

Application of Digital Technology in the Understanding of Young Adult Literature

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Abstract: Digital communications are thoughtfully influencing young adult communications. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how young adult novels portray digital communications features using text messages, e-mails, or blogs. This study explores adult authors' representations of characters in young adult literature (YAL) using digital communication like text messaging, blogs, instant messaging (IM), social networking websites, and email. The argument is that digital communication presents a new feature of young adult literature which has not yet been satisfactorily and adequately explored. The paper examines how the incidence of digital communication in contemporary society is signified in texts developed for the teens by illustrating who, what, and why of digital communication found in the texts. The paper also examines meta-themes available in the texts as the characters themselves reveal how digital communication impacts their life. The study found that the young adult literature texts used many forms of communication to maintain the narrative voice including blogs, e-mail, IM, text messages and social networking sites. The themes of establishing interpersonal connections, constructing identity and relationships with family were also illustrated and portrayed through the texts.

Keywords: Blogs, Digital Communication, E-Mail, Young Adult Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects life, hence the creative writer cannot write outside his experience. It communicates thoughts, ideas and experiences to the reader and maintains effort in communication. The creative writer interprets life and writes in a creative and imaginative form. Duruaku (2019), notes that literature is embellished with beauty and aesthetics through the use of words. The young adult literature is referred to as adolescent fiction. Mallika and Jayakaran (2013) describe young adult literature as literature that is in some way connected with the young adult. Commenting on his, they note that the evolutionary path of young adult literature spans several centuries. Owen (2003) and Yongan (2008) identifies the characteristics of young adult literature that relate so closely to the issues faced in young adulthood that have also made young literature highly relevant to the young adult, thus making it favoured as selected reading material for young adult students in many countries.

The young adult literature according to Dike (2005) plays the role in encouraging reading and helping to develop reading habits and skills for lifelong education and growth. Literature

helps the young adults to know that their experiences are shared with others. These are usually noticeable in their relationship problems and reassurances during reading situation. Nigeria young adults derive their literary and aesthetic pleasures through listening of stories, proverbs and riddles told by adults. Cyprian Ekwensi's *Passport of Mallam Iliya* (1960). The *Passport of Mallam Iliya* is a classic story of love, adventure and retribution, way ahead of its time. Set in colonial Kano, the story follows a man Mallam Iliya who spent a greater part of his life seeking revenge on Mallam Usman for the death of his wife, Zarah. Though he was able to avenge the wrong done to him, it came at a very high price. This novel explores themes of trust, betrayal and revenge, and Cyprian Ekwensi's *Drummer Boy* (1960) tells a talented blind drummer boy and singer moved from place to place entertaining people with his performance But deep down there is an undisclosed unhappiness. The teens can now identify Why is Akin unhappy? Who among his friends can he trust in his search for true happiness? Cyprian Ekwensi's *African Night Entertainment* (1962) tells another story of desire and vengeance, this book starts with the longing of a wealthy man called Shehu for a child of his own and continues with the obsessive search by Abu Bakir for revenge on Shehu for luring away the woman he was to marry. It ends with the murder of Shehu by his own son. Kunle Akinsemoyin's *Twilight and the Tortoise* (1963) and Kola Onadipe's *Adventures of Souza* (1965). The *Adventures of Souza*: A rascally village boy goes hunting, enrolls in a secret cult, meets a magician and engages in other adventures. What were his experiences? These represented the earliest literary fiction in Nigerian young adult literature. These early literary works tended to be traditional stories, real life stories and adventures stories. Dike (2005) opines that the development of these Nigerian fictional works motivated the need for a literature that is adequately reflecting the indigenous views and realities in Nigeria. Ozurumba (2009) states that Nigerian authors such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ken Saro Wiwa, Onuora Nzekwu, Anezi Okoro, Flora Nwapa, Oladele Taiwo wrote several fictional works for young adults, these were done to make the young adults to appreciate their environment. There are many types of fictional works for Nigerian young adults such as Ekwensi's *Juju Rock*, *Juju Rock* is a fast-paced speculative adventure novella set in newly post-colonial Nigeria (circa 1960). Rikku, a curious college boy in Western Nigeria, is drawn into a quest for a lost gold mine in northern

Nigeria after answering an advert for a boy guide. It was a fun and entertaining read I'd recommend to anyone who loves high-thrill adventures. Nwankwo's *More Tales Out of School*, Okoro's *One Week, One Trouble* Published in 1972 under the series *African Reader's Library 21, One Week One Trouble* was, and yet remains a fascinating book, one that endeared many schoolboys and girls of the 70s and 80s to Literature in English. Enfant terrible Wilson Tagbo, its protagonist, was a witty elementary school pupil who had just passed his entrance examination into St Mark's Grammar School, where he got into one trouble after another—week in week out—sometimes innocently, other times not. The hilarious memory survives till date in anyone who read the 112-page book written for young minds. And Ekwensi's *Eze Goes to School* Eze Goes to School tells the story of Eze and his quest to acquire western education. The author narrates the travails of Eze, his resilience and how he eventually succeeded in his dream amongst others.

II. YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

A broad definition of young adult literature would refer to the transitory period where a person leaves behind his childhood and embarks on the journey towards adulthood. This period according to Brushman and Herb (2006) is referred to as adolescence and could range between 11 to 22 although a narrower span of about 12 to 19 years is generally more accepted. Jayakaran and Mallika (2013) confirm that young adulthood is the period during which the young adults search for self identity. According to Nilson and Donelson (2001) young adult literature is anything that readers between the appropriate ages of 12 to 18 years would choose to read. They are literature written for, published and marked to young adults. They further describe the young adult literature as anything that is a popular choice as reading material for young adult students. Stephen (2007) notes that apart from independently choosing to read books that are meaningful reflections of their own thoughts about growing ups, young adults may also seek experiences in the text by identifying with the adult protagonist in the story. Owen (2003) describes young adult literature written for the young adults and that which the young adult would choose to read independently.

Wolf (2007) states that the young adult literature is distinct from other literacy genres hence it is importantly the definition of young adult protagonist at the center of the plot who is perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature and independent. He further notes that young adult literature is usually written from the teenage protagonist point of view and it is the voice of the young adult which is projected. The actions and the decisions of the main young adult characters are factors in the outcome of the conflict. Wolf observes that the themes found in young adults' literature are contemporary and meaningful to young adults includes issues that are relevant to the period of young adulthood.

Diala (2018) contends that in Nigeria, young adult literature contents is still relatively new, the popularity of the genre of literature has not yet caught up with selective reading

materials for students in the secondary schools. According to him, the selection of reading materials for Nigeria young adult students has not been highly and truly explored. The use of literary texts in the Nigeria Secondary school system is introduced as part of the English Language Curriculum. Students have after shown lack of relevance and identification with the texts. He notes that literary works used as compulsory components of the English Language subject in Secondary Schools reveal little enthusiasm and interest shown by students due to lack of relevance and identification with the texts. He further asserts literary works have not yet been subjected to critical examination in order to ascertain the pressure of teenage issues or the extent of relevance it has to the young adult Nigeria students who will be reading them. He suggests further that important fact that has to be taken into consideration is that the very experience of reading itself makes the young adult active participant who not only makes meaning from pages but get their personal histories embedded in the creation and interpretation of the texts.

Cart (2008) posits that as a literary genre young adult literature is fiction featuring young adult characters with which young adult readers can relate. According to him, major characteristics of the feature and educational value of this category of literature involves the extent to which young adult readers can observe their reflection in the characters' experiences and identify with characters who represent experiences with which they are unfamiliar. Goering & Connors (2014) note that these characteristics rely on a recognized need to fit into place reluctant readers with stories that will interest them and make available young adult readers with prospects to tackle with problems and issues relating to adolescence.

Young adult literature as the genre has developed and additional titles have been published and marketed toward young adult readers. The media and technology have been differently represented as components in the lives of characters, a device through which characters attend to problems, and important elements of the problem presented to characters. Working from broad definitions, media and technology as digital devices have always been available in young adult literature as constituents in the lives of characters. For instance, the use of mobile phone is a feature in the life of young adults and the inclusion of mobile phone helps to establish them as characters with which young adult readers can associate. Not only is the mobile phone available but the character's dealings in relationship to digital devices reflecting the practices with which it is employed in the temporal setting of the story. Pytash & Ferdig (2016) posit that one of the challenges presented by the involvement of digital devices as a feature in the lives of characters is that it provides as a time anchor that can possibly impact on how young adult readers relate to the characters and the story.

Digital devices like media and technology are means through which characters solve problems. The mobile phones used in the young adult novels make available particular opportunities

and limitations in the solving of problems. The manner problems are solved with media and technology are shaped by their opportunities and limitations and the manner they are employed by the characters.

Most young adult literature raises curious questions about the relevance of digital technology in the lives of its characters and how interaction among people in the society. As a result of these, digital devices are presented as central feature of the setback presented to the characters.

Young adult literature as a genre of fiction reflects the reality of the occurrence and application of digital devices specific to particular time periods, and it makes available imagined realities, in which media and technology play roles, in the form of horror and science fiction. Within the real and imagined fictional contexts of young adult literature, three specific representations of digital devices are fashionable in young adult literature. These are digital communication, social media, and surveillance technology.

Digital Communication

Koss & Teale (2009) assert that young adult literature endeavours to symbolize and characterize the lives of young adults with the intention of appeal to readers of that age, the relevance with which young adult characters interact changes to reflect the period of the fictional settings. The introduction of new methods of communication among young adults informs the manner the increasingly digital forms of communication are signified in young adult literature.

As a feature in the lives of characters, digital communication is usually characterized in young adult literature through e-mail and message conversations with several novels involving writing conventions characteristically utilized in young adult text types such as abbreviations, emoticons, emoji, capitalization, and punctuation use. These text forms are made use of in various ways within the novels. According to Koss & Tucker-Raymond (2010), several young adult novels are written solely as digital communication, others involve digital communication within the body of the narrative, and others are written in form of epistolary novels. In Lauren Myracle's series, *The Internet Girls* involves four young adult novels that are written in form of text message transcripts characterizing three teenage girls who employ digital communication in sharing their lives and experiences in high school and freshman year of college across a span of two years. Koss & Tucker-Raymond posit that young adult novels that mark digital communication often involve time and date stamps of the messages, which attach the conversations in a timeline and assist the readers understanding of the significance of digital communication in the lives of teens along a particular timescale. The digital communication element within young adult novels normally place center of attention on everyday features in the lives of teens, such as school assignments, social events, friendships and arguments, and romantic relationships.

Brody (2010) citing another clear example note that digital communication also features as a means through which characters address the problems presented to them. He illustrated this with the novel *My Life Undecided* where the protagonist, Brooklyn, posts anonymously to a blog asking readers for advice about difficulties she is facing in her life. The blog as a variety of digital communication permits Brooklyn to interact and relate with others under the blanket of anonymity to obtain advice that is meticulous and special to her resolution but not special to her real-life identity. The digital communication serves partially as the means through which Brooklyn attends and tackles her problems in a manner that other forms of communications obtainable and accessible to her may not afford.

In another novel *ChaseR*, Rosen (2002) identifies e-mails in the novel as elements of digital communication which forms the principal means through which the protagonist, Chase practices his experiences travelling from the city to a rural area. Written as an epistolary fiction, the e-mails element portrays the communication between Chase and his sister, who is away at college, and his friends back in the city. The e-mails make available to him the digital means of communication across the distance between his friends and sister. Chase's digital communication provides the crucial means through which he carries out major changes in his life associated to movement and distance from experiences in the city with which is known and recognizable. These show that digital communication as featured is tool employed by characters to work through problems in their lives.

Digital communication features as a crucial element in problem solving for issues the characters are facing. The deployment of digital communication is aspect of a larger problem. Digital communication is the most important problem the character encounter. For instance, the problem that characters encounter in young adult literature involving digital communication is identity formation. In the view of Koss and Tucker-Raymond (2010), they observe characters in young adult literature among the interpersonal-social identities characterized by the digital communication, characters principally interacted as "friends and relevant others or to meet new people online" (p. 48). Characters rarely interact with adults in their lives, and characters use digital communication to carry out a new or different identity. These identity performances interceded by digital communication provides sites for problems given out to characters.

Klinger (2008) in the novel, *The Kingdom of Strange* illustrated the use digital communication with a female character in attempt to establish a relationship with an online classmate she assumes to be a girl. The online classmate does not try to make accurate her inaccuracy, and the relationship is made difficult when their genders are disclosed. The digital communication is a central element in hiding one's identity in online interaction and communication. It presents complications of privacy and protection that go with those communication practices. Young adult literature is distinct

since the digital communication is more than simply the means through which characters address problems.

Digital Youth

Ito, Davidson, Jenkins, Lee, Eisenberg, & Weiss, (2008) assert that young people are growing up in the period where digital have become component of social and cultural framework for learning, play, and social communication. Digital technology is presently everywhere. According to Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, & Phelps (1998), literacy practices of present day adolescents are different from teens of earlier generations. In the view of Bruce (2004) through this new media, teens of the present generation are uncovering new methods of communication and expressing themselves. Rheingold (2002) posits that the sudden increase of teen involvement on the Internet and use of mobile technologies has influenced ways their mode of reading, writing, and socializing. New varieties of reading and writing, online and offline, through different digital devices such as IM, email and text messaging creates new literacy practices. This has given rise to new rules and conventions such as increased utilization of “chatspeak” like abbreviations, emoticons.

Weber & Mitchell (2008) note that teens employ new digital devices as conservatory methods for themselves which are embodied tools for informing others who they are and who they might like to be. They spend additional time presenting and re-presenting themselves to others through digital communication. However, what forms of identities do they present, to whom, and for what purposes? Ito, Davidson, Jenkins, Lee, Eisenberg, & Weiss, 2008 state that most youths make use of online digital media as additional aspects of their offline lives. They chat to the same people online as offline, and they chat about the same topics: friendships, romance, and their daily lives. They also note that in the situation of social networking sites, the distinction is that such communication is now continually written for the world to see. These are now made public for searchable by an audience undetectable to the authors.

Teens’ use of digital media should be conceptualized as a continuous part of their lives, and their time online as a part of their fluid and dynamic identity development. The sudden increase of Myspace, Facebook, and Youtube which are typical social networking sites is just beginning to appear in Young adult literature. Young adult literatures that reveal digital communication tend to represent particular forms of adolescents using such digital communication.

Digital Literacy & Young Adult Literature

The concept of digital literacy according to Richard Lanham (1995) explains being deeply literate in the digital world. This means being well noticed, heard, read and skilled at making sense of complex images, sounds and the syntactical complexity of words. It involves being able to understand the shifting mixture of words, images, and sounds.

The images for young people like sound bites and video messages and texting takes on new forms with Smartphone applications such as video-messaging and Snapchat. To adapt to a new environment, many teens are unsatisfied with the traditional way of communicating hence there is often another and faster way. Currently, Apple has created integrated music, video, and cell phone technology which have revolutionized the communication industry, it is no wonder that the way teens see and acknowledge the world as constantly changing. Curwood and Cowell (2011) affirm the significance of adapting to the technological world in which young adults will prosper.

Forms of Digital Devices in Young Adult Literature

i. Social Media

This social media is a significant form of media and technology in the lives of young adults that extends beyond digital communication to involve a constant and ever-changing presentation of identity that is viewed as attached to a specific social media platform. Social media in young adult literature also provide elements in the everyday lives of characters. It assists characters in solving problems. Much young adult literature that feature social media are regarded to be cautionary tales by organizations promotion of young adult literature. These literary works are encouraged as significantly helpful in the young readers in order to avoid the mistakes and pitfalls that teens encounter on social media platforms.

The social media platform does not significantly present how the characters go about working through the problems they face. But the presence of the social media platform illustrates the element in the characters’ lives which assists to establish the time period in which the story is set. This makes the characters relevant to present-day readers. The involvement of particular social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter work against the enduring marketability of the young adult literature as readers drifts from one social media platform to another.

In much young adult literature that applies social media; a typical problems faced by teens are strengthened by the ability of social media to reach wide audience and spreading beyond the control of the characters in the literature texts. The representation of social media assists in demonstrating the interrelationship between teen’s online activity and their relationship with other persons.

ii. Surveillance technology

Surveillance technology features in young adult literature variously as oppressive surveillance by a government in which characters are willing participants in the surveillance. This according to Andrejevic (2004) and Flanagan (2014) refers to as imaginative and creative surveillance in which characters in young adult literature observe each other. Connors (2017) explains that typical storyline of young adult characters is perceived to appeal to young adult readers since it works as a form of metaphor for adolescence since youth

experience of restrictive environments eventually overcome limitations. Surveillance technology in the lives of teens allow for both freedom of expression and interaction with peers and oppressive oversight by controlling forces like corporations or parents. Surveillance technology is also represented as the means through which adolescent characters address their problems.

The representation of oppressive surveillance technology as important element of the problems young adult characters face is exemplified as a tool of the oppressor. Young adult literature with this form of subversion of oppressive surveillance technology are potentially demanding to teen readers hence the stories progress beyond didactic and cautionary tales of the potential danger of media and technology by illustrating young adult characters using digital devices in ways that encourage resistance to oppressive systems.

iii. Glogster

Glogster seems to be a suitable platform for publishing the teens' innovative work. Glogster EDU (<http://edu.glogster.com>) is one of several educational technologies available to young adults and teachers. The website permits its users to create glogs, or graphic blogs. Instead of the use of text as the major mode of communication like the traditional blog, glogs use visual elements to convey the message of the creator. Teens can develop virtual posters, including audio, video, text, hyperlinks, and images, and then share them publicly. Essentially, the finished product looks like an interactive poster with components such as music, YouTube videos, pictures, and text to create a representation of a main idea. Glogster is different from traditional blogging platforms. The site tries to create a virtual classroom. With these and other characteristics, Glogster is well suited for young adult setting. Glogster are created to expand digital literacy and provide differentiated instructional activities. Its website creates a platform for young adults to creatively express their ideas.

Numerous traits of Glogster strengthen concepts that are vital to digital literacy. Glogster as Web 2.0 platform assists users in the creation of interactive online posters called glogs, through the addition of images, videos, audio and text. Young adults can employ Glogster in building upon their knowledge while learning. Young adults enjoy creating their own meaning and displaying it to others in an interactive, online poster. Its format promotes the construction of additional knowledge while balancing mastery of skills and the utilization of multimedia and web resources. Several of its tools assist the fostering of creativity of learner-centered tool which helps in building knowledge and allowing young adults to construct their own meaning of the content of a literary work.

A variety of templates to construct a glog give young adults the option of selecting their own layouts. There are several different forms of virtual buttons, pictures, and textboxes

which also helpful when attempting to be creative. In young adults literature incorporating technologies help to make literature more engaging. It can contribute to the main goal of English language, helping them enhance their love for and understanding of literature and respond critically to creativity.

Lack of Diversity

Digital devices were mainly represented as elements in the lives of teens that help them in communication, complete school work, and making new friends. Young adult literature is a genre familiarized toward symbolizing the reality of young adults. The content analysis makes known that young adult literature incorporates digital devices to unpleasantly bring into line to reflect the participation in digital technologies. According to Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin (2005) this is problematic for the diversity of teens who utilize digital devices in their daily lives who are potential readers of young adult literature, and who seek to see themselves represented by the genre.

III. CONCLUSION

The article is projected to be significant in the determination of the extent to which this literature genre fulfilled the objectives of relevance to the young adult. The article describes the extent to which the young adults have identified with the texts on a personal level and how they relate to them.

The article showed identification with the young adult characters and issues in the novels was present in varying degrees and differed from one teen to another. There was also a form of counter—identification with young adult protagonists in the novels when the teens felt that they would not measure up to the strength of the characters. Again, there were sense of empathy and common bonding that developed between students and characters which elicited responses indicating indignation, protectiveness, loyalty and defensiveness towards the characters when the occasion arose which further illustrated their identification with the characters.

Another thought arising from the article is that identification of issues and characters that are familiar is significant not only by their presence but also by their absence. The young adult reader is also at certain points able to move from his own position as young adult and adopt a more objective perspective of situations which is indicative of a maturity that is more commonly associated with adulthood

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