An Assessment of Mobile Internet Usage in a Rural Setting of a Developing Country

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ABSTRACT

In sub-Saharan Africa, studies show that the key driver for mobile Internet use is social media. However, despite the global reach and proliferation of the Internet and mobile phones, research on mobile Internet use in rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa is lacking. There is very little research on how rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa use the Internet, yet a number of studies have shown that there are unique technological needs of rural communities. The purpose of this article is to explore and understand how marginalized rural people in a sub-Saharan African country like Uganda use the Internet, and the factors that limit the use of this technology. This research found out that sports websites accessed through mobile phones were a more substantial indicator of mobile Internet use in Arapai sub-county. This is contrary to what much of the literature presents that the reason for going online in Sub-Saharan Africa is to access social media networking sites. The research also found out that the most limiting factor for accessing the Internet was poor network connectivity.

KEYWORDS

Internet, Mobile Phones, Social Media, Sub-Saharan Africa

INTRODUCTION

Recent research on mobile phone use in Sub-Saharan Africa suggests rapid uptake of smartphones and increasing use of mobile Internet for accessing the Internet. The key driver for broadband use, or for people to go online in many urban areas in sub-Sahara Africa is social media (RIA, 2012; Wyche et al. 2013; Calandro, 2015; Philbeck, 2017). However, despite their global reach and proliferation of mobile phones and Internet, research on mobile Internet access and use in rural communities is lacking (Wyche et al. 2013; Dalvit et al. 2014). There is very little research on how rural communities use the mobile Internet, yet a number of researchers have shown that rural communities have unique technological needs compared to urban communities (Gilbert et al. 2008). Could it be possible that social media is the main driving force for Internet use in rural areas in Sub-Saharan Africa? Today, people in all age groups and in all geographic locations across the world are increasingly using the Internet for several purposes and this development has opened the door for new research activities to scholars (Gorkemli, 2017). It, therefore, means that the Internet usage could vary across people with different demographical features. The purpose of this paper is to explore and understand how marginalized rural people in a Sub-Saharan African country like Uganda use mobile Internet, and the factors that limit the use of mobile Internet.
BACKGROUND

The mobile phones subscription growth rate in Sub-Saharan Africa still remains the highest in the world. In 2010, there was a 50 percent mobile phone penetration rate, and forecasts show that close to 100 percent penetration will be achieved in 2021 (Ericsson Mobility Report, 2016). As a result of the high mobile phones subscription, access to mobile Internet (also called mobile data) in Sub-Saharan Africa has been rising steadily as well, with a current penetration rate of around 35 percent (Ericsson Mobility Report, 2016). The key driver for Internet use, or for people to go online in the developing world is social media (Philbeck, 2017). In Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, studies have shown that most individuals who access the Internet on their mobile phones, aim at accessing social media, and social media therefore, has become the greatest boost for Internet use in Sub-Saharan Africa (Wyche et al. 2013). Household and Individual ICT Access and Use survey carried out in three African countries namely South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria indicated that accessing social media was the main reason why people bought and utilized mobile data (RIA, 2012). Similarly, another baseline study conducted in 2014 in the Western Cape Province in South Africa found that 48 percent of Internet users indicated that their main reason for going online was to access social media (Calandro, 2015).

Scott and Jacka (2015) observe that there is no single recognized definition of social media. In their attempt to define social media, they associated social media with “…a set of Web-based broadcast technologies that enable the democratization of content, giving people the ability to emerge from consumers of content to publishers…” (Scott and Jacka, 2015). The American Academy of Pediatrics, on the other hand, defines social media as “…any website that allows social interaction…” (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). The English Oxford Living Dictionary (2017) defines social media as “…websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.” While there are many loose descriptions of social media, Schein et al. (2010) observe that social media is fundamentally defined by its ability to provide an interactive environment for users, where there is a two-way communication and discussion, and users are encouraged to contribute content. The restriction to the web in the definitions by Scott and Jacka (2015) and by O’Keeffe and Clarke-Person (2011) does not seem appropriate. Based on the definition from English Oxford Living Dictionary, this paper considers the following websites and applications as social media tools: Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, BlackBerry Messenger, WeChat, PalmChat, YouTube, Instagram, and Google, to mention but a few. It is reported that there are over 1.7 billion Facebook users, 900 million WhatsApp users, 1.12 billion WeChat users and 320 million Twitter users globally (Smith, 2016). Over 3 million new photographs are uploaded on Facebook every single day and about 1 billion photographs have been uploaded to Instagram. Seventy-two hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute (Smith, 2016). From the statistics above, Facebook is the most widely used social media site in the world. Since 2009, Facebook has grown from extremely few users in Sub-Saharan Africa to become the most widely used social media platform (Balancing Act Report, 2014). Today, the average South African subscriber spends three hours on Facebook every day, while in Nigeria there are over 7 million active daily users of Facebook, 97 percent of whom access the service on mobile devices (Facebook Africa Statistics. 2015). By 2012, 50 percent of the one million Internet subscribers in Angola were using Facebook (Balancing Act Report, 2014).

However, despite the wide spread availability and use of mobile phones and mobile Internet, research on mobile Internet usage patterns in rural communities is lacking (Wyche et al. 2013; Dalvit et al. 2014). Very little research has been conducted on how rural communities use the mobile Internet, yet Gilbert et al. (2008) observe that rural communities have unique technological needs compared to urban communities. This, therefore, possess an important question that “could it be possible that social media is the main driving force for Internet use in rural areas in Sub-Saharan Africa”? This question is relevant because, people in all age groups and in different geographic locations across the world are increasingly using mobile Internet for different purposes. This has given researchers an opportunity to conduct studies on the different uses of mobile Internet among different demographic
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