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Perception of Virtual Dating and Relationship Building among Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Undergraduates Students, Igbariam

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Abstract

Social media has become part of everyday life as people establish relationships, maintain connectedness and interact with love ones separated by culture and distance. Different studies by media scholars and gurus have found that social media has become pertinent part of everyday life that cannot be abolished even though it comes with implications (both negative and positive). It is against this background that this study through survey -questionnaire examined perception of virtual dating and relationship among undergraduate student of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Nigeria. The aims were to find out how many students of the University own or have access to internet-enabled devices that enable them to date and form a relationship outside their campus. Also to determine their perception of the use of social media platforms for virtual dating and relationships formation. 370 respondents were selected for the study. Findings showed that undergraduates students studied own and have access to internet-enabled devices which have exposed them to dating and relationship formations with the use of social media. The findings also showed that dating and relationships formed on social media are not credible as some are built on deceptions and lies as perceived by users.

Key words: Perception, Virtual dating, Relationship Undergraduates, Students.

Introduction

The internet over the years has become a standard fixture in the lives of many people, who uses the platform mostly for interpersonal communication. Several mediums such as electronic mail (e-mail), group mailing forums, interactive games, and real-time chatting provide users with communication opportunities. Through interpersonal communication on the internet, users of the web have formed one form of relationship or the other. In a world that is now reliant on technology, it seems natural that the internet is where relationship seekers and daters have turned to (Williams, 2014). According to Wigmore (2014), the social media is a collection of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. They include websites and applications dedicated to forums, micro blogging, social networking, social bookmarking, social curation, and wikis are among the different types of social media. However, there are various reasons why people form relationship on the internet. They include loneliness; lack of intimacy in real-world relationships; shyness, curiosities, seeking life partners etc. the social media provides the platform for these shared interests. Presently, dating has gone beyond the normal meeting of individuals physically, most guys and ladies have turn to what is regarded as online dating where you meet your desire date online and interact through the internet without seeing the other person physically.

Improvements in internet dating website have become more interesting with the advent of virtual dating café, which is the next step in online dating. It involves the use of avatars for people to interact in a virtual venue that resembles a real life dating environment. A very good examples here is that daters can meet and chat romantically in a virtual café in Paris, London, Abuja and son on. Daters can explore together, play games and take relationship quizzes to get a better, deeper understanding of each other (Adeokun, 2013). Online dating which is a service that allows users to create internet-based profiles describing themselves and to contact or be contacted directly by others, has become an increasingly popular choice for the engineering of romantic encounters. The advent of online dating has both lowered the barrier to initiating contacts (from a painful phone call to a click of a mouse)

and simultaneously increased the number of available options. Despite this seeming promise, however, results have been decidedly mixed. Anecdotal evidence and market data suggest widespread user disappointment (Egan, 2003). Thus, against this forgoing, the study examines perception of virtual dating and relationship among Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University undergraduates' students'.

Statement of the Problem

The internet relationship is a form of relationship that occurs between cybercitizens who have met online, and in many cases known each other only via the internet. Online relationships are similar in many ways to normal real life relationships. This relationship can be romantic, platonic, or even based on business affairs. According to Duggan and Smith (2014) cited in Paul (2014), some 73% of online adults now use a social networking site of some kind. Facebook is the dominant social networking platform in the number of users, but a striking number of users are now diversifying onto other platforms. Some 42% of online adults now use multiple social networking sites.

As many continue to depend on internet based relationships because of the anonymity provided by the medium, there have been arguments for and against the subject of online relationship. Some argue that it doesn't last and that it leads to more break-ups and internet scam; while others believe that it can lead to finding long lasting partners. Against this backdrop, the question is how many students use social media platform for dating and relationships formation? How do undergraduates' students regard virtual dating and relationship formation? These are issue that this study attempted to solve.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Find out how many among Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University own or have access to internet-enabled devices.

2. Ascertain how many students use the social media platforms for dating and relationship purposes on the internet.

3. Determine their perception of the social media platforms as channels for virtual dating and relationships formation.

4. Discover their pre-existing beliefs about virtual dating and relationships.

Research Questions

1. How many among Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University own or have access to internet-enabled devices?

2. How many students use the social media platforms for dating and relationship purposes on the internet?

3. How many perceive the social media as credible platform for dating and relationship formation?

4. What are these students' beliefs regarding virtual dating and relationships?

Literature Review

The Social Media Platform

Social media has emerged to be one of the most vital communication means. It exist so as to ease communication among people regardless of the expanse, making it open to people to easily share information, files and pictures and videos, create blogs and send messages, and conduct real-time conversations. These systems are referred to as social, simply because they allow communication with friends, course mates, teachers, project supervisors, lecturers etc so easily and effectively. Social media which are a form of electronic communication that has become the highest activity on the internet. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a social media refers to forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users creates online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (such as videos).

According to Kim and Kim, (2010) Social media are the emerging digital communication channels which create a user oriented information sharing ground where any people can generate or subscribe information content as both information provider and consumer. Buettner, (2016) sees social media as computer mediated tools that allow people or companies to create, share exchange information, career interest, ideas, pictures/virtual communities and networks. By suggestion, through Social media, individuals can with no much of a stretch trade profitable information which can enhance their profession interest, thoughts and so on. It additionally helps in sending pictorial outlines of thoughts.

Andreas and Micheal (2010) asserts that social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. Kietzmann and Hermkens (2011) elaborates on this, stating that "social media depends on Mobile and Web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. They introduce substantial land pervasive changes to communications between communities and individuals". According to O'Neill (2008), a social platform is an operating system that leverages the power of social connectivity to virally distribute application. All social platforms according to O'Neill must have the following features:

i. A markup language that enables developers to display both personal and social information without accessing the information.

ii. An API (application program interface) that provides access to the core elements of the platform (e.g a cell phone's phonebook or Facebook profile wall).

iii. A system for defining a user's connections (bonds or ties).

iv. Privacy setting that enables users to control what information applications they access.

Types of Social Media Platforms

According to SEO Pressor (2015), (A word processing company that help website to gain favourable position on Google search), social media has expanded over the years to include six primary categories, each with its own unique set of characteristics. They include the following:

1. Social networks

A social network site is a social media site that allows users to connect and share with people who have similar interests and backgrounds. Facebook is the most popular example of a social network website.

2. Bookmarking sites

These sites allow users to save and organize links to any number of online resources and websites. A great feature of these services is the ability for the user to "tag" links, which makes them easier to search, and invariably, share with their followers. Stumbleupon is a popular example of a bookmarking site.

3. Social news

This is a social news site that allows its users to post news links and other items to outside articles. Users then vote on said items, and the items with the highest number of votes are most prominently displayed. A good example of a social news site is Reddit.

4. Media sharing

Media sharing websites allow users to share different types of media, such as picture and video. Most of these sites also offer social features, like the ability to create profiles and the option of commenting on the uploaded images. YouTube is the most well-known media sharing site in the world.

5. Microblogging

These are just what they sound like, sites, as well as links to other social media sites. These are then posted on 'wall' of everyone who has subscribed to that user's account. The most commonly used microblogging website is Twitter.

6. Blog comments and forums

An online forum is a site that lets users engage in conversations by posting and responding to community messages. A blog comment site is the same thing except a little more focused. The comments are usually centered on the specific subject of the attached blog. Google has a popular blogging site aptly, Blogger. However, there are a seemingly endless number of blogging sites, particularly because so many of them are niche-based, unlike the universal appeal of general social media.

The Benefits of the Social Media Platforms for Dating and Relationship Formation

According to Farrugia (2013), since the beginning of time, people have created ways to communicate, evolving from primitive language and markings to more recent technologies including telephones and computers. Prior to today's technology, people developed relationship face-to-face. Face to face interaction allows a person to respond in conversation by utilizing verbal and non-verbal clues they receive during the conversation. Today's systems of communication allow people to interact with each other in settings that are not face-to-face. The use of telephones and computers has paved the way for the most recent addition to communication-social media.

Online social networking sites (SNS) have tried to re-create face-to-face interactions on the web by allowing people to interact publically or privately. Many people use social media as a way to stay in contact, while others use the medium as a way to develop new connections. A benefit of social networking websites is that they allow people to develop or maintain relationships with individuals who may not be close to themselves geographically. When it comes to location, social networking websites allow families, couples, and friends to stay connected using a simple click of a button (Farrugia, 2013).

Computer mediated communication (CMC) allows individuals to have an interactive exchange of communication through technological devices. CMC is a way in which people are developing relationship online, often without the visual and oral cues that face-to-face communication would deliver (Rau, Gao and Ding, 2008). CMC is not only social media or web based communication. CMC also includes texting, emailing, instant messaging, video conferencing, and social media platforms to name a few. Now that cell phones have internet access, the smart phone provides users with the ability to communicate through many forms of media technology at the touch of a button. Whitty (2008), state that CMC might actually be a better way for people to communicate because individuals are more likely to be their true self online. The feeling produced by CMC can result in greater feelings of love and support, even if that person is not receiving face-to-face communication.

According to Duggan (2012), a person can shape his or her personality and characteristics much easier online through words than you can through real actions in person. Also, people get way more time to respond online, allowing them a chance to formulate how they want to present themselves and consciously shape who they are. Meeting someone in person may allow for misrepresentations of one's self through nervousness, but it is still portraying exactly who they are in real time. You can get a sense of who they are right away. With online dating, you obtain a foggy perception of who the other person is, and then have to wait for date to find out who they really are. In conventional dating, the process of finding new people, talking with them and eventually obtaining a date seems a lot more time-consuming and difficult than receiving emails for potential dates (Duggan, 2012).

The Negative Aspect of Online Dating

It is undeniably that online dating helps a number of people in meeting suitable potential partners and finding love, but at the same time online dating does have several bad sides and consequences. According to AnKee and Yazdanifard (2015), the negative effect includes:

1. **Deception**

The issue of online deception is commonly discussed since the emergence of internet, social media and now online dating. Deception can be considered as a deliberate act that intended to mislead people, while the deceiver has the intention of giving false perception and the other person has no clue that these actions are taking place (Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014). Deceptive behavior is more frequently found on the internet due to the absence of no verbal cues in online communication, and people can easily manipulate the information (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Online users may change the information on the internet according to their wish because cyberspace is a virtual place which allows users to chat freely without meeting each other face to face. The purpose of joining an online dating site is to search for a love partner. There is no doubt that people with better physical appearance and good personality are more popular than those who have relatively lower physical attractiveness

2. Unreliable Matching Method

Online dating sites collect data from users, study the possibility between users and recommend desirable potential partners to respective users. Many dating sites states that using proprietary algorithms, they can help online dater to pick a perfect match out of millions of people who is on the same dating site. Dating sites insist on the concept that their matching algorithms are scientifically valid, however they fail to disclose their algorithms and provide evidence that they are adhering to the standard of science (Finkel, as cited in Horn,2012). Besides that, algorithms of dating sites have a major issue with the information they collect from users. They only ask questions related to individual characteristics and personalities. These information do not guarantee the relationships and happiness between two persons. Based on the algorithms, two persons who have similar characteristics such as political orientation, religion background and life values are most probably going to end up to be perfect match in the system (Finkel& Karney, 2012).

3. Short-Lived Relationships

The most common process for online dating is searching for a desirable potential partner, then starting to communicate via messaging, getting to know each other and set up for a meeting in person. The key difference between online dating and traditional way of meeting people in real life is the sense of urgency (Slater, 2013). Many couples who meet online tend to maintain their relationships for a short period of time and eventually break up easily. Another possible outcome is the pair does not feel right when they encounter face to face.

4. Threat to Marriage

Today, the phenomenon of internet infidelity takes place in the society. Internet infidelity is defined as any sort of communication or interaction happens between two parties on the internet which carries emotions and behaviors away from the primary relationship and influence the relationship negatively (Jones & Tuttle, 2012). Those who suffer from dissatisfaction in marriage have the tendency to meet new friends online because other online daters do not know the real person who is already married. They can simply avoid the topic and refuse to disclose any information regarding their marital status.

Online users have the ability to manipulate the information and no one will discover the truth as long as the deceiver keeps lying.

5. **Health Risk of Sexual Activity**

Online dating sites provide a platform for users to search for new friends, ease boredom, relaxation, finding romantic partners, as well as sexual partners (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). A study states that

45% of female and 55% of male utilize internet for the sexual purpose; and those who claimed that they have met offline sexual partner online consist of 40% of female and 35% of male (Daneback, Mansson, and Ross, 2007). Having casual sex with an online stranger brings a major threat, which is raising the possibility of contracting sexual transmitted diseases (STDs). Dating sites offer identity and anonymity. It is very difficult to know the accurate STD status of online users as there is no guarantee that the person will confess the truth. A higher frequency in casual sex and number of sexual partners can cause greater incidence of STDs among the population (Chan & Ghose, 2014).

Review of Related Empirical Studies

Aaron, Kasali, Wumi and Adegbenjo (2016) studied the role of social media on online dating and sustainable marriage. This study employed descriptive statistics using quantitative research methodology which involves the use of questionnaires as the research instrument and the questionnaire. Data used for the analysis were collected with the use of a well-structured questionnaire administered to 50 respondents in the Ph.D family wholeness class of 2015/2016 of Babacok University, Ogun State and the analysis was done with the help of Statistical Package Service Solution (SPSS) version 21.0.

Findings showed that51% of the respondents admitted that dating and marrying an online friend is possible if only the person has a good heart and fears God. Furthermore, 72.61% of the respondents do not believe that online dating can lead to sustainable marriage while 27.39% of the population sampled believes otherwise. The researchers concludes that a larger percentage of the population surveyed do not accept that online dating can actually lead to a sustainable marriage. The study recommends that while people may engage in online dating, it is advisable they meet physically to become more acquainted before considering marriage. AnKee and Yazdanifard, (2015). This paper investigates the negative impacts brought by online dating, and to what extent do they affect online users. The researchers employed a secondary sources of data. It is discovered that there are eight main harmful aspects impacting the people and society. These are deception, unreliable matching method, short-lived relationships, threat to Marriage, health risk of Sexual activity, racial prejudice, and scam and privacybreach.The authors recommends that online users must learn how to protect themselves from risks and dangers if they wish to expand their social circles to the internet. They are responsible for their own health and safety. None of the reviewed works made an attempt to ascertain undergraduates' perception of virtual dating and relationships which this study would be filling the gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Penetration theory as propounded by Psychologist Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973. The theory explains how communication enriches the relationship of two or more individuals. It says that as relationship develop, interpersonal communication moves from relatively shallow, non-intimate levels, to deeper and more intimate ones. Relationships have normal ebbs and flows. The do not automatically get better and better where the participants learn more and more about each other. Instead, the participants have to work through the tensions of the relationship while they learn and group themselves and a parties in a relationships. At times the relationships are very open and sharing. Other time, one or both parties to the relationship need their space, or have other concerns, and the relationship is less open.

The theory posits that these cycles occur throughout the life of the relationship as the persons try to balance their needs for privacy and open relationship. According to Littlejohn (2002) citing Spring (2002), Altman and Taylor developed a patterns that is broken into four stages of relationship development. The first is described as "orientation of interaction" and is postulated to occur at the periphery of personality in public areas. During this encounters, individuals make only a small part of themselves accessible to others (Roloff and Gerald, 2007, p.259). An example of this is the way individuals interact with others at a party. If the person is outgoing, he/she is perceived as laugh-out-loud, fun-loving guy/girl with a positive attitude (Spring, 2009).

Social penetration theory plays a central in people assess in interpersonal rewards and costs, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, gained from interaction with others, and that the advancement of the

relationship is heavily dependent on the amount and nature of the rewards and costs. The rewards may be presented in the form of reciprocal disclosures from others and being "liked" by others, while costs may take the form of increased vulnerability and risks related to others.

In relation to the study, one must really take a look at and examine the social penetration theory to be able to understand the interactions people face every day, we all begin, and usually desire to have the stable exchange, with selected people. Our interactions during the stage of trying to know about the other person at the other end of the line would determine if we would enter into a relationship or not.

Methodology

The survey was adopted as the research design for this study. Survey as a research instrument focuses on a representative sample derived from the entire population of a study. According to Creswell (2012, p.376), survey research designs are procedures in quantitative research in which investigators administer a survey to a sample or to the entire population of people to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviours, or characteristics of the population. The survey method was considered very appropriate in this study due to the fact that it is a study of the characteristics of a sample through questioning that enables a researcher to make generalisations concerning her population of interest (Ohaja, 2009). The population of the study are undergraduate students of the Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State. According to the office of the Registrar, the undergraduates' population is 10,564 in 2017/2018 academic session.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sample size for the survey was determined using the Cozby's recommendation which states that statisticians have found 370 as a magic number for many surveys, no matter how large the population. It is estimated that for a population of over 10,000 (hundred thousand at 95 percent confidence level and + - 5% error) the sample is 370.

Therefore 370 sample size was good and was the most appropriate for this research work. The sampling technique used for this study was availability or convenience sampling technique. According to Agbo and Ugwu (2010) cited in Ezegwu, Owo and Akpan (2015), this is a form of sampling in which the researcher simply chooses anyone who comes his way until his sample is complete. It entails distribution of the questionnaire to those respondents who were readily available at the time of the research work.

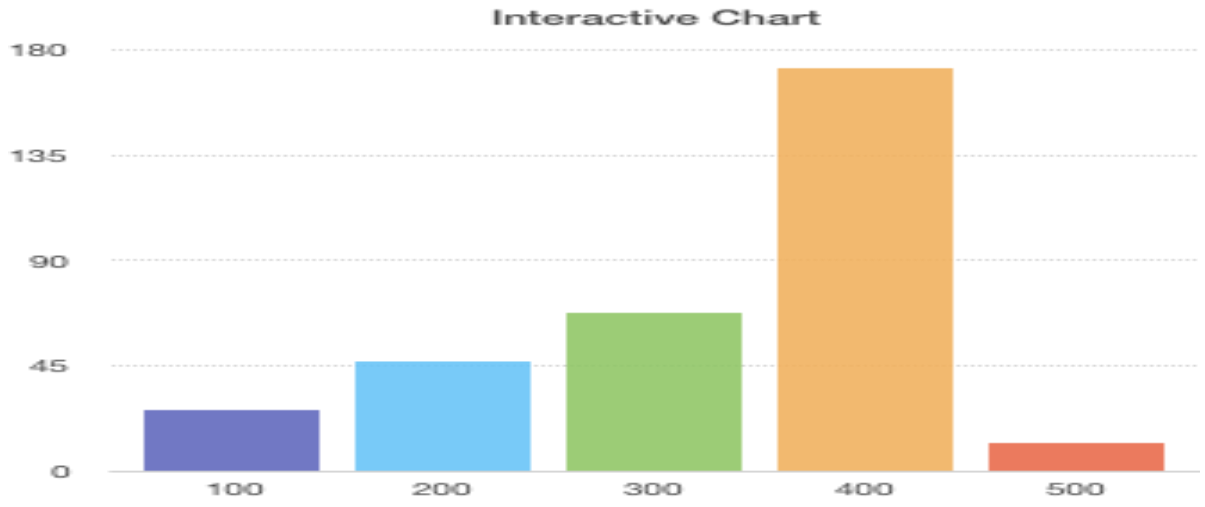
Data Presentation and Analysis

Out of 370 copies of questionnaire administered to students of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam campus, only 325 (88%) were returned and found useable, thus giving the questionnaire a mortality rate of 45 (12%). Therefore, only 325 copies of questionnaires were used for the purpose of data analysis.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Male	177	54
Female	148	46

Age Distribution		
16-20	51	16
21-25	156	48
26and above 30	118	36
Marital Status		
Single	289	89
Married	36	11
Year of Study		
100	26	8
200	47	14
300	68	21
400	172	53
500	12	4
Total	**325**	**100**



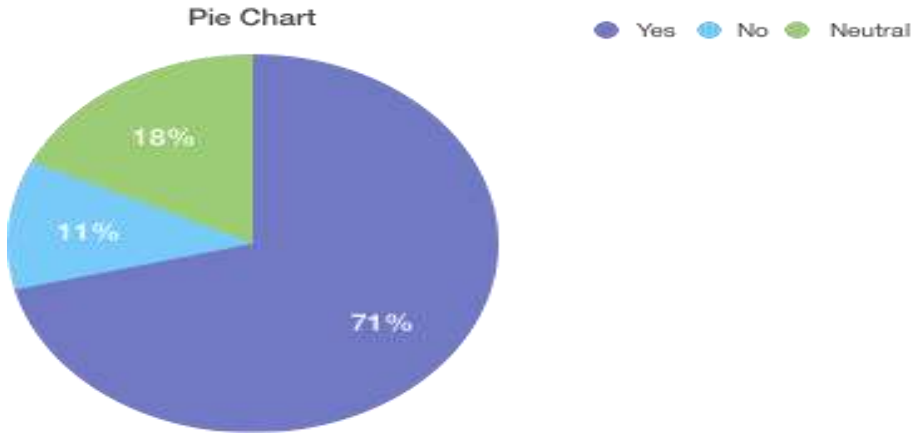
Source Field survey, 2018

The summary of demographic data on table one indicates that majority of the respondents (54%) are male. The fell between age range of 21-25 (48%), they were mostly single (89%) and most of them (53%) were in 400 level.

Research Question One

How many among Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University own or have access to internet-enabled devices?

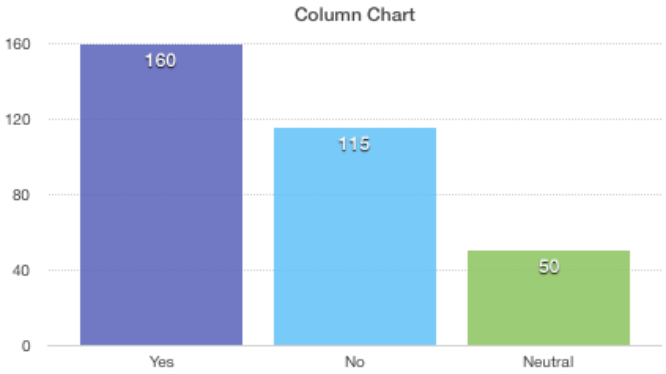
Table 2: Showing whether students have access to internet



The implication of the chart is that majority of respondents have access to internet enabled phone.

Research Question Two: How many students use the social media platforms for dating and relationship purposes on the internet?

Table 3: Showing whether students use social media platforms for dating and relationships

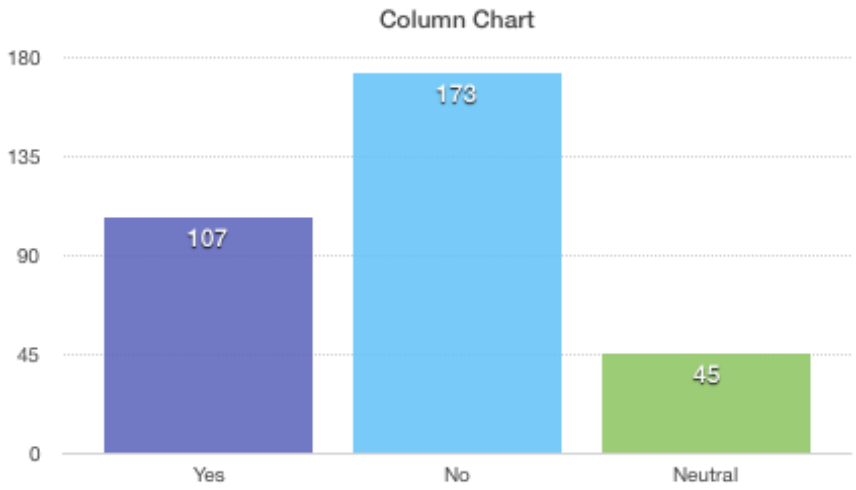


The chart above purports that 160 (51%) respondents uses social media platforms for dating, 115 (35%) said No, while 50 (15%) can't say anything. This implies that most of the respondents used social media platforms for dating and relationships.

Research Question Three

How many perceive the social media as credible platform for dating and relationship formation?

Table 4: Perception of the respondents on credibility of social media platforms for dating and relationship



The above chart showed that 107 (33%) respondents perceived social media platform as credible for dating and relationship, 173 (53%) disagreed on the issue while 45 (14%) respondents can't say. This means that most of the respondents perceived social media platforms as not credible for dating and relationship.

Research Question four

What are these students' beliefs regarding virtual dating and relationships?

Chart 5: Respondents belief regarding virtual dating and relationship

The data in chart 5 above indicated that 102 (31%), said virtual dating and relationship is a good platform, 168 (52%) respondents said it is not a good platform while 55 (17%) can't say anything on the issue. The implication is that respondents does not see virtual dating and relationship as a good platform.

Discussion of Findings

The first research question was aimed at ascertaining how many among Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University own or have access to internet-enabled devices. The data generated as presented in table two revealed that 231 (71%) respondents agreed that they have access to internet enabled, 36 (11%) respondent said no, while 58 (17%) can't say. This indicates that majority of the respondents have access to internet enabled phones. This findings support Olise (2014) position that more than half of the sampled population of University of Jos student's accessed internet enabled devices. The second research question sought to determine how many students use the social media platforms for dating and relationship purposes on the internet. It was revealed that most of the respondents used social media platforms for dating and relationships. Data in table 3 were very helpful in answering this research question. Based on the figures in the table 160 (51%) respondents uses social media platforms for dating, 115 (35%) said No, while 44 (14%) can't say anything. This implies that most of the respondents used social media platforms for dating and relationships. This is more so as the findings support the study conducted by Smith and Anderson (2015) on the five facts of online dating, which found that majority of Americans said online dating is a good way to meet people. Data presented in table 4 helped to provide response to research question four. In line with data in the table, 107 (33%) respondents perceived social media platform as credible for dating and relationship, 173 (53%) disagreed on the issue while 45 (14%) respondents can't say. This means that most of the respondents perceived social media platforms as not credible for dating and relationship. Tsikerdis and Zeadally (2014) pointed that deceivers have a great advantage for altering content online because of the way social networking sites are built. Rege (2009) affirms this in his findings that digital environment influence cyber-crimes and deception putting social networking sites users at risk of being deceived.

The researcher utilized the data collected and presented in table 5 to answer research question four. In line with data in the table, 102 (31%), said virtual dating and relationship is a good platform, 168 (52%) respondents said it is not a good platform while 55 (17%) can't say anything on the issue. The implication is that respondents does not see virtual dating and relationship as a good platform. This findings is contrary to social penetration theory. According to the theory as relationship develop, interpersonal communication moves from relatively shallow, non-intimate levels, to deeper and more intimate ones (Altman and Taylor, 2003).

Conclusion

The results from the analysed data showed that undergraduates respondents studied own and have access to internet-enabled devices; they are cybercitizens who are exposed to dating and relationship on the social media. This leads to the conclusion that the social media are not a credible platform for dating and relationship purposes, this is because of continual deception and lies noticed by users of the social media.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the recommendation of this study is as follows:

1. Users' of the social media should tread with caution in their use of the platform for dating and finding relationship, as individuals that use the medium tend to portray themselves falsely to get favourably attention.

2. Social media users' who use the medium for dating and relationships should ensure that virtual relationships develop into a mature stage which involves lot of time trying to know the person at the other end of the line before they develop trust

3. As much as possible online daters should meet face to face subsequently. This will reduce chances of deception.

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