

**SECRECY, SECURITY AND SOCIAL
EXCHANGE:
New Media and Cross-generational
Dating in Nigeria**

AYOBAMI OJEBODE

University of Ibadan

DIMEJI TOGUNDE

Spelman College

ABIMBOLA ADELAKUN

University of Ibadan

Although studies that examine the uses and influence of new media in Africa have always focused on national trends and mainstream groups, the peculiar appropriation of the new media by sub-cultural groups has received little attention. This paper examines the appropriation of the new media by female undergraduate students involved in cross-generational dating in southwestern Nigeria. It addresses how this group of students deploy the new media in their dating practice with older male partners, and how the new media in turn influence their activities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on three Nigerian university campuses, findings indicate that female students involved in cross-generational dating employ the new media to connect with older male partners, nurse the connections and/or to disconnect. The respondents also reveal that the new media are highly valued because they ensure secrecy, which is important in their practice of cross-generational dating. Through their utility in tracking members of the group, the new media are helpful for security purpose. The media have also come to be a status symbol within and outside the group, and to signify a currency of exchange. There is a reciprocal relationship between cross-generational dating and the use of exotic new media accessories: each accelerates and improves the other.

INTRODUCTION

The new media of communication, that is mobile telephone, internet and the accompanying social media such as Facebook and Twitter, have spread with unprecedented speed across the African continent. Although

the actual statistics may vary across countries, there is general consensus that the growth of the new media in Africa in the past decade has been tremendous. Authoritative statistics from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) (2010) shows that access to mobile phones rose from 1 in 50 Africans in 2000 to 20.5 in 50 Africans in 2010. In Nigeria, the locale of the current study, it rose to about 24.2 in 50 citizens within the same period. The Internet World Statistics (IWS) (2010) stated that the use of internet in Africa rose in ten years by 2,357.3%; in Nigeria it rose by 21,891.1% within the same period. The growth in the use of the new media can thus be described as staggering.

Communication researchers with interest in Africa have devoted substantial attention to the socio-cultural (Olorunnisola, 2009), policy (Onwumechili, 2009; Dunn and Bofo, 2010), professional (Obijiofor, 2009) and pedagogical (Steenveld, 2006) implications of the phenomenal growth in the availability of the new media. Not only this, in their bids to interrogate the different appropriations of the new media among African peoples, researchers have studied aggregate populations such as countries (Olorunnisola, 2009; Burrell, 2009; Brinkman, de Bruijn and Bilal, 2009; Molony, 2009); ethno-tribal communities (Nkwi, 2009; van Beek, 2009) and mainstream groups in the society (Steenveld, 2006). However, since we live in the age of globalization where powerful indicators such as the new media create social networks, shape social behaviours, intimate relationships and sexual mores, we discover that empirical studies that investigate how select segments of African population who engage in discreet but growing dating culture appropriate the new media are very rare. In this paper, we examine the role of the new media especially, among female university students who are involved in cross-generational dating in southwest Nigeria. Our intention is to unravel how this relatively unseen group of students deploy the new media in their dating practice, and how the new media in turn influence their activities.

The study of cross-generational dating has interested researchers from different disciplines including anthropology (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004; Masvawure, 2010); sociology (Clignet, 1977; Kuate-Defo, 2004); public health studies (Luke, 2003; Longfield, Glick, Waithaka & Berman, 2004) and legal research (Bamgbose, 2002). Yet, not only have researchers conceptualized cross-generational dating as motivated by poverty, but they have also failed largely to understand cross-generational dating as social rather than individual acts. Exceptions to this include Thornton

(2009) and Ojebode, Togunde and Adelokun (2010). In their study of cross-generational dating among female undergraduates in southwest Nigeria, Ojebode *et al.* (2010) found that this slightly hidden group of students operated indeed like a distinct group with a structure, networks and relationships, rather than as isolated individuals who exchange sex for money. According to their novel findings, the group members operate like a subculture with their own slangs, as well as defined but expectedly unwritten code of conduct. Not only this, cross-generational dating was found to be for the purposes of raising social capital for future needs not just for money and gifts for immediate gratifications (Thornton, 2009; Ojebode *et al.*, 2010).

If female students involved in cross-generational dating (also called sugar daddy dating) form groups that are both distinct and organized, it is important to examine how such a group use the new media. This is especially so given that the new media provides the user with substantial privacy in communication, one of the key ingredients which cross generational dating requires (Masvawure, 2010; Ojebode, *et al.* 2010). Different groups in society have the tendencies to appropriate the new media in different ways. Therefore, to lump a sub cultural group such as females who date “sugar daddies” together with others in country-wide or sectional studies may obscure information about the “modus operandi” (mode of operation) of this group. Such approaches also rob the research community of useful insights into the dynamics of the reciprocal relationships in which the new media shape the society (not at the macro or micro level, but at the mezzo level) and the society shapes the media (Moore, 1993 Moore, 2005).

At this juncture, it is important to note that cross-generational dating is prevalent all over the world. Kuate-Defo (2004:18) made this point effectively by citing numerous studies that demonstrate the prevalence of cross-generational dating in several African and non-African countries including Kenya, Cameroon, Tanzania, Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia, Sweden, Jamaica, South Africa, India, the Philippines and Korea. Others, such as Hughes (1999), Hughes (2000), and Sharp and Earle (2003) demonstrate the prevalence of cross-generational dating and other socially disapproved forms of sexual relationships in Europe, America and Asia. Locating our study in southwest Nigeria was purely a matter of convenience and data availability, rather than an attempt to suggest that cross-generational dating was more prevalent there than elsewhere within or outside Nigeria.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: NEW MEDIA USES AND GRATIFICATIONS

Studies of the new media—the internet and mobile phones specifically—have focused largely on their utilities and gratifications derived from the use. Although there are some scholars who do not explicitly specify the theoretical anchor for their studies, most have employed the uses and gratifications theory of the media or some of its propositions more than they have employed any other communication theory (Wei & Ven-Hwei, 2006; Hlebec, Manfreda & Vehovar, 2006; Arvidsson, 2006; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Their preference for invoking “uses and gratification theory” is understandable given the nature of the new media which, unlike the traditional media, gives the user greater control and more choices.

The uses and gratifications theory suggests that ‘... people bend the media to their needs more readily than the media overpower them’ (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1973: 164-5). Originally focused on mass media, this theory holds promise for our understanding of the new media as well. The theory presents the user as having multiple needs and actively seeking to meet these needs using the media. The notion of an active audience implies utility, intentionality and selectivity. While utility deals with uses to which people put the media, intentionality implies motivation that directs communication behaviour. Selectivity implies that users have existing interests and desires and these determine their choice of media, as well as their interpretation of the media content.

The famous thirty-five needs, identified and categorized into five by Katz *et al.* (1973), were based on Israeli respondents’ uses of the media (which included books and films). Since audiences vary, these needs have been variously re-classified. In the context of the new media, different scholars have identified different uses to which people put the media. For instance, December (1996) identified three uses of the internet: communication, interaction and information. Cho, Zúñiga, Rojas & Shah (2003) also identified three uses (surveillance, interaction and consumption) and three gratifications (learning, connection and acquisition) among internet users. With reference to the cell phone, Leung & Wei (2000) identified seven categories of need that are met by the cell phone: fashion/status (status symbol); affection/sociability (closer to people); relaxation (pleasure talk, gossips etc); mobility (no need to queue up at public phone boots); immediate access; instrumentality (business); reassurance (security and safety—having a cell phone in times of emergency).

Studies that have focused on social and integrative uses of the new media have shown that they provide social gratifications such as initiating, maintaining and strengthening social ties. Arvidsson (2006) made reference to the estimate of 15 million US residents that found a partner on the internet in 2002 and prediction that the figure would increase to 24 million by 2007. In a study among university students in Nigeria, Ibekwe (2000) discovered that students who had cell phones made fewer trips home to visit their parents, yet they felt as much in close touch with their parents as students who made more trips home. She concluded that the cell phone was used mainly to maintain family ties. In a similar study of Taiwanese college students, Wei and Ven-Hwei (2006) discovered that the cell phone was a means of strengthening users' family bonds and expanding their psychological neighbourhood.

In regard to the connection between new media and dating, Peter and Valkenburg (2007) discovered among Dutch adults that high sensation-seekers and sexually-permissive users looked for casual dates online more frequently than low sensation-seekers and sexually-restrictive users. They conclude that the internet seems to enable people to do what they have already done in the offline world, while providing them with better opportunities to tailor their interactions to meet their needs. Hlebec, Manfreda & Vehovar (2006) discovered that the internet was a major means of expanding individual networks especially among the socially de-privileged such as the divorced and single parents.

The foregoing review suggests that media users are very strategic in that they target at specific needs that they hope the media would meet. We find this to be of important relevance to our study. Cross-generational dating is a strategic practice aimed at meeting some needs of those within the social network (Thornton, 2009; Ojebode *et al.*, 2010). Studies of cross-generational dating in Africa and especially, in Nigeria, have paid no attention to the deployment of the new media and how this deployment is changing the process and practice of cross-generational dating. Given the wide access to the new media among university students in Nigeria who are mostly involved in cross-generational dating than other segments of the Nigerian population, it is important to examine if and for what purposes the media are deployed in the practice of cross-generational practice.

DATA AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

This paper builds on a previous study (Ojebode *et al.*, 2010) to examine the role of new media in the practice of cross-generational dating among

tertiary school female students in Nigeria. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with that study, we noted the disagreement in the literature regarding what constitutes cross-generational dating, especially as it relates to age difference between the partners (see also Kuate-Defo, 2004). As a result, we will reiterate that an age difference of fifteen years between partners can be defined as cross-generational dating on the assumption that a man that is older than his partner for at least fifteen years is old enough to give birth to that partner. Furthermore, we find it justifiable to rehash two concrete reasons for targeting females in higher educational institutions as the unit of analysis. First, we believe that from both theoretical and methodological standpoints, an on-campus residential living arrangement provides a nexus of networking among females, which is crucial to an explication of cross-generational dating. Second, it is common on most university campuses to see heavy traffic of older men in flashy and expensive cars in front of female hostels. As a result, we feel that it would be expedient to study educated females whose sophistication and wide access to the new media might offer new insight toward an understanding of this dating phenomenon.

We conducted ethnographic study on three campuses: the University of Ibadan, Ogun State University and Lagos State University. Most of the ladies whom we approached claimed that they were not involved in cross-generational dating. Some, however, referred us to those they knew practiced cross-generational dating. Thus, through snowballing technique (a type of non-probability sampling method), we identified and conducted in-depth interviews with eighteen female students who gave us their consent upon our promise of anonymity. These interviews were done by the third author. Our eighteen interviewees were ladies to whom we were referred. Even among them, some denied being involved in cross-generational dating or being involved 'fulltime' but offered to freely share the experiences of their friends or some people they knew who were involved. As discussions went on, these ladies often turned to the use of first person pronouns which made the stories sound much more like theirs than someone else's. Among the eighteen ladies were two who said they were involved in cross-generational dating but had discontinued the practice: one was a recent graduate who was into a small textile trade; the other a newly converted Christian. On two occasions, the interviews were conducted with pairs of ladies. This was their preference.

The difficulty faced in selecting large samples for studies of cross-generational dating and multiple-partner sexual practice has been

acknowledged. Masvawure (2010) who interviewed ten respondents and Thornton (2009) whose sample size was unstated are among others who have contended with the difficulty posed by the secrecy shrouding the entire process of cross-generational dating and multiple-partner sex. Often, depth of interviews is made to compensate for the limited sample size. We took selective guidance from these earlier studies. Our choice of the qualitative approach was also an attempt to circumvent respondent reactivity which often sabotages quantitative investigation of sensitive topics as the one we studied.

In analyzing interview data, we identified recurrent themes, emphasis and perception. We paid attention to contexts, terms and meaning. Though our analysis was inductive, our presentation of findings was theme-driven. Many of our interviewees went into very lurid details and used offensive language: as much as possible, we left out such details and words in our presentation. In presenting direct quotes, we used pseudonyms to refer to our interviewees so as to ensure anonymity.

FINDINGS

Before presenting our findings, we consider it extremely helpful to present a summary of a recent study by Ojebode *et al.* (2010) on cross-generational dating among female undergraduate students in southwest Nigeria. A recapitulation of that study, especially its explications of the various forms of cross-generational dating provides a frame of reference for understanding the results of the current study. First, among the female students, the term used on Nigerian Campuses for older men dating young ladies is *aristo*. The term probably originated from the belief that only rich men, that is the aristocrats, had enough money to date the young ladies. The term may also have been a halfway clone of the name 'Aristotle', and meant to mock the old men for their age and wise talks during dating.

Second, the researchers found that cross-generational dating among South Western Nigerian undergraduate students was motivated by the need to strengthen their social capital base, a new finding that extends beyond the economic and poverty motif. Cross-generational dating was also discovered not to be a lone-ranging act but a practice that involves networking as well as different forms of pressure among ladies.

Importantly, they discovered that there are different levels of relationship in cross-generational dating. A one-off contact which may involve sex was termed by their interviewees as *rums*. Repeated contacts

in which partners began to recognise each other and exchange information such as contact details were called *paroles*. When partners developed affection for each other and began to make some claims to special attention, the affair was termed *relationships* (Ojebode *et al.*, 2010).

In the current study, we find that the undergraduate female students involved in cross-generational dating deploy the new media for general as well as peculiar purposes. General purposes included the use of the internet for browsing for information, sending emails and interaction on Facebook and Twitter; the use of mobile phones to maintain contacts with family, friends and with *aristos*. We concentrated on the peculiar use of the new media among the students. What we learnt from the interviews is discussed under the themes that follow. We have maintained the use of such terms as *aristo*, *runs*, *parole* and *relationship* in our presentation because our interviewees used those terms.

New Media: Connecting, Nursing and Disconnecting

In their discussions, our interviewees gave prominence to the cell phone as a means by which they were informed of *runs*. The expressions, 'you are called'; 'they call you'; 'your friends call you' were recurrent. Recruitment is done through the internet as well. Two of our interviewees mentioned being seen on Facebook and contacted. One declined the invitation because "the guy sounded like 419¹". The other accepted the invitation. She said:

The guy saw me on Facebook and called me. We got talking and he said his boss would like to meet me. They came to pick me and we've been on...six months now.

Rich men who are not computer literate or who do not have the time to spend online, our interviewees claimed, depend on younger men who are computer savvy to recruit ladies for them online. These younger men are typically known as PA (Personal Assistants) and they run other errands for their bosses. We were also told of ladies who had met foreign *aristos* online in chat rooms, on Facebook and on other platforms. Some of these ladies were now in the US and Europe. For some others, the *aristos* came down from the US and Europe to visit the ladies in Nigeria, thus migrating the relationship from virtual to real ones.

There is some intentionality in ladies' use of Facebook and chat rooms for cross-generational contacts. Pictures, profile and other details are carefully selected and hoisted with the view to attracting men. When chats begin, "you must sound interesting, current and knowledgeable".

Ladies do not make their availability for cross-generational dating obvious or easy when chatting online. Availability must be won so that it is valued.

The new media also come in handy when it comes to growing an interaction from *runs* to *parole* to *relationship*. For a runs to become a parole, phone calls are almost invariably involved. Relationships also survive on calls because the man, who is almost invariably married, lives with his primary family and keeps in touch through calls.

Our interviewees thought that the new media have influenced the practice of cross-generational dating significantly. The new media have widened the ladies' social networks and thus increased the number of people with whom they come in contact. Not only the number of contacts but also the ease of contacting and being contacted has increased.

But the new media also *disconnect*. An important area in which the new media has influenced cross-generational dating is in by-passing pimps. Pimps were described as cruel and greedy people who often exacted more than was their due. Pimps also used the secrets they knew about the ladies to blackmail them. Fatty told us:

We don't use pimps again. Why use pimps when you can always pick your phone and call the man? And when he needs you, he can always call.

However, interviewees discussed mass recruitment of ladies for large-scale parties such as one organised by prestigious clubs and wealthy men especially politicians. According to them, many of such men have in their employment younger men whose terms of reference included handling social parties which almost invariably included recruiting ladies for parties. Such employees have contacts among *aristo* ladies on campus and are, therefore, able to recruit ladies with ease. Only few of such men asked the ladies for money since recruiting was part of their 'official' duties and since their continued employment depended on their success in recruiting ladies which in turn depended on the ladies' cooperation. But once the ladies made the first contact at the party, the recruiting agent became unnecessary in the progress of the contact from a *runs* to a *parole* and possibly a *relationship*.

Still on the disconnecting role of the new media, ladies mentioned disconnecting from stingy, insatiable or repulsive *aristo* men by giving them fake phone numbers, ignoring their calls, barring calls from such men or in extreme cases, changing their own SIM cards if the men already had their phone number. Tina shared her friend's experience:

She said the man smell (sic) like he-goat. My friend said she just managed him for that night. When he asked her for her phone number, she gave him a fake number.

The foregoing shows that several tactics for connecting and disconnecting which were impossible with the old media were being deployed with the new media.

Severing relationships was easier now that for most partners, the only method of contacting was the cell phone or the internet.

Then...the day you meet [sic] a man, he knew your room number and so on... it was hard to cut off from them. Now, unless you're serious with a man, you don't tell him your room number; all he has is your phone number and you can cut off anytime (Fatty)

Exchange the right phone numbers is therefore one of the basic expressions of commitment to the interaction or relationship. It marks out a potential *relationship* from a *runs*.

Maintaining Secrecy

Among Nigerian female undergraduate students, cross-generational dating is still shrouded in some secrecy. No one comes out boldly to declare that she or he is involved in the practice. Even when friends and classmates know it, it is fashionable for a lady to deny it so as to avoid being perceived as greedy or labelled as a home wrecker. On occasions that ladies have to introduce their older partners, such partners are referred to as uncles. Knowing well that society generally frowns at cross-generational dating; *aristos* don't normally show public affection towards the ladies. Mimi said that the word 'uncle' now means 'something different from what is found in any dictionary'.

Maintaining some level of secrecy is important for the ladies because they often date their *aristos* alongside the real boyfriends they intend to marry, or as some claimed, they double-date *aristos* especially if the affair has not become a *relationship*. For the older men, secrecy is important because they are often married and so must ensure that their wives do not know of their extra-marital affairs. Much better than the old media of mediated interpersonal relationship, such as land lines and letters, the new media help maintain this needed secrecy.

The cell phone is particularly useful because, unlike written notes, cards or letters, it covers the tracks of the ladies and the men. It is less likely that the older man's wife or the younger lady's boyfriend would

find out about their partner's communication through phone than it would have been if the communication were through letters and notes. In the cell phones, ladies save the names and numbers of their *aristo* men under such 'names' as 'Uncle' or 'Daddy' and are quick to delete text messages sent by their *aristo* before their boyfriend or another *aristo* gets to read them. Bib told us how she navigated this terrain:

I learnt long ago not to forget R-C-D. It means Read, Cram and Delete. When I get [a] text from any of these *aristos*, I quickly read it, cram the important part ... and delete it quickly, as in, within seconds.

Nonetheless, unpleasant situations still arose and things sometimes got difficult. Sara was caught by her boyfriend once:

It was kind of messy for me. My boyfriend was playing [a] game in [sic] my handset when his (aristo's) text message arrived and my boyfriend read it. He was like...this text is from your Uncle and he's saying you should meet him at Cocoa Dome² at 10 tonight? What type of Uncle is that? I tried to deny it...to explain...but it was obvious. That was the beginning of the headache that separated us.

Stories were also told of housewives who read text messages sent to their husbands by ladies, or eavesdropped while their husbands made or took calls from ladies and thereby discovered their husbands' philandering.

However, our interviewees felt that these were isolated accidents which did not diminish the instrumental usefulness of the cell phones as a tool in cross-generational dating. Our interviewees listed how the men and ladies ensured that such leaks were prevented: not allowing anyone to have access to their phones; switching off phone when they think a call or text message might create suspicion; refusing to pick a call in their boyfriend's presence and later claiming that it was bad network or 'you did not hear the phone ring'.

New Media as Currency of Exchange

The new media serve as a significant currency of exchange in cross-generational dating among the undergraduate students whom we studied. Although our interviewees emphasised repeatedly that they partook in cross-generational dating for reasons more than money and gifts, they nonetheless explained that their participation was not gratis. Money and gifts might not have been the only motivations; they are a major factor in the equation. These come in various forms among which are new

media accessories such as mobile phone sets, recharge cards, mobile internet modems, cameras, and in some cases, laptops.

Bib, an interviewee, informed us that the use of new media accessories as a currency has eliminated excuses from men when ladies asked them for money.

Before now, they'd say 'Sorry, I can't get to the bank; today is Saturday' or 'I'm busy, I can't leave my office'. Now the ladies will simply say, 'No qualms. Just send me N1,500.00 MTN calling card credit'.

Such recharge cards may be sold by the ladies or in most cases spent on calls. An *aristo's* commitment and to a large extent the attention he receives from a lady is connected to the quality of such accessories he is able to give the lady. Sara explained:

You can *facie*³ an aristo who send [sic] you small recharge card or gave you a *yeye* Chinco⁴ Nokia. You can press 'Delete' for him, as in, control-X him. But when a Papa buys you a laptop, or pays for your internet one year, *you self go know say*⁵ that man mean [sic] business...

Stories were told of rich *aristos* who doled out laptops and stingy ones who would not send even ordinary recharge cards. Our interviewees thought that the need to have these materials—a prestigious handset, internet modem, camera and laptop—was enough reason that some students engage in or continue with cross-generational dating.

The deployment of the new media, especially their accessories as a currency of exchange, means that options for exchange are now wider than they were before the current prevalence of new media use. It also implies that transactions can be more easily made, and more transactions can be made.

Enhancing within-group and 'without'-group Status

When mobile telephony began in Nigeria in 2000, having a cell phone or handset was a status symbol (Ibekwe, 2000). But that soon changed as it became widespread; what remained status symbol were the kind of handset a person has and the cost of such a set. Cheap phones costing about N3,000 to N5,000, often from the Asian Tigers, do not attract to the owner as much attention as do phones from Europe which may cost twenty times the price of Asian phones. Phones that attract attention also come with inbuilt still and video camera, radio, television, audio recorder and data transfer devices. Though some of cheap phones have these devices, they still do not attract as much respect as expensive phones. The status

is in the cost. In fact, it is a derisive comment to describe a phone as 'Chinco', that is, made-in-China.

Among the female undergraduate students whom we interviewed, having expensive new media accessories enhanced in-group status. When a lady possessed an expensive phone, camera, palmtop or laptop, bought for her by her *aristo*, members of her cross-generational dating circle not only envied her, they also gave her some measure of respect. According to them, it meant the lady was smart and lucky to have been able to grow a *runs* with a rich and generous *aristo* into a *relationship* or at least a *parole*. She also must have been considered pretty by her *aristo*. Tina said:

If your *aristo* gives you a 2k phone, what is that? You can't even come back to babes and say here's what the old man gave me. Unless you want them to curse him and insult him for you...and make jest of you...But if you come with a correct phone or a camera...original something like that, *babes go bow for you, hail you*⁶, as in, you're like a queen for that period.

Two of our interviewees noted that the new media accessories had taken the place of jewellery. As Mimi said, ladies "paraded expensive watches, chains (necklace) and things like that...but now it is imported phones and laptops". These are the things that attract respect and attraction within the group.

There is a second sense in which the new media enhance the status of the ladies. Possessing access to the new media and having expensive media accessories compels respect from would-be older male partners. Older male partners were said to respect and lavish resources on ladies who were contacted online, much more than they would do to ladies they met offline at a club or by the roadside. According to Sara,

When they meet you online, maybe in [sic] Facebook, they know that you are *tush*, as in, you're enlightened, an international babe. They can't give you shit. You talk dollars. They respect you. As in, they know you are not one of those useless girls they pick by the roadside.

In spite of the widespread use of the new media in Nigeria as seen in the statistical information with which we began this report, the internet is still in the exclusive preserve of the elite. If for any reason, such as registering children online for public examinations, the poor have to use the internet, they patronise commercial cybercafés where they are charged per hour and for "assisted browsing". It is understandable, therefore,

that Nigerian ladies found online on Facebook, Twitter or other social media, are regarded as educated, sophisticated and enlightened by their would-be older male partners.

Regular Touch for Security

The female undergraduates involved in cross-generational dating operate as a network or, as our interviewees called it, 'in circles'. A circle is like an extended family with members living sometimes in close proximity in university halls of residence or in rented apartment outside the universities. Circles are hardly larger than ten and fewer than four. Recruitment into the circles takes place when academic sessions start and continues for all time. Ladies with attractive features including voluptuous bodies could be under some pressure to join a circle. Use of force was however not mentioned.

Often, the ladies are friends connected in other visible networks such as being classmates, roommates or members of the same student hostel. A potential cross-generational dating girl can also be identified and initiated. The major sign for identifying such actual or potential ladies is their way of dressing: skimpy dresses, tight and stretchy trousers, heavy make-ups, expensive shoes, handsets and maybe laptops. Our interviewees also claimed that talks with such ladies often reveal their tastes for expensive and foreign articles. "When you see them like that, you know this is likely to be someone who does runs or someone who will like to do runs" noted Sandra.

They are invited to parties where gifts and rewards of practicing cross-generational dating are dangled before them. Tina said,

I can say that I didn't start this thing just like that on my own. You know, these girls are well dressed; their room is well furnished and so on. And you want to dress like them. They are also friendly. So they tell you, these things don't fall from heaven. It takes runs to get them. They tell you that you need connections with big men for your future. If you keep saying no to them, you lose their friendship; they also mock you.

The new media, specifically the mobile phone, is a major medium through which members of a circle maintain regular touch. "My friends can always find me"; "If I'm on any runs, I tell them" are common claims among the ladies.

The nature of cross-generational dating has however compelled another use of the mobile phone. Mobile phones are employed to *warn*

friends in danger, and pilot them from such danger. Our interviewees noted that getting involved in cross-generational dating was fraught with danger. Tina said,

You're going out with someone you've never seen. You'll be left alone in the same room with a stranger all night. You don't know. He may be a ritual killer, you know, or a kidnapper or something like that. So, it's...you must be telling your friends how things are going, as in, how far.

Our interviewees had heard stories told of ladies who had gone on *runs* and had disappeared; some whose dead and mutilated bodies were found somewhere later and others whose whereabouts were never discovered. None of them claimed to know any of such unfortunate ladies. The closest experience came from Sandra who was picked by someone who probably was a ritual killer. According to her,

One of my friends who were at the party was looking at the man and me as we were talking. She saw the man bring out a white something from his socks, under the table. He was behaving funny. My friend quickly text me that 'Careful for that man o; e be like say' that man get *jass*⁸ o' Immediately I told the man 'Excuse me' and that's how I zap [disappeared].

In this instance, Sandra believed, the timely text message saved her from being taken away by a ritual killer or a kidnapper.

As a result of these stories (real and/or rumoured experiences), female undergraduates involved in cross-generational dating exercise great caution which involved being in constant touch with their base, and checking in on one another. The mobile phone comes in handy in meeting this need.

DISCUSSION

In sum, our findings reveal that female students in cross-generational dating actively use the new media to meet peculiar needs. The new media are used to connect with older male partners, nurse the connections and if or when need be, cut the connection. The new media help maintain the much-needed secrecy and also serve as currency of exchange in the cross-generational dating process. Possessing exotic new media accessories or using the new media enhances status within a 'circle' and even in the reckoning of older male partners. The new media, specifically mobile phone, are also helpful in maintaining contact with others in a circle for the purposes of security of the lady who is away.

Different researchers have identified some of the foregoing uses of the new media among their populations. For instance, Cho *et al.* (2003) identified connection with others; Leung and Wei (2000) identified status symbols (which they also referred to as fashion), and security and safety. Our study has re-emphasized the malleability of the new media. Indeed, it has shown the multi-faceted use to which the media can be put: connecting, nursing and disconnecting; as medium in an exchange and as the currency of that exchange. The uniqueness and importance of our findings lie with the segment of the population studied; a group of Nigerian undergraduates whose social identity, economic survival strategies and urban exposure to media products, brought by globalization, have revolutionized a dating culture in a transitional society such as Nigeria.

Previous studies have suggested the status symbol significance of the new media (Leung & Wei, 2000; Nkwi, 2009; Pfaff, 2009; Masvawure, 2010). However, 'status symbol' has been conceptualized in terms of impressing one's peers. Our study adds a bit to this understanding by showing that the concern of the ladies in cross-generational dating is to impress not only their peers but also (or, especially) older male partners. This is in order to earn respect from the male partners and cut the figure of a person of worth rather than that of a mere sex object. This is to ultimately push up the monetary and other rewards a lady is offered by the older partner. Further, an appearance of economic wellbeing displayed by a lady could intimidate an older man who in turn, might want to dispel such intimidation by resorting to lavish gifts. The new media are at once a measure of worth and a determinant of reward in the cross-generational exchanges.

Besides the use of new media to easily connect, nurse and sever contacts with older partners, they are also used to expand the social network of the ladies and thus widen the available pool from which older partners can be found. In a sense therefore, it is safe to infer that the new media may have increased the rate and pace of cross-generational dating. This confirms the findings of Hughes (2000) and Hlebec *et al* (2006) that the new media have increased frequencies and scope of dating and related activities among young people except that the unit of analysis utilized in the present study is restricted to a specific dating culture.

Importantly, our findings suggest that the female students involved in cross-generational dating do have and make choices, and take precautions. Our findings do not support the common portrayal of the

students as desperate, indiscriminate, money-means-everything sex hawkers (Bamgbose, 2002; Masvawure, 2010).

It is useful to note that a narrow range of new media are used — mobile phones, Facebook and occasionally emails. Dating sites and the numerous multi-user domains used by online couples in more developed countries such as the United States (Baker, 2005) and the Netherlands (Peter and Valkenburg, 2007) are not in considerable use by Nigerian female undergraduates involved in cross-generational dating. This may not be unconnected to the high cost of spending time online in Nigeria and unstable supply of electricity which makes the use of internet difficult. It may also not be unconnected with the fact that the target audience of the communications of these ladies—older male partners—are themselves not remarkable internet users.

CONCLUSION

In light of the richness of ethnographic data collected for this study, there is ample evidence to conclude that the new media have increased the celerity of the cross-generational dating by widening social networks and making contacting easier. In fact, the new media aid in the progression of cross-generational dating from one form to another. Their utility is pertinent to growing an interaction from *runs* to *parole* to *relationship*. In addition to this, they have eliminated the relevance of pimps. With pimps out of the way as a result of the deployment of the new media, tangible and intangible resources accruing from cross-generational dating may have increased as resources that used to be shared with pimps now belong only to the lady. In this sense, the new media may be said to have made cross-generational dating more lucrative and therefore, attractive to the ladies.

We are led by evidence to conclude that there is reciprocal relationship between the new media and cross-generational dating. Female participants in cross-generational dating bend these media to serve their purposes while the media also influence the practice. The idea of a reciprocal relationship between the media and society has been affirmed with differing explications in literature and other media (Moore, 2005; Olorunnisola, 2009). We conclude that that reciprocal relationship obtains as well in the context that we have studied.

We also have reason to conclude that the new media do not change behaviour or create new ones. Rather, they create “new ways of doing old things” (Tyler, 2002: 195). New media accessories are replacing jewellery; text messages are replacing handwritten notes; giving fake phone

numbers to undesired older male partners is replacing giving them wrong room numbers and contact addresses. The practice and intent remain the same. "It seems the more things change, the more they stay the same" (Tyler, 2002: 195).

Finally, while the present study is innovative and ground-breaking, its focus on female undergraduates in South Western Nigeria limits our ability to generalize the findings for the whole of Nigeria. Future studies might want to build on this by examining the interplay between the new media and cross-generational dating among female university students in other ethnic groups located in South Eastern and Northern Nigeria, where the effect of socio-economic environment and cultural factors might lead to different outcomes.

Notes

1. A fraudster. The number, 419, is the code for a criminal act that prohibited advance fee fraud in Nigeria, but it is often used to mean fraud and other shady deals.
2. Cocoa Dome, Ibadan, Nigeria, is a venue for meetings and especially night parties. It became notorious as venue for cross-generational matchmaking and wild partying to a point that the authorities of a female hall of residence on a campus blacklisted it. On a particular night, alerted that party organisers at Cocoa Dome were coming to recruit female students en masse from that hall of residence, the authorities issued a warning that any female student not found in her room that night would be expelled. That threat significantly frustrated the efforts of the party organisers (From the interviews).
3. 'Facie' means ignore; break a relationship with.
4. 'Yeye' means worthless. 'Chinco' products, especially phones, are made-in-China products derided by Nigerians for their assumed fragility, short life-span and cheapness.
5. Pidgin expression meaning 'even you will realize that...'
6. Pidgin meaning: Ladies would honor you and praise you.
7. Pidgin meaning: *it seems as if...*
8. Charms/amulets believed to be capable of working magically to hypnotize, convert a person to money or other objects. Charms are terribly feared by Nigerians.

References

- Arvidsson, A. (2006). 'Quality Singles': Internet Dating and the Work of Fantasy
New Media & Society 8(4): 671-690.

- Baker, A. J. (2005). *Double Click: Romance and Commitment among Online Couples* Cresskill, N. J.; Hampton Press Inc.
- Bamgbose, O. (2002). Female Prostitution and the Future of the Female Adolescent in Nigeria. *International Journal of Offender therapy and Comparative Criminology*. 46(5): 569-585.
- Brinkman, I.; de Bruijn, M. & Bilal, H. (2009). "The Mobile Phone, 'Modernity' and Change in Khartoum, Sudan" In M. De Bruijn, F. Nyamnjoh & I. Brinkman (eds) *Mobile Phones: the New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*. Leiden: Langaa & African Studies Centre. Pp 69-91.
- Burrell, J. (2009). "Could Connectivity Replace Mobility? An Analysis of Internet Cafe Use Patterns in Accra, Ghana" In M. De Bruijn, F. Nyamnjoh & I. Brinkman (eds) *Mobile Phones: the New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*. Leiden: Langaa & African Studies Centre. Pp 151-169.
- Cho, J; de Zúñiga, H. G; Rojas, H. & Shah, D. V. (2003). Beyond Access: The Digital Divide and Internet uses and Gratifications *IT & Society* 1(4): 46-72.
- Clignet, R. (1977). Roles Matrimoniaux ET Fécondité en Afrique Noire. *Revue Française de Sociologies* 18: 439-464.
- December, J. (1996). Units of Analysis for Internet Communication. *Journal of Communication*, 46(1): 14-38.
- Dunn, H. S. & Bofofo, K. (2010). "Digital Domains and New Development Strategies: Revisiting ICT Policy-Making in the Global South" *African Communication Research* 3(1): 37-60.
- Hlebec, V.; Manfreda, K. L. & Vehovar, V. (2006). The Social Support Networks of Internet Users. *New Media & Society* 8(1): 9-32.
- Hughes, D. (1999). "The Internet and the Global Prostitution Industry" In Hawthorne, S. and Klein, R. (eds) *Cyber Feminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity*. North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press Ltd. Pp. 157-185.
- Hughes, D. (2000). "The Internet and Sex Industries: Partners in Global Sexual Exploitation" *Technology and Society Magazine*, Spring 2000 <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/siii.htm> (Accessed December 28, 2010).
- Ibekwe, B. (2000). "Uses of GSM among Undergraduate Students of the University of Ibadan". A. B.A Project, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- International Telecommunications Union (ITU) (2010). "Mobile Cellular Subscriptions" http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Reporting/ShowReportFrame.aspx?ReportName=/WTI/CellularSubscribersPublic&ReportFormat=HTML4.0&RP_intYear=2009&RP_intLanguageID=1&RP_bitLiveData=False (Accessed December 28, 2010).
- Internet World Statistics (2010). "Internet Usage Statistics for Africa" <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm> (Accessed December 28, 2010).

- Katz, E. M. Gurevitch and H. Haas (1973). On the Use of the Mass Media for Important Things. *American Sociological Review* 38(2): 164-181.
- Kaufman, C. E. & Stavrou, S. E. (2004). 'Bus Fare Please': The Economics of Sex and Gifts among Young People in Urban South Africa *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 6(5): 377-391.
- Kuate-Defo, B. (2004). Young People's Relationships with Sugar Daddies and Sugar Mummies: What Do We Know and What Do we Need to Know? *African Journal of Reproductive Health*. 8(2): 13-37.
- Leung, L. & Wei, R. (2000). More Than Just Talk on the Move: Uses and Gratifications of the Cellular Phone *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77(2): 308-320.
- Longfield, K.; Glick, A.; Waithaka, M. & Berman, J. (2004). Relationships between Older Men and Younger Women: Implications for STIs/HIV in Kenya. *Studies in Family Planning*. 35(2): 125-134.
- Luke, N. (2003). Age and Economic Asymmetries in the Sexual Relationships of Adolescent Girls in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in Family Planning*. 34(2): 67-86.
- Masvawure, T. (2010). 'I Just Need to be Flashy on Campus': Female Students and Transactional Sex at a University in Zimbabwe. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* iFirst: 1-14.
- Molony, T. (2009). "Trading Places in Tanzania: Mobility and Marginalisation at a Time of Travel-Saving Technologies" In M. De Bruijn, F. Nyamnjoh & I. Brinkman (eds) *Mobile Phones: the New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*. Leiden: Langaa & African Studies Centre. Pp 92-109.
- Moores, S. (1993). *Interpreting Audiences: the Ethnography of Media Consumption*. London: Sage Publications.
- Moores, S. (2005). *Media/Theory: Thinking about Media & Communication*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Nkwi, W. G. (2009). "From the Elitist to the Commonality of Voice Communication: The History of the Telephone in Buea, Cameroon" In M. De Bruijn, F. Nyamnjoh & I. Brinkman (eds) *Mobile Phones: the New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*. Leiden: Langaa & African Studies Centre. Pp. 50-68.
- Obijiofor, L. (2009). "Journalism in the Digital Age: the Nigerian Press Framing of the Niger Delta Conflict" *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 30(2): 175-203.
- Ojebode, A.; Togunde, D. and Adedokun, A. (2010). "Beyond Money and Gifts: Social Capital as Motivation for Cross-generational Dating among Tertiary School Female Students in South West Nigeria" *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences* 5(4): 169-182.

- Olorunnisola, A. A. (2009). "GSM Telephones in Nigeria's Political, Socio-Economic and Geo-Cultural Landscapes" In Olorunnisola, A. A. (ed) *Media and Communications Industries in Nigeria: Impacts of Neoliberal Reforms between 1999 and 2007*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press. Pp. 103-156.
- Onwumehili, C. (2009). "Neo-Liberal Regulation: NITEL in Murky Water" In Olorunnisola, A. A. (ed) *Media and Communications Industries in Nigeria: Impacts of Neoliberal Reforms between 1999 and 2007*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press. Pp. 81-102.
- Peter, J. & Valkenburg, P. M. (2007). Who Looks for Casual Dates on the Internet? A Test of the Compensation and the Recreation Hypotheses *New Media & Society* 9(3): 455-474.
- Pfaff, J. (2009). "The Mobility of a Mobile Phone: Examining 'Swahiliness' through an Object's Biography" In M. De Bruijn, F. Nyamnjoh & I. Brinkman (eds) *Mobile Phones: the New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*. Leiden: Langaa & African Studies Centre. Pp 134-150.
- Sharp, K. and Earle, S. (2003). "Cyberpunter and Cyberwhores: Prostitution and the Internet" In Jewkes, Y. (ed) *Dot.cons: crime, deviance and identity on the internet*. Cullompton, UK: Willan. Pp 36-52.
- Steenveld, L. (2006). "Journalism Education in South Africa? Context, Context, Context" In Anthony Olorunnisola (ed) *Media in South Africa after Apartheid: a cross-media assessment*. Lewiston: the Edwin Mellen Press, pp 253-295.
- Thornton, R. (2009). Sexual Networks and Social Capital: Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partners as Rational Response to Unstable Social Networks. *African Journal of AIDS Research* 8(4): 413-421.
- Tyler, R. T. (2002). "Is Internet Changing Social Life? It Seems the More things Change, the More They Stay the Same?" *Journal of Social Issues* 58(1): 195-205.
- van Beek, W. (2009). "The Healer and his Phone: Medicinal Dynamics among the Kapsiki/Higi of North Cameroon" In M. De Bruijn, F. Nyamnjoh & I. Brinkman (eds) *Mobile Phones: the New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*. Leiden: Langaa & African Studies Centre. Pp. 125-133.
- Wei, R. & Ven-Hwei, L. (2006). Staying Connected while on the Move: Cell Phone use and Social Connectedness *New Media & Society*. 8(1): 53-72.