

Use of Memes by Unizik Netizen's on Tiktok as a Form of Nonverbal Communication Expression

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Abstract

This study analyzed the shift from blogs to Tiktok in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Netizens and the use of memes as a form of nonverbal communication. The study examined several factors which might have led to this transition from blogs to Tiktok, as well as the increasing use of memes as a form of nonverbal communication on Tiktok. Anchored on the medium theory and the uses and gratifications theory, the study adopted the survey research method in obtaining quantitative data from 380 respondents aged 16 – 30 years. The research found that Tiktok has become increasingly popular among young people, and that it offers new opportunities for expression and connection that were not possible with traditional blogging platforms. Memes have also become an important part of online communication, offering a creative and playful way to express oneself. The study concluded that the use of memes and Tiktok is changing the way people communicate, and this shift has implications for both individual expression and social interaction.

Keywords: Blogs, Memes, Netizens, Nonverbal Communication, Tiktok

Introduction

In recent years, influencer platforms have undergone a significant evolution, with traditional blogs giving way to newer social media platforms like Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tiktok. Blogs which originally gained popularity as a platform for individuals to share their thoughts and expertise in long-form written content, have gradually been overshadowed by the immediacy and brevity of the micro-blogging content of these fast-rising social media platforms. Under consideration in this study is one of these platforms, Tiktok.

The popularity of blogs which was heavily dependent on written content has seen a massive decline, while Tiktok, a video-sharing social media platform, has emerged as a dominant force in the digital landscape (Aparajita & Sara, 2022). This transition from blogs to Tiktok reveals an obvious shift in content consumption and content creation patterns. It also signifies a growing preference for visually-driven, concise, and interactive content consumption.

Memes have become a popular form of nonverbal communication on social media platforms, including Tiktok. Memes are often used to convey humor, sarcasm, and relatability, making them a powerful tool for influencers to connect with their audience. The use of memes as a means of nonverbal communication on Tiktok has reshaped the way users interact and share ideas, as users employ this as a quick and efficient way to express their thoughts and feelings, contributing to the platform's vibrant and fast-paced nature.

As digital trends continue to evolve, it is important that content creators adapt to, and embrace new formats to effectively engage with their audience. This study aims to explore the shift from blogs to Tiktok and examine the emergence of memes as a form of nonverbal communication

on this platform. By evaluating these developments, we can gain insights into the ever-changing landscape of influencer platforms, and also examine the role of visual content in shaping online interactions.

Background

The transition from blogs to Tiktok represents a significant revolution in influencer platforms and the way content is consumed and shared. Blogging has a rich history that dates back to the early days of the internet. The term “blog” is a truncation of “weblog” which refers to a website that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks, videos, and photographs provided by the writer (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

In the late 1990s, as internet technology advanced, individuals started creating online platforms where they could regularly publish and share their thoughts, experiences and expertise. These early blogs were often simple and text-based, resembling digital diaries or personal journals. Over time, blogs evolved in terms of design, functionality, and content formats. They incorporated multimedia elements such as images, videos, and podcasts. Some blogs transformed into full-fledged online publications, while others retained their personal and informal nature. However, with the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok, the blogging landscape experienced a shift and is currently facing a massive decline.

Tiktok in particular, is a social media platform that has rapidly gained popularity worldwide, particularly among younger audiences – the Generation Z. Tiktok gained popularity in 2020, during the global lockdown as young people saw it as a means to promote their talents and explore their creativity. Today, Tiktok is recognized as one of the fastest-growing short video apps worldwide, attracting millions of users from various countries (Negeria-Rey et al. 2022). This social medium offers users a platform to create and share short-form videos, typically ranging from 15 seconds to three minutes in length. This format allows for quick engaging content that captivates users’ attention in a visually compelling manner.

In addition to this, nonverbal communication using memes has become a significant aspect of the Tiktok platform, as users increasingly rely on visual content to express themselves. With communication taking place primarily online, the role of humor has been adapted to the new platforms of social media through memes (Mya, 2022; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2014). A meme is an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media (Merriam Webster, 2023). These memes come in the form of short-captioned video clips on Tiktok and has now been widely adopted by Netizens. Hartman, Berg, Fulton & Schuler, (2021) opine that meme abound on the internet and can last in popularity from a week to some years. For example, the distracted boyfriend meme and the grumpy cat meme. They added that teachers who follow the trend can use the hype and popularity of memes to their advantage in their classrooms.

As social media continues to become imbedded into daily life for millions of individuals worldwide, the question of how to authentically present oneself across online and offline spaces has similarly captured scholarly attention (Kristen & Nazanin, 2021). This emphasizes the prevalence of visual communication in the form of emojis, stickers and memes, and the shift away from traditional verbal communication, which can often be lengthy and less engaging. Nonverbal forms of communication have now been adopted as a way to express complex ideas, emotions and opinions in a simple and engaging way. As Netizens become more accustomed to communicating through emojis, images and videos, it is possible that they will prefer these methods to traditional verbal communication.

Statement of the Problem

With the evolution of influencer platforms, there has been a significant shift from traditional blogs to newer platforms like Tiktok. This shift raises the question of whether blogging is still popular among the younger generation, especially with the dominance of micro-blogging on Facebook and Twitter and short videos on Tiktok.

Furthermore, the emergence of memes as a form of nonverbal communication on these platforms adds another dimension to the analysis. The question is if the usage of memes and stickers will soon dominate verbal communication in the online world. As a result, it is important to understand the evolution and impact of influencer platforms. This study therefore, seeks to examine how the influencer landscape has evolved from blogs to Tiktok, and how memes have become a significant form of nonverbal communication on Tiktok.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to understand and analyze the role of memes as a form of nonverbal communication on newer platforms like Tiktok. The specific objectives include the following:

- i. To examine those factors that have contributed to the decline of traditional blogging platforms.
- ii. To ascertain how memes have become an important means for communication on Tiktok.

Research Questions

To help in investigation of this research problem, the following questions are posed:

- i. What factors have contributed to the decline of traditional blogging platforms?
- ii. In what ways have memes become an important means for communication on Tiktok?

Literature Review

Various scholars have carried out various studies and researches on the evolution of influencer platforms, as well as the use of memes as a form of nonverbal communication on the internet. Pinjama and Cheshire (2016) in their study examined the change in the online landscape of blogging in the Scandinavian context. Using a mixed methods approach in which they conducted interviews on 13 bloggers' and how their roles have changed over time, how bloggers have adapted to the changing landscape of blogging, as well as the perceptions of future blogging. Their findings showed that as blogs become more commercialized and professionalized, the rules of blogging and the relationship of bloggers change. In essence, bloggers who are more focused on monetization and growing their audience may alter their content and focus on marketing themselves, while those who prioritize personal connections and expression may be more resistant to these changes. They also found that bloggers have adapted to this changing landscape by adopting other media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram, which complement their blogs, by increasing their productivity and blogging more regularly, and by editing their content more carefully before publishing. Finally, through their research, Pinjama et al argued that as blogging continues to evolve, it will likely become more fragmented across various media platforms. Finding relevant blog content may become more difficult for readers, and for the bloggers themselves, the challenge will be to strike a balance between commercial and personal content in order to maintain both their audience, and their own sense of authenticity.

In a study Jose, Maria and Virgin (2020) sought to determine how memes can be powerful tools for collective coping and social change. They examined how memes have evolved into prominent social representations within mainstream media by analyzing the four stages of collective coping. This study provided an outline of how people manage stressors in the midst of a risk event like that generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They suggest that memes are a way for people to deal with a stressful situation and reevaluate the information they receive. As was the case in Puerto Rico during the COVID-19 crisis, memes helped people cope by simplifying complex information from the traditional media, and giving a rational, humorous perspective on it.

Aparajita and Sara (2022) examined “Why Everyone is on Tiktok Now”. They sought to find out what made Tiktok special in the eyes of Netizens and discovered that despite its similar features and services with other social media, Tiktok differs from all the other platforms in its approach to self-expression and identity creation. Tiktok allows for a more raw and spontaneous expression of identity which is slightly different from the “networked self” that is found on other social media. Some other unique features such as “the algorithm” set it apart and have brought about a paradigm shift to the social medium.

Another study carried out by Mya (2022) titled “How Gen Z Communicates with Memes” sought to discover how Generation Z interpret and communicate through memes on the internet and social media. She employed a qualitative research method where she interviewed 16 members of Generation Z and asked them to create three memes from a provided template and explain their creative process. Her findings revealed that Generation Z view memes as symbolic images that can be used to represent shared personal experiences, express feelings, or relatable events that occur in everyday life in a humorous way.

Research Methodology

The study is quantitative in nature and adopted survey research method. The area of study was Nnamdi Azikiwe University main campus in Awka, Anambra State. The study population consists of 37, 970 undergraduate students who are most likely Gen Zs between the ages of 16-25. However, for the purpose of data collection, 380 sample size was achieved through the Krejcie & Morgan table which was generalized to the entire student population. The research instrument used was questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three sections containing close-ended questions designed to supply answers to the research questions. The researcher physically distributed copies of the questionnaire to the respondents and this ensured a 100 percent return rate.

Result of the Findings

A total number of 380 copies of questionnaire were distributed to students at their various departments and faculties. The researcher personally administered the copies of questionnaire to the respondents, ensuring that they were able to fill it out accurately and completely. The copies of the questionnaire were collected on the spot, resulting in a 100 percent return rate.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Demographic Variables

The respondents’ demographic (data) variables were measured using questions 1 to 6 in the questionnaire. Data generated from their responses were presented in the following charts:

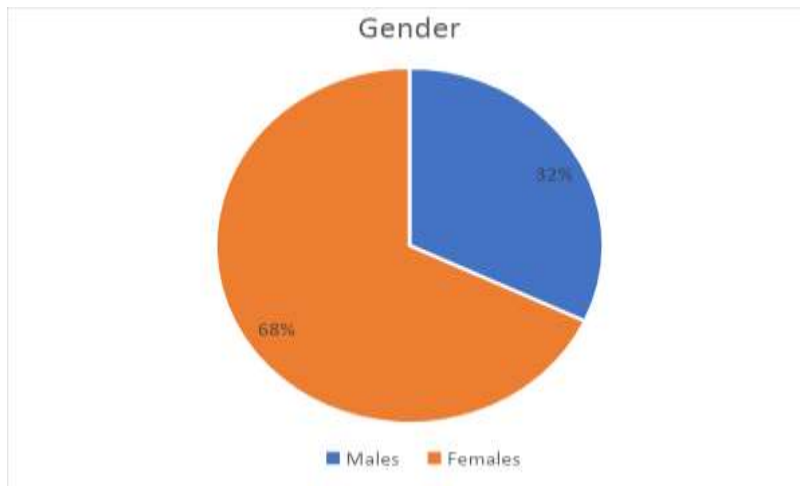


Figure 1: Gender of Respondents

Data in Figure 1 show that 32% of the respondents are males while 68% of the respondents are females. This indicates that majority of the respondents are females.

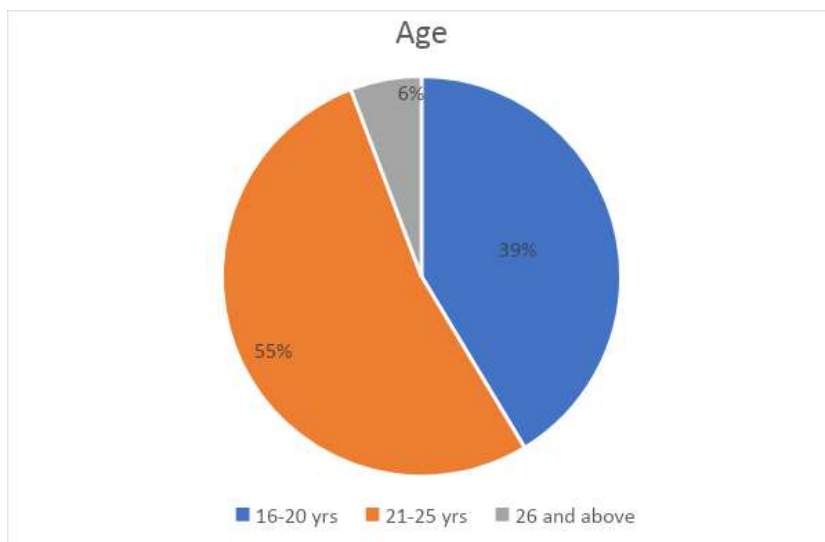


Figure 2: Age of Respondents

Data in Figure 2 show that 39% of the respondents are between the ages of 16 – 20 years, another 55% of the respondents are between 21 – 25 years while the remaining 6% of the respondents are 26 years and above. This data indicates that respondents preponderantly are between 21 – 25 years.

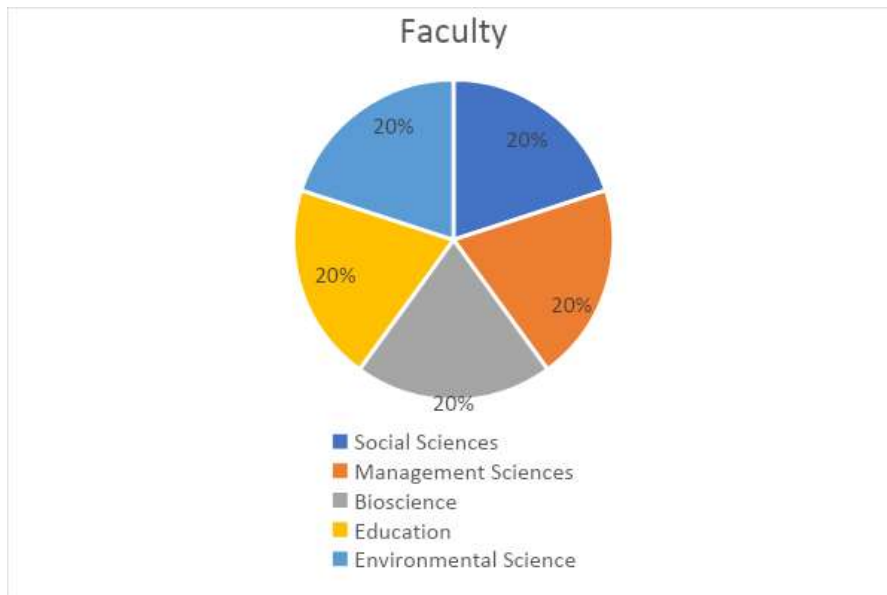


Figure 3: Faculty of Respondents

The data in Figure 3 show that all the respondents have equal distribution of various faculties. This data indicates that 20% is distributed equally among the faculties used in this research.

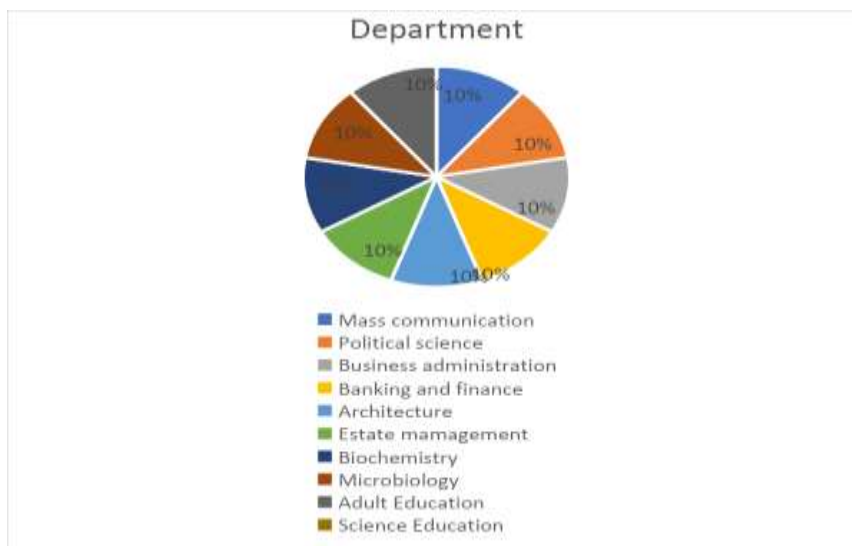


Figure 4: Department of Respondents

Data in Figure 4 shows that all respondents have equal distribution of various departments. This data indicates that 10% was distributed equally among the departments used in this research.



Figure 5: Class level of Respondents

Data in Figure 5 show that 16% of respondents are in 100 level, 13% of the respondents are in 200 level, 25% of the respondents are in 300 level, 40% of the respondents are in 400 level, and 6% of the respondents are in 500 level. This indicates that preponderantly, respondents are in 400 level.

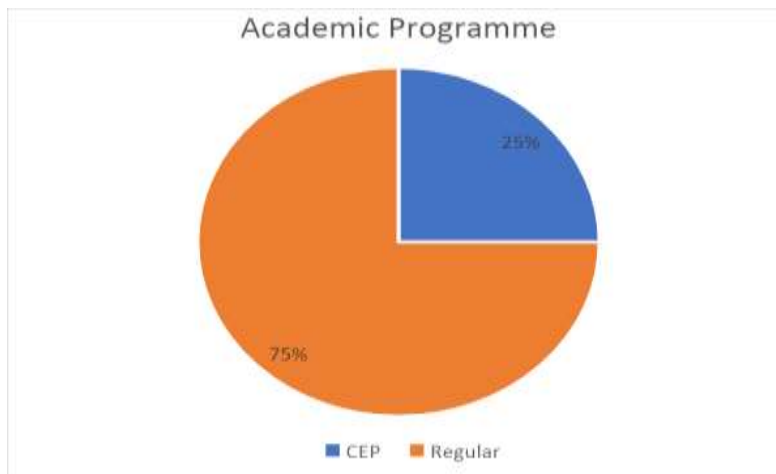


Figure 6: Academic Programme of Respondents

Data in Figure 6 show that 25% of the respondents are CEP students while 75% are regular students. This data indicates that majority of the respondents are regular students.

Research questions

What factors have contributed to the decline of traditional blogging platforms? (Questions 1-7)

Table 1: Do you own a smartphone?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	376	99%
No	4	1%
Total	380	100%

Data in Table 1 show that 99% of the respondents have smartphones, while remaining 4% do not have smartphones. This indicates that a majority of the respondents have smartphones.

Table 2: Do you visit blog sites?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	307	80%
No	73	20%
Total	380	100%

Data in Table 2 show that 80% of the respondents said they visit blog sites, while the remaining 20% do not visit blog sites. This data indicates that majority of the respondents visit blog sites.

Table 3: How often do you visit blog sites?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very frequently	141	37%
Minimally	171	45%
Never	68	18%
Total	380	100

Data in Table 3 show that 37% of the respondents visit blog sites very frequently, 45% visit blog sites minimally, while 18% do not visit blog sites at all.

Table 4: Which do you prefer? Visiting blog sites or following blog accounts on social media.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Visiting blog sites	81	21%
Following blog accounts on social media	120	32%
Both	125	33%
None	54	14%
Total	380	100

Data in Table 4 show that 21% of the respondents prefer visiting blog sites, 32% prefer following blog accounts on social media, 33% prefer both visiting the blog sites and following blog accounts on social media, and 14% neither visit blog sites nor follow blog accounts on social media.

Table 5: Do you have a Tiktok account?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	360	94%
No	20	6%
Total	380	100%

Data in Table 5 show that 94% of the respondents have Tiktok accounts, while 6% of the respondents do not have Tiktok accounts. This data indicates that majority of the respondents have Tiktok accounts.

Table 6: How many hours do you spend on Tiktok daily?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Below 1 hour	130	34%
Between 1hr to 2hrs	100	26%
Between 2hr to 3hrs	80	21%
Above 3hrs	70	19%
Total	380	100

Data in Table 6 show that 34% of the respondents spend below 1 hour on Tiktok, 26% spend between 1 hour and 2 hours on Tiktok, 21% spend between 2 hours and 3 hours on Tiktok, and 19% spend above 3 hours on Tiktok. This data indicates that majority of the respondents spend below an hour on Tiktok.

Table 7: Do you think social media platforms like Tiktok, Instagram and Twitter offer easier ways to consume content than blogs?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	309	81%
No	11	3%
Not sure	60	16%
Total	380	100%

Data in Table 7 show that 81% of the respondents think that social media platforms like Tiktok, Instagram and Twitter offer easier ways to consume content than blogs, 3% think that social media platforms do not offer easier ways to consume content than blogs, while the remaining 16% are not sure whether social media platforms offer easier ways to consume content than blogs or not.

In what ways have memes become an important way for people to communicate on Tiktok? (Questions 8 – 12)

Table 8: Do you know about memes?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	372	98%
No	3	1%
Not sure	5	1%
Total	380	100

Data in Table 8 show that 98% of the respondents know about memes, 1% do not know about memes, while the remaining 1% are not sure if they know about memes or not. This data indicates that majority of the respondents know about memes.

Table 9: Have you created a meme before?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	141	37%
No	225	59%
Not sure	14	4%
Total	380	100

Data in Table 9 show that 37% of the respondents have created a meme before, 59% have not created a meme before, while the remaining 4% are not sure if they have created a meme before or not. This data indicates that majority of the respondents have not created a meme before.

Table 10: How often do you engage with memes on Tiktok?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	174	46%
Minimally	135	36%
Never	71	18%
Total	380	100%

Data in Table 10 show that 46% of the respondents engage with memes on Tiktok very often, 36% do not engage with memes on Tiktok very often (i.e. minimally), while the remaining 18% do not engage with memes on Tiktok at all. This data indicates that majority of the respondents engage with memes on Tiktok.

Table 11: Do you think that memes have made it easier to communicate with others on Tiktok?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	252	66%
No	25	7%
Not sure	103	27%
Total	380	100%

Data in Table 11 show that 66% of the respondents think that memes have made it easier to communicate with others on Tiktok, 7% do not think that memes have made it easier to communicate with other on Tiktok, while the remaining 27% are not sure if memes have made communication with others on Tiktok easier or not.

Table 12: What do you enjoy the most about memes on Tiktok?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
They are personal and self-expressive	70	18%
They are visually driven and engaging	33	9%
They are usually very relatable	166	44%
They are funny	111	29%
Total	380	100%

Data in Table 12 show that 18% of the respondents enjoy memes on Tiktok because they are personal and self-expressive, 9% of the respondents enjoy memes on Tiktok because they are visually driven and engaging, 44% of the respondents enjoy memes on Tiktok because they are usually very relatable, while the remaining 29% enjoy memes on Tiktok because they are funny. This data indicates that majority of the respondents enjoy memes on Tiktok because they usually very relatable.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective of this study was to understand the factors contributing to the decline of traditional blogging platforms. The findings suggested that the rise of smartphones (as seen in Table 1 which shows that majority of the respondents own a smartphone) has been a key factor, as more people are now accessing the internet via mobile devices. Additionally, data from Table 4 show that most people now prefer to follow blog accounts on social media rather than visiting the blog websites themselves, indicating a shift away from traditional blogging. This is also in line with the findings of Pinjama et al (2016) who discovered from their research that bloggers have adapted to the changing landscape by adopting other social media platforms like Twitter or Instagram, which complement their blogs. This explains why majority of the respondents prefer following blog accounts on social media. Furthermore, data from Tables 5 and 6 show that a majority of the respondents have Tiktok accounts and spend a significant amount of time on the platform. This (as seen in Table 7) suggests that Tiktok has become a popular alternative to blogging, offering an engaging and easily accessible way to consume content.

The second objective of the study focused on the role of memes in facilitating communication on Tiktok. The findings show that majority of the respondents are aware of memes and engage with them frequently on the platform. The findings also suggested that the use of memes has enhanced communication on Tiktok, and this could be as a result of certain factors such as the relatable nature of memes on Tiktok, visual engagement, self-expression, and humor, which have contributed to the ease in communication on the platform. Memes inspire the creation of other texts that follow, build upon, or parody the form of the original communication.

The findings of this study came against the backdrop of the two research questions raised in this study. The data analyzed in this study was obtained from 380 students on UNIZIK main campus, spread across five faculties. It is clear from the study that most students at Nnamdi

Azikiwe University, own smartphones, and are active on social media, particularly Tiktok. They spend a significant amount of time on these platforms and rarely visit blog sites. Instead, they follow the blogs' social media accounts. This goes ahead to prove that there has been a shift from blogs to social media, with Tiktok as the dominant platform. The students believe that social media platforms like Tiktok offer easier ways to consume content than blogs. This could be as a result of certain factors such as ease of access, self-expressiveness, relatability, and visual engagement of content on this platform.

In addition to that, the study's findings also showed that majority of UNIZIK students know about memes and engage with them very often. This suggests that memes are used frequently by Generation Z as a form of nonverbal communication on social media, particularly Tiktok. They believed that memes have made it easier to communicate with others because of their humor, relatability, sarcasm, and ability to express oneself. This suggests that memes may be an effective way to convey messages and connect with others on social media. This is likely due to the visual nature of memes and the ability to communicate complex ideas in a simple and easily digestible format.

Conclusion

As technology has advanced and user habits have changed, social media have had to evolve and adapt, to remain relevant and engaging. Blogs were once the main source of information and entertainment on the internet, but they have been surpassed by platforms like Tiktok that offer more interactive and visual experiences. This shift has been driven by a number of factors, including the rise of smartphones, which have made it easier for users to create and consume content on the go, the popularity of short-form content, and the need for more interactive and engaging content.

Additionally, the use of memes as a form of nonverbal communication has emerged as a significant trend on social media. Memes allow users to express complex emotions and ideas in a succinct and easy-to-understand format, making them an ideal form of communication for the fast-paced world of social media.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Social media are a dynamic and ever-changing landscape, therefore given this rapid pace of change, more studies should be carried out to enable users understand new developments such as new platforms, features and content trends. These researches should also be made available to the public, so that users can make informed decisions on how to use social media.
- ii. The use of memes as a form of nonverbal communication should be further explored, as it has the potential to enrich the social media experience.
- iii. Could it be possible that nonverbal communication will completely take over on the internet? Who knows? The increasing prevalence of nonverbal communication on the internet may lead to a decrease in verbal communication. It is unlikely that verbal communication will completely disappear. It is however important to strike a balance between using nonverbal communication as a tool to enhance social media interaction, and traditional verbal communication. Implementing features such as voice notes, voice chats and chatbots may help preserve verbal communication. This will ensure that users continue to express their thoughts and ideas through this medium.

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