks and as such, new platforms have allowed people to divert their attention to online networking where people comment and express their views on an appropriate method of shaping the country's system of administration, as well as criticizing it (Joseph, 2012). However, there is limited freedom of expression and association with the Tanzanian Government being accused of blocking websites and blogs it perceives as a threat (Nalwoga, n.d). One such website is *JamiiForums.com*, which has become a target for the Tanzanian Government (Jamii Forums, 2011). The website publishes and discusses topics ranging from politics and economics to social issues in Tanzania and beyond and on average, over 20,000 people visit the forums daily and spend at least seventeen minutes browsing at least eleven pages per person (Jamii Forums, 2011).

However, on a number of occasions, the forum has come under attack by the government over allegations that it was

working to "undermine" the ruling party and the government (Jamii Forums, 2011). In April 2011, the forum's hosts reacted with a press release reassuring their members that the government's allegations were intended to threaten and deter the online community from exercising their freedom of speech and association (Jamii Forums, 2011). The forum's hosts have also, on a number of occasions, been interrogated by the authorities over content that irked the government (Jamii Forums, 2011).

In a recent BBC article, it was reported that the Tanzanian Government is cloning the *Jamii Forums* website in an attempt to control content produced on that website (Allen, 2011). Although the government has not come out and admitted this new allegation, it was believed that it was attempting to institute a mechanism through which content on social media sites can be controlled or even censored, as seen in China (Allen, 2011).

1.1.2 Use of social media by undergraduate students

Unlike Tanzanian universities, Kenyan universities continue to lead the way in the use of social media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In a recent survey by research firm CPS International, Kenyan universities lead other East African countries in the use of and accessibility to ICT in education, followed by Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and lastly Burundi (Ng'anga, 2012). The survey also showed that Kenya invested more heavily in ICT than other East African countries of which Tanzania is included while Burundi invested the least (Ng'anga, 2012). However, according to various scholars (Mahai, 2012; Shembilu, 2013), there is very scanty research that has been published on issues to do with ICT and social media use among undergraduate students in Tanzanian universities.

The extensive distribution and growth of SNSs, has drawn the attention of researchers, leading to a wide range of studies focusing on uses and social implications of SNSs (Karim, *et.al.*, 2014). Most students in universities are motivated to use Facebook so as to learn about their classmates and keep in touch with them and to help them pass time and be entertained (Acquisti & Gross, 2006). Students in universities use social media such as Facebook in order to facilitate social relationships with their friends rather than parents and strangers (Pempek, *et.al.*, 2009).

A number of studies (Sheldon, 2008; Pempek *et al.*, 2009; Reich, *et al.*, 2012; Tosun, 2012) reported that nurturing or maintaining existing relationships has been the most mentioned motivation for using Facebook, also, seeking new relationships has been a frequently mentioned objective for using Facebook. Other motives that have sometimes been reported include enhancing one's reputation (being cool), avoiding loneliness, keeping tabs on other people, (seeing who has joined on Facebook or what they are doing), and entertainment (Joinson, 2008; Sheldon, 2008; Tosun, 2012). In most universities in East Africa, students own mobile phones and are completely engrossed in the social media craze as they peruse through various social networks (Mugera, 2013).

2.2 Nature of information shared on social media

Developmental psychologists have long identified the early 20s as a crucial time for learning and applying problem solving skills (Commons, *et al.*, 1989). Ideally, the college experience

rapidly advances students' cognitive development and they are often asked about differences in viewpoint, what aspects of a topic may remain unexplored, and how a piece of knowledge or an issue may serve as a call for individual action later in life (Head & Eisenberg, 2011). At the same time, students must perform information-seeking tasks for school, work, and their personal, daily lives, often for the first time (Head & Eisenberg, 2011). As a result, information-seeking activities may be equally or more complex for students than those undertaken by full-fledged adults who have already adjusted to life at large (Rieh and Hilligoss, 2008).

A parade of new digital technologies has been a constant feature in most of their lives. For this generation, information-seeking strategies are being formed, practiced, and taught (Head & Eisenberg, 2008). These methods are put to the test in the vast information landscape of their college years (Head & Eisenberg, 2008). Undergraduates struggle with finding different kinds of contexts (namely big picture, language, situational, and information gathering) when conducting course-related research, and to a lesser extent, everyday life research (Head & Eisenberg, 2009; 2008).

More recently, a 2010 study reports how different generations use the Internet, including millennials or those born between 1977 and 1992 (Zickuhr, 2010). All in all, the study found millennials (676) respondents frequently engage in a variety of information-seeking activities using the Internet (Zickur, 2010). They rely on search engines to do so with a majority of them searching for health, news, purchasing, and trip planning information (Zickur, 2010).

In particular, the data have measured college students and their increased use of the Internet for social communication (Head & Eisenberg, 2011). A large body of scholarly studies has also delved into college students and their use of social network sites, specifically to acquire online social capital (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, *et al.*, 2007; Valenzuela, *et al.*, 2009). The impact of social media has extended to the health care domain, as consumers seeking health information online have begun to share their experiences and knowledge (Wicks *et al.*, 2010).

Social media users follow their colleague's personal health experiences or updates, to remember or memorialize other people who suffered from a particular health condition and died, get health information, raise money for or draw attention to a health related issue, post comments, queries, or information about health or medical matters or start or join a health related group (Fox, 2011).

2.3 Relationship between social media and communication skills

Social media has the potential to become the primary means of communication among youth although it has an effect on their communication skills (Huang, 2010). Popular social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter have become mainstream methods for communication across the board as it has become well integrated into our lives (Huang, 2010). According to *Displacement Hypothesis*, time spent on social media replaces time spent on important communication experiences like face-to-face interaction (Huang, 2010). Valkenburg and Peter (2007) argue that online contacts are superficial with weak-tie relationships that lack feelings of affection and commitment which reduces the quality of relationships and well-being. Social

media sites appear more attractive but are ultimately leaner and less satisfying medium of human interaction which increases a sense of loneliness (Song, *et al.*, 2014).

Weiser (2001) observed that university students who use social media for personal rather than social purposes had problems associated with depression, life satisfaction and loneliness. An emerging trend reveals a decline in existing face-to-face social interaction due to high social media use and communicating with colleagues with the size of social groups reducing thus affecting communication skills (Nie & Hillygus, 2002).

There is evidence suggesting that lonely people with communication challenges tend to use social media more frequently than those without such challenges (Song, *et al.*, 2014). The *Social Augmentation Hypothesis* explains that social communication via social media amplifies individuals' total social capital by providing more possibilities for interaction with others (Bessiere, *et al.* 2008). In this hypothesis, individuals who are lonely offline may be encouraged to use social media to augment their social world (Bessiere, *et al.* 2008). Despite the potential benefits for youth who engage in the various types of social networking, such as the sense of being understood and supported by peers (Selfhout, *et al.*, 2009). Excess use of social media may underhandedly inhibit proper interpersonal skill development (Wolak, *et al.*, 2003). These observations clearly point out that social media and communication skills have an effect on each other through their interrelationships (Bessiere, *et al.* 2008).

2.4 Relationship between social media and communication skills as moderated by self-esteem

Social media allow users to edit information they present on their profiles which is indicative of positive self-impressions (Toma, *et al.*, 2013). Studies on self-esteem concur that the number of online contacts one has boosts their self-esteem (Kay, 2011). In a study of undergraduate college students, participants with low self-esteem benefited from social capital acquired using Facebook (Kalpidou, 2011). Unlike traditional ways of self viewing such as a mirror, digital self-presentations provide an opportunity to present what they prefer others to see (Mims, *et al.*, 2013). The ideal and not the real self was activated by use of Facebook involvement and audience awareness (Mims, *et al.*, 2013). The profile owners derive their happiness from the number of friends they have since it reinforces their perception of and ability to maintain social links thus enhancing self-esteem (Kim & Jong-Eun, 2011).

Social media encourages the creation of new relationships, however, maintaining those relationships is the responsibility of the user (Mims, *et al.*, 2013). It was found that spending more time online relate to a larger online network and weekly contacts (Pollet, *et al.*, 2011). Social media gives an opportunity to show social skills and exchange social support (Kim & Jong-Eun, 2011). However, despite the attempts to show online support, social media users view their profile and other sites to show case their social prowess (Mims, *et al.*, 2013). The tendency by people to find life support and satisfaction through other people is a factor that creates the attraction of social media (Manago, *et al.*, 2012). Facebook users who are convinced that this social media site provides social support, had large amounts of maintained relationships (Manago, *et al.*, 2012).

If interpersonal interactions in users' online networks appear similar to that in reality then the self-disclosure increases (Joon, 2012). Social media may positively affect communication skills and self-esteem, but it can create negative issues for interpersonal relationships (Fleming, 2011). Social media sites lack the crucial face-to-face interaction needed for skill attainment (Mims, *et.al.*, 2013). The simulated interactions in the digital environment are not the same as real world interaction (Strickler, 2005) and as a result, users lack the chance to demonstrate interpersonal abilities (Doo, 2006). Previous studies have examined the effects of social media sites have on self-esteem (Mims, *et.al.*, 2013). Although self-esteem increases with online connections, the strength of these online bonds is weak (Mims, *et.al.*, 2013).

2.5 Social class and communication skills

In a study conducted by Street, Gordon, Ward, Krupat and Kravitz (2005) among patients at a health care facility between doctors and patients, doctor's information giving was positively influenced by the patient's communication style such as question asking, affective expressiveness and opinion-giving (De Laender, 2010). More affective expressiveness and being assertive on the patient's side, which is strongly related to his or her educational level leads to more information giving on the doctor's side (De Laender, 2010). More educated patient's receive more diagnostic and health information than their lower educated counterparts (De Laender, 2010).

In another study by Street, Gordon, Ward, Krupat and Kravitz (2005), a comparison was done to test the degree to which parent's personal and interactive characteristics determine the variation in doctor-parent interactions during paediatric consultations (De Laender, 2010). Social class was measured as educational level and more educated parents are not only more expressive and assertive but also ask more questions (De Laender, 2010). In another study, in a patient-doctor interaction, doctors noted that they explained and listened more to patients from higher social classes and also examined them more than those from lower social classes since those from higher social classes are more inquisitive and appear knowledgeable than those from lower social classes who were passive (De Laender, 2010).

2.5.1 Social class and self-esteem

Rosenberg and Pearlin (1978) argued that the effects of social class on self-esteem is higher in adulthood than in childhood. The social class homogeneity of many school settings shelters children from social comparisons and reflected appraisals that negatively affect self-esteem (Mc Mullin & Cairney, 2004). Social class does not influence levels of self-esteem for young men and women but does so for those in middle and older age groups (Mc Mullin & Cairney, 2004). From middle age onwards, social classes diverge in their levels of self-esteem such that men and women from lower classes experience the lowest levels of self-esteem (Mc Mullin & Cairney, 2004). Explanations for the relationship between self-esteem and social class often focus on reflected appraisals and social comparisons (Rosenberg, 1981).

Members of the working class have poor self-esteem because they are judged negatively by those with whom they interact based on their low status jobs, incomes and education (Mc Mullin & Cairney, 2004). At work, for example, managers

may perceive themselves as superior to the workers they employ and treat them accordingly (Mc Mullin & Cairney, 2004). Reflected appraisals are linked to social comparisons since members of the working class are more likely to perceive themselves as inferior those of the middle and upper social classes than vice versa (Mc Mullin & Cairney, 2004). The combination of reflected appraisals and social comparisons negatively influences self-esteem among the working class (Mc Mullin & Cairney, 2004).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was based on literature review related to the extent of use of social media by undergraduate students. It also explored the nature of information shared in social media sited by undergraduate students. Thirdly, the study determined the extent of the interrelationship between social media and communication skills. In addition, the study examined the extent of the interrelationship between social media and communication skills as moderated by self-esteem. Finally, the study assesses whether social class moderates the relationship between self-esteem and communication skills.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study established the following conclusions based on the literature reviewed:

Social media is a crucial tool in enabling users to establish and maintain useful bonds that can be used to boost their self-esteem. In addition, social media can be used to improve communication skills besides the normal interpersonal communication. However, if used inappropriately, it can also destroy the self-esteem and communication skills of users. Social class is also an aspect that can influence self-esteem and communication skills of individuals.

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