

***Bridging the Digital Divide: Empowering Ghanaian Youth Through
Prudent Internet Usage and Social Media Training***

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Abstract

The use of the Internet has significantly influenced modern human interaction and life as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become the dominant media for communication and business. Ghana, along with other countries, has witnessed a surge in Internet users, with over 23 million people accessing the Internet by the beginning of 2023. Current scholarship examines social media in various disciplines including education, banking and business. However, there are growing concerns about the efficient use of social media in Ghana. This study explored internet usage practices among the youth in Ghana, encouraging a more prudent and beneficial way of leveraging the digital landscape. The study analyzed data from a specific Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) training program by comparing it with existing national records and policies. The findings underlined an urgent demand for further training opportunities for youth in Ghana, a need that remains unmet. The study also contributes to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities of Internet usage and the impact of social media in Ghana, emphasizing the importance of NGO training initiatives and the relevance of continuous efforts to equip Ghanaians with the necessary digital skills and knowledge to make informed decisions in the ever-evolving digital era.

Keywords: Social Media, Internet, Digital Literacy

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Introduction

Social media adoption has grown rapidly in recent years and is now used in various fields such as education, communication, human capital development, social and professional interactions. As a result, the use of social media has become prominent, making digital literacy an essential and ongoing topic. The current scholarship on social media in developing economies is scanty with most of the literature concentrated on the benefits and challenges of social media. Despite scholarship on social media, internet use and ICT, little attention has been focused on training the youth on prudent Internet usage as cases of misappropriation such as the dissemination of explicit content and fraudulent activities persistently surface through social media channels. Furthermore, the already little scholarship has neglected the role NGOs play in aiding the achievement of ICT agenda in Ghana.

Researchers have advocated for the integration of the Internet in education, particularly in underserved rural areas. Others have also highlighted the revolution of the banking sector after the introduction of internet banking and the emergence of mobile money facilitating payments (Owusu et al., 2017; Owusu et al., 2020). Apart from the positive impact of social media, there are growing concerns about the negative impact of social media usage, particularly among young people (Katz and Rice 2002). The excessive use of social media for leisure activities, such as posting memes and scrolling, can lead to poor time management, negatively affecting mental health (Allcott et al., 2020) and limiting opportunities for productive activities (Zulkifli & Mohammed, 2023). Also, unwise social media use can lead to privacy concerns, increased rates of low self-esteem and suicide among young people (Zulkifli and Mohammed, 2023), and potential health issues, including mental health problems and sleep deprivation (Zulkifli and Mohammed, 2023).

A global review of the literature on social media use in Ghana showed little work on prudent use of social media among the youth. Therefore, this study investigates the importance of empowering the youth through a comprehensive understanding of social media as a powerful tool. The primary objective of the study is to explore internet usage practices among the youth in Ghana, encouraging a more prudent and beneficial way of leveraging the digital landscape. To achieve this, the study uses data from applicants and valuable feedback from participants of a two-day social media marketing boot camp and a four-day web development workshop in Ghana. The study also generates recommendations and draws conclusions by comparing these insights with existing statistical data. The outcomes of the research have significant consequences for shaping educational programs and helping young people navigate the digital landscape with responsibility, ultimately leading to the development of a society that is digitally savvy and mentally resilient.

The State of Internet in Africa and Ghana

During the past decade, there has been a significant increase in global Internet usage, particularly in Eastern Asia leading with a remarkable usage rate of 24% as of January 2023. Currently, there are about 5.48 billion unique cell phone users worldwide, which represents 64.4% of the global population. GSMA Intelligence reported a 1.9% increase from the previous year. Additionally, social media remains a crucial factor, as an estimated 8 billion individuals access social media platforms, and 4.9 billion of them are connected to the internet in 2023.

Although West Africa has an internet usage rate of around 4%, it is considerably lower in other African regions, such as Middle Africa with 1.1%, Southern Africa with 0.9%, and Northern Africa with 3.3% (Kemp, 2023). Among these regions, Ghana, a sub-Saharan African country in West Africa, distinguishes itself due to its unique circumstances as one of the most peaceful nations on the African continent.

This peaceful environment is a significant advantage enjoyed by the Ghanaian youth and the general population. Unlike several other countries, Ghana has not encountered Internet shutdowns, as seen in Sudan, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, and Somaliland. These shutdowns incurred an estimated loss of \$261 million in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2022, according to Africa Business Communities (2023) and Gagliardone and Stremlau (2022).

Ghana has seen a big surge in Internet use, especially among young people, as global Internet use has also increased. Many Ghanaians have embraced the digital age, using the Internet for business, entertainment, political campaigns, and free speech. According to Kemp (2023), as of 2023, Ghana had 23.05 million Internet users and 6.60 million social media users. Additionally, Kemp's digital report for 2023 shows that Internet usage in Ghana increased by over 1.9% from 2022 to 2023, following a global trend of similar growth.

Scholars have conducted research on Internet usage across various sectors in Ghana, covering entrepreneurship (Erogul et al., 2019), education (Yebowaah et al., 2018), banking (Owusu et al., 2017; Owusu et al., 2020), and health (Wynn et al., 2016). This array of research contributes to comprehending the potential of the Internet to foster advancement and growth in diverse areas.

In summary, while the global landscape witnessed a steady rise in Internet usage, Africa's varying adoption rates across regions underscore the need for targeted efforts to bridge this digital divide. Ghana's peaceful environment and uninterrupted Internet access are crucial assets that facilitate its integration into the digital era.

However, challenges persist, as youth grapples with the challenge of the Internet's immense possibilities and potential pitfalls. Nevertheless, the transformative potential of the Internet remains undeniable, empowering individuals to establish connections, access information, and explore new opportunities, thus making it a powerful tool for personal and societal advancement.

Share of Global Internet Users

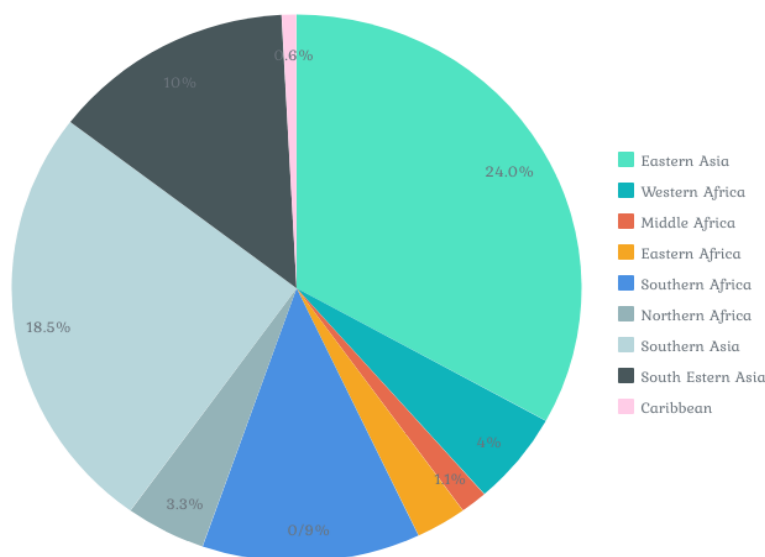


Figure 1: Share of Global Internet Users

By charting a course toward prudent Internet usage, Ghana can pave the way for an inclusive and thriving digital future where the Internet becomes a powerful ally for personal development, national progress, and global connectivity. Embracing this vision, Ghana stands poised to capitalise on the digital revolution and secure its position at the forefront of Africa's digital landscape.

Digital Literacy in Ghana

In 2003, Ghana formulated the Ghana Integrated Information and Communication Technology for Accelerated Development (ICT4AD) policy, delineating the country's vision of the digital era. Recognising this demographic dividend's transformative potential, one of the objectives of the ICT4AD policy emphasises the nation's youthful population as an economic asset. With a significant youth population within working age accounting for 60.4% of the population of Ghana, as of 2023, many Ghanaian youth still lacked essential training and access to the Internet, hindering their ability to fully participate in the digital economy.

The contribution of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) including Social Media (SM) to Ghana's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been noteworthy, accounting for approximately 3.6% and a staggering 1.7 billion dollars in 2017 (Oj & Oj, 2021). Since then, this figure has exhibited consistent growth, illustrating ICT's pivotal role in Ghana. Moreover, as Ghana evolves in the digital age, the demand for digital skills within the labour force is projected to surge, which is expected to encompass nearly nine million individuals by 2030.

However, the increased demand for digital skills brings to the forefront the pressing need to address the digital literacy gap among Ghana's youth ; as a significant portion of the young population still lacks access to quality digital training and internet connectivity, constraining

their potential to contribute actively to the country's economic growth. As Ghana positions itself to fully embrace the digital revolution, the necessity to equip youth with relevant digital skills becomes paramount.

Looking ahead to 2030, the demand for digital skills is projected to escalate even further, requiring training for an additional four million individuals (IFC, 2019b). By this time, the number of individuals in need of digital skills training was estimated to reach nearly 19 million. Failure to bridge this gap between demand and access to digital literacy may hinder Ghana's ability to fully capitalise on its youthful population's potential as a driving force for its growth and prosperity.

More comprehensive and targeted strategies are required to address this challenge. Ghana must prioritise digital literacy and education, especially in underserved regions, to ensure that all segments of the youth population can actively participate in the digital economy. Investments in digital infrastructure and the creation of accessible digital training programs can empower the youth with the necessary tools to thrive in this digital age.

In conclusion, Ghana stands at a critical juncture where the potential of its young population intersects with the digital revolution. Realising the vision of the ICT4AD policy requires an unwavering commitment to digital literacy and inclusivity. By investing in the digital education and training of the youth, Ghana can unlock its potential as an agent of economic growth, innovation, and progress, positioning the country at the forefront of Africa's digital transformation.

Theoretical Framework

For a better comprehension of how Ghana can bridge the digital divide through NGO training programs, this study delves into the nexus of social media usage and the digital landscape in Ghana. Embracing the transformative power of social media, this study employs an innovative prudent social media usage framework. Using this framework, the study uncovers the complex network of relationships that form the foundation of the digital landscape in Ghana and how it could possibly be used prudently by the youth.

The prudent social media usage framework recognizes social media as a comprehensive platform that encompasses multiple communication channels and networking tools that facilitate interactions and knowledge sharing among individuals, communities, and businesses. At the same time, it acknowledges the underpinning ICT infrastructure, good internet, political stability as the support structure that enables digital interactions, comprising the hardware, software, and networks that form the digital ecosystem. The framework further emphasizes the potential of social media as a potent driver of economic development (Song et al., 2023) that foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital empowerment.

Through the prudent social media usage framework, the issue of prudent and rational use of social media as a factor to be considered is emphasized. The framework highlights that social media in itself is not a great tool but only through its rational use.

This framework complements and helps to understand the NGO's training program that targeted the prudent use of social media. It underlines the relevance of the role NGO's play in shifting the general focus of ICT agenda alone to a more detailed concept of leveraging social media through its prudent use.

This study carefully examines data and feedback from participants of a two-day social media bootcamp and how their experience has shaped their use of social media. This in turn projects the role that training the youth on the prudent of social media can play in shaping the digital landscape in Ghana.

Methodology

The prudent social media usage framework presents a strong and comprehensive method for examining the complex nature of social media use as well as the critical role of NGO training in Ghana. Through the utilization of this conceptual lens, this study provides valuable insights that can guide policymakers, stakeholders, and entrepreneurs in harnessing the transformative potential of social media in Ghana. By adopting this extensive perspective, Ghana has the opportunity to lead the way in Africa's digital transformation and unlock new avenues to bridge the knowledge gap as well as the digital divide.

To adhere to these methodological principles, the researcher opted for a mixed research design, which enabled the capture of the intricate nuances and multifaceted nature of the research topic. The data collection process began with the dissemination of an online application form across various social media platforms in Ghana, targeting youth demographics. This approach not only facilitated swift and efficient registration but also ensured accessibility to a diverse pool of potential participants.

To further understand the motivations and interests of the applicants, comprehensive phone interviews were carried out. These interviews presented a chance for interactive dialogue, allowing the investigator to explore the perspectives, aspirations, and experiences of the participants in depth. The trainings took place on 24th June, 2023 and 18th to 22nd September, 2023 respectively.

The study is anchored on two core research questions, each designed to explore different facets of the Internet's influence on Ghana's youth.

1. What is the current state and demand for social media training among the youth in Ghana?
2. What role can NGOs play in achieving ICT agenda in Ghana?

The above questions serve as a guide in the analyses of data collected before, during and after the NGO's training program in Tamale, Ghana.

Context of the Case Study

Eduvision is an NGO in Ghana which was established to provide digital training to young girls in underserved communities in Ghana's Northern parts. As part of its training program, it organized a two-day social media bootcamp for 35 girls in Tamale, Ghana. The training took place at the Afritechlab on the 23 and 24th June 2023. The training program received girls and boys from various tertiary institutions in Northern Ghana. During the training, topics discussed included Social Media Marketing, Branding, web development and Chat GPT. At the end of the program, participants received certificates of participation and provided feedback in written and recorded video form. Selected girls were further enrolled into a mentorship program to provide academic and professional guidance.

Discussion

High Demand for Training Among the Youth

The growing presence of social media in the lives of the youth is exponential. The same can be said about the quest and curiosity for knowledge. According to the World Economic Forum, in their article *Over 2.5 Billion People Use Social Media. This Is How It Has Changed the World*, (2022), every two people out of three use social media worldwide. The same article explains that there is a higher usage of social media among young people between the ages of 18 to 24. The number of users decline among older counterparts and varies from one SM platform to the other (*Over 2.5 Billion People Use Social Media. This Is How It Has Changed the World*, 2022).

On the other hand, current research shows the average knowledge lifespan is less than two years in what researchers call “half-life of knowledge” (Kirchhoff, 2022) meaning that people need to stay abreast, upgrade and continuously learn new things to be able to catch up with the fast-paced world. According to current scholarship on social media training, many young people are exposed to lots of information daily through social media. Many of these young people go to social media to shop, read, interact with family and friends, and sometimes to simply scroll. This shows that social media has become an unavoidable part of young people’s lives.

Analyzing data from the NGO’s training program, the program received about 87 applications. Though the training targeted young Ghanaian girls between the ages of 15 and 35, applications came from boys and non-Ghanaians as well. These out of the bracket applicants explained in their application their need and demand for training even if they do not fall within the criteria for selection (see figure 2).

This shows that young people are thirsty for knowledge on how to navigate the internet sphere prudently. In the application, an Uzbekistani girl explained:

My intended major is Computer Science. As a girl in Uzbekistan, I believe that access to technology and to the knowledge about it can change my life fundamentally. I live in a remote part, near the Aral Sea, with few career opportunities. But with access to the internet and knowledge of programming, I can make a living and be more independent. It helps me to master the field of technology, increase my knowledge and create additional opportunities for myself in the future. I have already started learning independently, using online classes. However, I believe I can learn more effectively in a program with dedicated mentors and teams of other students. I am especially excited to work on a real-life project, not just a homework assignment for a class. Moreover, I hope to develop my communication skills and get exposed to people and perspectives from around the world. I want to broaden my worldview. I want to find a team of people who can help me become a mature professional in the field of technology.

The training also received applications outside the stipulated age bracket of 15 -35. It received applications from people above 35 years. About 3 percent of applicants were above the age bracket (See figure 2). 9% of applicants were boys or men while the remaining 91% were female.

How old are you?

87 responses

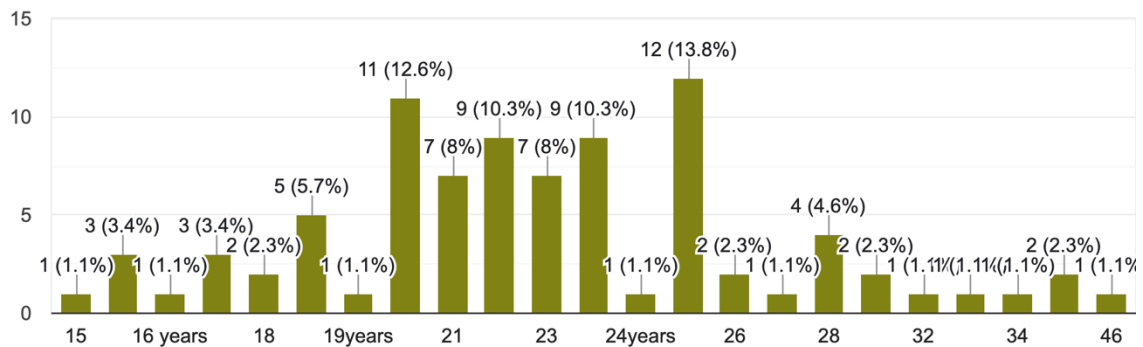


Figure 2: Age Range of Applicants

In the analyses of the data, the investigator observed the enthusiasm and the eagerness with which applicants looked forward to the training program. The interview part of the selection process showed a young populace that was eager to learn about social media and its prudent use. The selected participants had a lot of positive feedback to give and asked organizers of the training program to expand to accommodate a wider age bracket and young boys as well (See annex for some testimonials from participants of the bootcamp and workshop).

Contribution of NGOs in Achieving ICT Agenda in Ghana

NGOs have always played critical roles in every sphere of development. There are NGOs who provide help such as clean water, infrastructure, career guidance, poverty reduction (Banks & Hulme 2012), consultancy and many more to underserved communities in the world. In the world of ICT, researchers have explored the relationship between ICT and NGOs. Ghana alone boasts of hundreds of NGOs all working towards sustainable development of the country. With the rise in ICT trainings, NGOs have also tuned their agenda towards ICT trainings. With the growing need for ICT training and projected digital literacy demand in Ghana, NGOs such as Eduvison plays a great role in achieving the national ICT agenda in Ghana.

According to data gathered during the two-day training and feedback gathered after, the role of NGOs in aiding in the achievement of the ICT agenda was highlighted. Additionally, NGOs can reach far-to-reach communities through their work making it easier to bring training to rural areas. The work of Eduvison in the Northern part of Ghana received many great reviews from participants stating how happy they are that an NGO thought about them in that manner.

According to participants, most NGOs are in the Southern parts of Ghana thereby cutting them off many benefits they could have gained from such trainings. Not only do they feel cut off by NGOs but most girls in the Northern parts of Ghana do not receive the same attention and training as their counterparts in the South of Ghana.

Leveraging Social Media for Advantage

Social media can be a friendly ally or a fierce enemy depending on its usage. The benefits of Social Media usage cannot be overemphasized. During the analysis of data and feedback

from the NGO's training program, I realized that many young people know how to use social media but not for profitable ventures. In one of the reviews, a girl reiterated that:

“The bootcamp opened my eyes to what I'm missing out not using social media to my advantage.”

Many young people grew up with the idea that social media is only for chatting and interacting or just for fun preventing them from leveraging same for personal development which multiplies Ghana's benefits. Many businesses are thriving on social media while others have used same for remarkable personal branding that has opened up opportunities that they would otherwise will not have.

Additionally, navigating the digital landscape with prudence will curtail cyber-attacks on the youth and prepare them for such. Cyberbullying and internet fraud will be decreased projecting a more positive image of the country. The youth will become aware of the many other uses of social media which was not visible to them before.

Recommendations

The outcomes of this study carry significant implications for promoting sustainable and equitable internet usage in Ghana. Given these insights, it is of utmost importance for policymakers to prioritize and implement targeted strategies that aim to harness the full potential of the internet for societal development. Furthermore, it is essential for policymakers to prioritize equipping individuals with the necessary digital skills to fully capitalize on the opportunities presented by internet usage. This involves investing in comprehensive digital literacy programs that empower citizens with the knowledge and competencies needed to navigate the digital realm effectively. By strengthening digital literacy among the populace, Ghana can enhance its human capital and foster a tech-savvy workforce capable of driving innovation and productivity.

Furthermore, partnerships between government, private sector organisations, and civil society can foster an enabling environment for digital skill development, creating opportunities for mentorship, internships, and work-based learning experiences. By engaging in interdisciplinary research, stakeholders can gain insights into the specific digital skill needs of youth and tailor training programs accordingly.

In light of these recommendations, it is paramount for the Government of Ghana to take proactive measures to ensure widespread and affordable internet access for all citizens. Initiatives such as capacity-building programs and public-private partnerships can play a pivotal role in extending Internet services to underserved communities and remote regions. Additionally, establishing a dynamic regulatory body can facilitate the creation of a conducive environment that encourages private sector investment and innovation in the internet and telecommunications sector.

Conclusion

The research findings emphasize the significant role of the Internet and social media in shaping modern society, particularly in Ghana. The Internet has become an indispensable part of daily life and serves as both a formidable adversary and valuable ally, depending on its use. It is vital to understand and promote prudent use of the Internet among youth to

safeguard their mental health, privacy, and overall well-being. The study highlights the pressing need to provide comprehensive ICT training programs, such as the social media bootcamp, to equip youth with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape responsibly. By harnessing the potential of social media for personal development and life improvement, youth can leverage these platforms to their advantage, build meaningful connections, and access previously inaccessible opportunities.

This research highlights the importance of Internet literacy and its significant impact on economic growth and development. Ghana's young and vibrant population is a rich asset for the country's progress, making it crucial for policymakers to prioritize digital literacy initiatives. By bridging the digital divide and ensuring equal access to education and digital skills, youth can become active participants in the digital economy and drive sustainable economic growth. In conclusion, this research calls for a collaborative effort from all stakeholders, including government, non-profit organizations, educators, and families, to promote responsible internet and social media use. By embracing the opportunities offered by the digital age while mitigating its potential risks, Ghana can create a more inclusive, empowered, and thriving society.

To capitalise on these opportunities and address these challenges, it is imperative for every country, including Ghana, to adopt comprehensive strategies. Policymakers must prioritise digital literacy and Internet accessibility, particularly in underserved areas, to unlock the potential of Ghana's youth population and foster inclusive economic growth. Promoting gender equity and empowering the youth through social media training and awareness initiatives can create a generation of digital-savvy individuals capable of leveraging the Internet responsibly for the benefit of both themselves and the nation.

In the pursuit of digital empowerment, interdisciplinary research plays a crucial role in investigating the diverse implications of internet use across sectors such as entrepreneurship, education, banking, and health. Through evidence-based insights, Ghana can effectively optimise its strategies to harness the Internet's transformative potential.

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