

## Probable Solutions for Social Networking Sites Usage: A Zone of Criminal Activities and Social Discomfort for South African Youth

**Ndivhuwo Doctor Sundani**

*Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa*

### Abstract

Adopting the non-empirical research design: Systematic review. This paper focuses on uses of social networking sites as zones of criminal activities and social discomfort for South African youth. The guiding objectives were designed as follows: (1) To assess how the youth use social networking sites, (2) To find causes of online criminal activities and social discomfort and (3) To identify solutions to prevent misuse of social networking sites by South African youth. This was coupled with Social Exchange Theory (SET) to clearly explain the role of social networking sites to promote social harmony among South African youth when practicing their online activities. The journal articles, online articles and libraries, dissertations and thesis were reviewed for this purpose. The results were discussed and recommendations leading to the prevention of misuse of social networking sites and new media technologies by youth in South Africa were provided. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to the continuous debates on the formulation and implementation of new media and social media policies in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Criminal activities, Social discomfort, Social networking sites, Solution, South African Youth.

### Introduction and problem exposition

Social networking sites have become a part of the daily life experiences for an increasing number of people (Chowdhury & Saha, 2015). Along with this, Pernisco (2010:1) discovers that social media websites have become ubiquitous, giving young people a new way to interact with each other and communicate with the world. Chowdhury and Saha (2015:28) define social networking sites as "internet-based social spaces designed to facilitate communication, collaboration and content sharing across networks of contacts."

According to Tawiah, Nondzor and Alhaji (2014:103), social media and social network tools, especially WhatsApp Messenger, Facebook, and Viber, have become the dominant factor in today's digital world. In this regard, Abaido (2020) indicates that over the past few years, other social media platforms such as Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram have emerged and these platforms are presently frequently used for social interactivity amongst youths.

As revealed by Eke, Omekwu and Odoh (2014) in Africa; social media networking sites are becoming more widely spread than ever before, and it appears that people's perception of this technology is diverse. Similarly, van Niekerk (2017:127) indicates that, as Internet connectivity in Africa increases, a greater percentage of the population has Internet access.

Tawiah *et al.* (2014:103) argue that social media and networks are affecting how users

communicate. Hence, Ephraim (2013) revealed that South Africa to date is regarded as the leading social network country in Africa. Further, the author found that most of the users of South Africa's most popular social network are young adults. The author further explained that youths in South Africa spend time on social networks for purposes other than chatting and the same youths spend an average of at least an hour on social networks on daily basis.

Owing to their features, Kuppuswamy and Narayan (2010:67) explain that young people are attracted to social networking sites. On the other hand, Hlatshwayo (2014:4) discovered that the advent of social media has somehow raised serious concerns about its effects on the lives of young social media users. Importantly, Chowdhury and Saha (2015) revealed that social networking sites can be used to perform various type of cybercrimes, which lead to demotivation of the young generations, and sometimes they might be involved in various unprofessional or illegal activities, which provide negative feedback of this site. According to Abaido (2020:407), recent research studies have revealed that cyberbullying and online harassment are considerable problems for users of social media platforms, especially young people. In this regard, Patel and Binjola (2020:19) explained that cybercrime is a crime which has so many criminal aspects to its nature where cyber bullying, sexual harassment, financial frauds are intrinsic part of it. Research conducted by van Niekerk (2017:126) has shown that in South Africa, the leading perpetrators of cyberattacks are hacktivists and criminals.

Authors such as Kuppuswamy and Narayan (2010) are concerned that social networking sites also pose a danger to youths' privacy, safety, health and professional reputations if proper precautions are not taken. In addition to this, Khan (2012:58) is concerned that social networks grab the total attention and concentration of the youths and diverts it towards non-educational, unethical, and inappropriate actions such as useless chatting, time killing by random searching and not doing their jobs.

The technology used by youths and the type of misbehaviour is unfamiliar to adults, which has made it difficult for parents to prevent and deal with the phenomena (Badenhorst, 2011). Likewise, Greenhow (2011) indicates that social networking sites also have negative cognitive, social, and emotional impact on young people.

Subsequently, from this paper, how some youth use social networking sites to commit cybercrimes? And the causes of social disharmony can be deduced, as well as the available measures to mitigate or prevent misuse of social networking sites by youth in South Africa and the analysis of the current legislative framework to respond to this practice can also disseminated with ease.

### **Preliminary literature review**

The paper provided various pieces of literature from previous scholars to justify the present study. The literature review focused on Four (04) parts, namely: (1) Assessment of how youth use social networking sites. (2) Causes of online criminal activities by youth. (3) Probable solutions to prevent misuse of social networking sites by youth and (4) The recent legislative framework to effectively respond to cybercrimes.

## Usage of social networking sites by youth

Chowdhury and Saha (2015) explain that youths use social networking sites for countless activities such as connecting with existing networks, making, and developing friendships, create an online presence for their users, viewing content, finding information, creating, and customising profiles and so on. The authors furthermore indicate that these social networking sites help these users to share views and thoughts with strangers or enable them to share their viewpoints with a visible well-known friend. Greenhow (2011:140) highlights that social networking sites are used predominantly to connect with those one already knows and less for traditional “networking” purposes.

Authors such as Allen and Nelson (2013:567) confirm that in many ways, youths today are more engaged in their interpersonal relationships than ever before, and as a result, they often have a wider and deeper friendship network. Further, these authors (Allen & Nelson, 2013) highlight that these relationships are integral to their development and are often supported through participation in social networking with tools such as Facebook or Twitter.

Hlatshwayo (2014:4), who conducted a study on the usage of social media by youth in Swaziland revealed that with the advent of social media in Swaziland, young people have been afforded an opportunity to access, share and exchange information and ideas freely. As well as that, Greenhow (2011) explained that technological advancements have contributed increasingly to young people’s adoption of social media, their interconnections and generated content. In addition to this, authors such as Kuppuswamy and Narayan (2010:68) are of the view that social networking sites such as Facebook provide individuals with a way of maintaining and strengthening social ties, which can be beneficial in both social and academic settings.

Greenhow (2011) also clarifies that when used by young people, social networking sites enable new forms of inquiry, communication, collaboration, identity work, and knowledge development, among others. Apart from this, Khan (2012) indicates that the most popular activities performed by youths on social networking sites revolve around looking at profiles of one another, searching for someone, or updating one’s own profile, among others. Along with this, Khan (2020) explains that some of the youths register themselves on social networking websites because they want others to know about them; for such reason youths are registered and make friends. Without a doubt, Khan’s argument shows that youths think that an increasing number of friends could make them famous among other friends, but unfortunately, social networking websites provide virtual contacts.

Alternatively, youths according to Eke *et al.* (2014) use social networking sites to develop their identities, beliefs, and stances on various issues such as politics, religion, and work, as well as to pioneer and develop intimate relationships.

According to Patel and Binjola (2020), social media platforms such as Tik Tok has become a new platform for portrayal of talent for youngsters adding new meaning to already existing social media platforms. It is the fastest growing social media, which has fascinated and engrossed so many youngsters across the globe and is one of the fastest growing platforms.

## Online criminal activities and social discomfort among youth

Olowu and Seri (2012:69) share that social networking sites have allowed for a significant change in the social, interpersonal, and personal behaviour of youths today. In this regard, Chowdhury and Saha (2015:30) reveal that sometimes youths use social networking sites to spread misinformation and perform various types of cybercrimes including sexual and mental crime with their unknown friends through chatting. Patel and Binjola (2020) revealed that cybercrimes affect public safety especially for youths and vulnerable sections of the society through incidents of exploitation and cyberbullying.

From the study conducted by Eke *et al.* (2014), immoral acts like pornography, prostitution, and cyber-bullying are associated with youths when they are online. Along with this, Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell and Ybarra (2008:120) indicate that the internet has fostered speculation that it may increase the number of youths victimised. Cyberbullying may result in victims suffering from anxiety and depression and, in extreme cases, may cause suicide, according to Badenhorst (2011:3). The author further explained that usually victims of cyberbullying may be reluctant to report the bullying for fear that their mobile phones may be taken away or their internet access suspended.

Research conducted by Ephraim (2013) reveals cyberbullying activities in several African countries of note including South Africa. According to the author, in Africa, cyberbullying has led to some near-fatal consequences. Furthermore, Ephraim (2013) indicates that statistics from research conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention in 2009 revealed that 1 in 3 South African children have been a victim of cyberbullying while 47% of these children reported been bullied online through mobile phones. In addition to this, the author clarifies that the research statistics in 2012 also reveal that cyberbullying is particularly prevalent in the South African province of Gauteng.

The study conducted by Hlatshwayo (2014) in Swaziland highlights that what is more disturbing is that social media expose youths to a barrage of immoral information. In line with this, Badenhorst (2011) indicates that cyberbullying and sexting are two relatively new phenomena that have emerged along with youths' often unlimited and unmonitored access and use of electronic communication technology. Hence, Ephraim (2013) explains that online bullies and stalkers on social networks may post implicating pictures or videos of their victims, send anonymous threats or lure victims to specific locations where serious bodily harm could be inflicted. Hlatshwayo (2014) further explains that, in Swaziland, social media promote a lot of immoral behaviour amongst young people, and it was found that many Swazis belong to 'dirty' groups. In addition to this, the author further found out that some of these groups only discuss sex.

Further, Pernisco (2010:7) reveals that some social networking sites users are not aware of what exactly can be considered harassment or illegal activity. According to the author, many people do not bother with reporting the negativity they come across on the internet for fear of the trouble it may cause them or the thought that no-one may even read it anyway. In addition to this, many times people are harassed in

so many ways over the internet and nothing is ever done about it is because people do not know what to do about it. Nonetheless, Hlatshwayo (2014) found that youths who use social media are aware of the negative effects of social media. On the other hand, this shows that some youths show negligence when they are online.

### **Solutions to prevent misuse of social networking sites by youth**

According to Allen and Nelson (2013), how youths use technology is ever changing, but what is steadfast is the need for adults to be involved in all facets of youths' lives. Apart from this, Wolak *et al.* (2008) highlight that social media education needs to be extended to parents so that they understand the unsuspected and risky uses. Web and digital cameras may be put to use and increase the potential magnitude of this problem.

Moreover, Hlathswayo (2014) suggests that there is a need to educate social media users about the benefits and disadvantages. Furthermore, Allen and Nelson, (2013:566) are of the view that there is also a need for professionals who work with youths and their families to understand and utilise technology. In addition to this, van Niekerk (2017:127) concurs that a possible solution will be to focus cybersecurity awareness training on information technology professionals in the country, to assist in creating a secure culture and an improvement of security in system development.

According to Badenhorst (2011:3), the measures taken against the perpetrator should not exacerbate violence by taking a punitive approach and using violence against violence. Further, the author recommended that state parties should ensure that relevant legislation provides adequate protection of youths in relation to Information and Communications Technologies.

Eke *et al.* (2014) suggested that there should be a provision of laws on the content of social media. Without a doubt, there must be laws guiding the youths' use of social networking sites and what they disseminate through the media. This is supported by van Niekerk (2017:127) by indicating that due to the increase of cyber incidents, it is imperative that the legislative environment is enabled to afford corporations protection and support law-enforcement in combatting cyber-attacks.

Ephraim (2013) is concerned that these laws should be localised to fit the African context as well as tailored to prosecute minor and adult offenders. The protection of the rights and lives of youths should be a priority in the enactment and implementation of these proposed laws and policies. Hlatshwayo (2014) suggests that there must be a sense of urgency to mount remedial programmes aimed at tackling the problem of offensive information posted on social network sites.

According to Pernisco (2010), one of many ways this could be done to prevent misuse of social networking sites would be to have undercover officers patrolling at various times. Therefore, the ministry has to propose to the national assembly to enact a new law that would guide the users of the social network sites with the 'do's and don'ts.' Olowu and Seri (2012) are concerned that an effort should be made to limit time spent online especially viewing social networking sites. Hence, Ephraim (2013) is of the view that operators of social networks too will need to review the operational facilities on their sites to make them safe for young users.

Hlatshwayo (2014) encourages dialogue among the social media users about the benefits of social media networking. Further, Hlatshwayo (2014) indicates that there should be the creation of awareness about the positive usage of social media by youths. Although young people try to ignore and delete such offensive information, this cannot be taken as a lasting solution to the problem (Hlatshwayo, 2014:18).

### **The recent legal framework to respond to cybercrimes**

In relation to this paper, the Cybercrimes Act (No. 19 of 2020), was found to be relevant because it provides penalties for those who are involved in online criminal activities such as cyberbullying. This Act was passed by the President of the Republic of South Africa to create offences which have a bearing on cybercrime; to criminalise the disclosure of data messages which are harmful and to provide for interim protection orders; to further regulate jurisdiction in respect of cybercrimes; to further regulate the powers to investigate cybercrimes; and to further regulate aspects relating to mutual assistance in respect of the investigation of cybercrimes; among others.

As this Act is specifically focusing much on cybercrimes, therefore, this paper urges the South African government to implement social media policies that simply and strictly outline how youths and general users of social media platforms should conduct themselves when they are online.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since the study is aiming to help youth to bring social harmony when they are online, SET was adopted. This theory was used to explain communication exchange of people and how they build relationships based on such communication. The SET clarifies how social media platforms enable social media users from around the world to formulate new relationships.

The SET is one of the most influential conceptual paradigms concerning the behaviour of individuals and the ability of people to change one another's behaviour through variations of their own behaviour control (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), although one may argue that youth behaviour is mostly determined by the sustenance of their communication and good relationships. In addition to this, social network users such as youth determine their socialisation through the way they exchange messages. This shows that even criminal activities and social discomfort are determined by youths' socialisation online. Further, the above-mentioned authors assert that another basic tenet of the SET is that relationships evolve into trusting, loyal and mutual commitments and rules of exchange. This assertion is key to this paper, as it is conducted to bring solutions that could help South African youths to use social media in a responsible manner that results in social comfort.

### **Adopted methodology**

From a non-empirical research design: Systematic review standpoint. This paper qualitatively explores social networking sites as zones of criminal activities and

social discomfort for South African youth. According to Fouché and Schurink (2011:310), this research approach allows phenomena to be investigated, analysed and interpreted differently depending on one's belief of what social reality is and how social phenomena can be known.

For data collections; published reports such as the seminal journal articles, internet sources online libraries, dissertations and thesis were selected to generate data for this paper. Therefore, data were collected and analysed to support the research's findings and discussion. The collected data were restricted from 2005 to 2020.

The descriptive analysis was adopted to analyse secondary data generated in the study. According to Müller-Rommel (2016), descriptive analysis deals with describing a phenomenon on how we think something is. It attempts to examine the situations in order to describe the norm. Further, the author explains that descriptive analysis describes what exists and tries to pave the way for finding new facts. It includes gathering data related to products, people, individuals, events and situations and then organises, tabulates, depicts and describes the outcome.

### **Findings and discussions**

This paper focuses on the uses of social networking sites as a criminal zone by South African youth. To accomplish this, this section discusses findings gathered from the literature review on the uses of social network sites as a criminal zone by the youth. The results highlighted that social networking sites foster youths' connectedness and strengthen their interpersonal relationships. This paper also found that youth also primarily use social networking users to share views and thoughts with other users. In this regard, most authors concur that youth use social networking sites to interact with each other and communicate with the world.

As guided by presented reviewed literature studies of this paper; Ephraim (2013) concurred that young people in Africa use social networks for a variety of purposes including interpersonal connection. It seems like the connection has driven most young people to their own social networking sites.

Based on communication purposes, Ephraim (2013) also explained that social networks such as Facebook are used primarily by youths as forums for communication exchange with friends and connecting with new ones. In addition to this, Ephraim (2013) further highlighted that, currently, social media has become a very important part of the daily lives of many African youths and this however has resulted in a new social network addiction amongst the youths across the continent.

In this article, researchers have revealed online criminal activities and causes of social discomfort among youth. More interesting is that many youths use social networking sites for wrongdoings such as cybercrimes, cyberbullying, and sexting, among others. In line with this, van Niekerk (2017) supported that in Africa, since a greater percentage of the population has had access to the Internet, there is also a high rate of cybercrime, targeting, among others, new entrants who are not yet fully aware of the security risks.

In the South African context, Dlamini and Mbambo (2019) emphasised that cybercrime continues to be a detrimental problem in South Africa and continues to change in

nature and sophistication. It is revealed that cyberbullying can cause youths to suffer from anxiety and depression and it could also cause suicide. The finding also revealed sexting as one of many factors that cause social discomfort when young people are online.

Solutions leading to the prevention of the misuse of social networking sites by youth were also suggested in this paper. Various studies suggest that if policies can be implemented, they could prevent online criminal activities. Ephraim (2013), who explains that there is therefore now an increasing need for African countries including South Africa to develop plans and strategies as well as formulate policies to survive the challenges of the rapidly digitizing world, supports this. In addition to this, Ephraim (2013) highlights that this could be done by liaising with more digitally mature countries that have standardised cyber laws that protect people from and punish people for cybercrimes.

Without a doubt, the Ministry of Communications together with the Portfolio Committee on Communications in the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa has a duty or responsibility of initiating and co-ordinating all the policies and programmes towards the use and development of information and communication technologies and social networking sites. The literature in this paper also suggests that there is a need for the implementation of programmes aimed at mitigating the problem of offensive posts on social network sites. Also, Ephraim (2013) is concerned that there must be efforts by the South African government to establish cybercrime prevention centres and websites to protect young people.

The consulted literature revealed that parents should also be involved in social media education so that they understand the risks that affect their children. In this regard, Ephraim (2013) suggested that parents also have a serious part to play in ensuring that children and youths turn out to be responsible users of social networks. One can urge that South African parents need to actively participate in the social life of their children and monitor their online activities. The consulted literature also found that operators of social networks need to improve their operational facilities and privacy settings. Hence, it is believed that this could strengthen safety for young users of social networks.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This paper explored social networking sites as zones of criminal activities and social discomfort for South African youth. As discussed, the results obtained from this paper have shown that most youth use social networking sites for various reasons such as maintaining and strengthening social ties, and accessing and exchanging information, among others. It could also be established from the study that some youths when they are online use social networking sites to cyberbully each other. Among other misuses of social networks by youth discovered in this paper are immoral behaviours such as posting pornographic materials and seditious information. Further, this paper revealed Facebook as the most preferred social network used by youths. On the other hand, one can argue that perhaps youth prefer Facebook over other sites to perform online criminal activities. This paper also revealed the benefits of using

social networks by youth such as developing their identities, beliefs, and stances on various issues related to politics, religion and work, among others.

This paper identified the mentioned challenges that youths encounter when they are on social networks and this led to recommendations that there is an urgent need to inculcate best practices of social media among youth and teach them how to use social networks as tools to bring social harmony.

Furthermore, the results of this paper might serve as an intervention tool to encourage the Ministry of Communications together with the Portfolio Committee on Communications in the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa to rapidly implement measures that could help to prevent the youth from doing things that result to social disharmony when they are online.

It is also believed that this paper could contribute to research into the continuing debates about the importance of formulating laws that are strictly focusing on the social networking sites and new media in South Africa. In relation to this, this paper could serve to lead to the creation of a platform that will develop measures that could prevent ongoing online criminal activities.

There is also an urgent need to implement effective cybercrime awareness programmes by the South African government. This could enhance strong participation in the prevention of cybercrimes among the youth. Hence, this will allow youth to make positive contributions towards the combatting of online criminal activities.

Consequently, social media education can be used as another tool to combat online criminal activity. Hence, it can also promote social harmony when youth are exchanging messages online. In this regard, social media education needs to be extended to adults so that they understand risky behaviours and provide guidance to youths to use social media to promote social harmony.

## References

- Abaido, G. M. (2020). Cyberbullying on social media platforms among university students in the United Arab Emirates. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 407-420.
- Allen, K., & Nelson, D. (2013). A case study on integrating social media in an online graduate youth development course. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 9(4), 566-574.
- Badenhorst, C. (2011). *Legal responses to cyber bullying and sexting in South Africa*. Claremont: Intermedia.
- Chowdhury, I. R., & Saha, B. (2015). Impact of Facebook as a social networking site (SNS) on youth generations: A case study of Kolkata City. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 4(6), 28-42.
- Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31(6), 874-900.
- Cybercrimes Act, 2020. [Online]. Available: [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/202106/44651gon324.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202106/44651gon324.pdf) (June 11, 2021).
- Dlamini, S., & Mbambo, S. (2019). Understanding policing of cyber-crime in South Africa: The phenomena, challenges and effective responses. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5(1), 1-13.
- Eke, H. N., Omekwu, C. O. & Odoh, J. N. (2014). The use of social networking sites among the undergraduate students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 1195, 1-27.

- Ephraim, P. E. (2013). African youths and the dangers of social networking: A culture-centered approach to using social. [Online]: Available [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262164979\\_African\\_youths\\_and\\_the\\_dangers\\_of\\_social\\_networking\\_A\\_culture-centered\\_approach\\_to\\_using\\_social\\_media](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262164979_African_youths_and_the_dangers_of_social_networking_A_culture-centered_approach_to_using_social_media) (May 31, 2021).
- Fouché, C. B., & Schurink, W. (2011). Qualitative research designs. In A. S. De Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché & C. S. Delport, Research at grass roots, for social sciences and human service profession. (4th Ed.) (pp. 307-327). Pretoria: Van Schaick.
- Greenhow, C. (2011). Youth, learning, and social media. *Educational Computing Research*, 45(2), 139-146.
- Hlatshwayo, V. S. (2014). Youth usage of social media Swaziland: A report for the Swaziland chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA). [Online] Available: <https://misaswaziland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/the-youth-usage-of-social-media-2014.pdf> (June 01, 2021)
- Khan, S. (2012). Impact of social networking websites on students. *Abasyn Journal of Social Sciences*, 5 (2), 56-77.
- Kuppuswamy, S., & Narayan, P. B. (2010). The impact of social networking websites on the education of youth. *International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking*, 2(1), 67-79.
- Müller-Rommel, F. (2016). An introduction of descriptive analysis, its advantages and disadvantages. [Online] Available: [https://www.academia.edu/25307454/Title\\_An\\_Introduction\\_on\\_Descriptive\\_Analysis\\_Its\\_advantages\\_and\\_disadvantages](https://www.academia.edu/25307454/Title_An_Introduction_on_Descriptive_Analysis_Its_advantages_and_disadvantages) (June 06, 2021)
- Olowu, A. A., & Seri, F. O. (2012). A study of social network addiction among youth in Nigeria. *Journal of Social Science and Policy Review*, 4, 62-71.
- Patel, K. & Binjola, H. (2020). Tik Tok the new alternative media for youngsters for online sharing of talent: An Analytical Study, 7(1), 16-19.
- Pernisco, N. (2010). Social media: Impact and implications on society. *Student Journal for Media Literacy Education*, 1(1), 1-14.
- Tawiah, Y. S, Nondzor, H. E., & Alhaji, A. (2014). Usage of WhatsApp and voice calls (phone call): Preference of polytechnic students in Ghana. *Science Journal of Business and Management*, 2(4), 103-108.
- van Niekerk, B. (2017). An analysis of cyber-incidents in South Africa. *The African Journal of Information and Communication (AJIC)*, 20, 113-132.
- Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K. J., & Ybarra, M. L. (2008). Online “predators” and their victims: Myths, realities, and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist*, 63(2), 111-128.