Social Media Impact on Societal Change: Insights from Mauritania

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Abstract:- This article focuses on the new traits people acquire consciously or unconsciously through exposure to social media. Through an empirical approach based on the study of its use, practices, and representations of identity, we pursue here the objective of producing a contextualized analysis of the appearance of a new generation toughly impacted by the globalization of the social media. This generation not only represents a deviation from a cultural point of view, but also it brings in a new way of life, of seeing and doing things which is not necessarily welcomed by the Mauritanian society. Guided by the reflection of giving a central place to social media in shaping one's behavior, we will attempt to bring a sociological perspective to this socio-cultural phenomenon as well as analyzing the changes they bring within societies. This paper confirmed that the social media has a direct impact of individual's behavior in Mauritania and that the Mauritanian society undergoes a change in its socio-cultural norms which is shaping new identities and bringing new norms.

Keywords:- Social Media, users, Influence, Behavior, Norms, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of social media stems from the appearance of new information and communication technologies and originated from the Internet. Marking a turning point in the history of the global network, "Web 2.0" gave the Internet a new face, replacing humans and their uses more and more in the center of it. Appeared in 2004 and made popular by Tim O'Reilly (2006), the expression Web 2.0 designates a set of new technologies that also promote an interactive dimension within the platforms that integrate them and testifies to the rise of an Internet " new generation " (Reich, 2008).

Since 2002, there are more and more social networks. It is important to note that networks started as simple platforms for communication, however, they are now a showcase for brands, individuals and even spaces where people shop and make money (Lucile, 2013). More than that, these platforms have proven to be a real place for change, especially with the emergence of a new generation of young people considered as popular figures who among other things, introduce socio-cultural changes into societies.

Mauritania is not an exception. Nowadays, there is an emergence of "fashionistas" as well as "bloggers" and "social influencers" who are supposedly known a public figures and who operate strongly in the in the digital world. These young "influencers", who are mostly girls, have enough power to influence and change people's behaviors and considerations. The increasing power of social media among youth and the visible tendency to be influenced by is content makes this subject a central issue and a sociological phenomenon to be studied by sociologists.

COVID-19 health crisis has been a great opportunity for many people around the world to increase their connectivity as they were locked down into homes for long periods of time. This high exposure to the internet facility has also increased the chance to be present in the social media platforms and thus be exposed to its content with all connotations that goes with it (Saud M, et all, 2020).

Digital 2022: Global overview report shows that 1.73 million internet users in Mauritania were recorded among which 1.00 million are social media users. Data published indicates that Facebook had 892.5 thousand users with a percentage of 35.4 for females in contrast to 64.6% for male. For Instagram, the report indicates that it has 112 thousand users among which 41.5% were females, and 58.5% were males. As for LinkedIn, it is indicated that it has 86 thousand members in Mauritania among which 20% are females against 80% of males. Twitter on the other hand shows that it has 39.5 thousand users in Mauritania (Simon Kemp, 2022).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media has been always a debatable issue for researchers working in the field of communication and social studies. Justin Reich has debated how the internet in general and media networks have changed people's mindset. Written in 2008, shortly after the breakout of the social media usage, Reich has put emphasis on participation for a democratization of the web. He was much more concerned with giving users the opportunity to voice themselves for a balanced distribution of power (Reich, 2008). Reich, in this case, has explored the socio-political dimension of the social media usage.

On the other hand, Muqaddas Jan, Sanobia Anwwer Soomro and Nawaz Ahmad have addressed the phycological dimension of social media usage. In talking about Facebook particularly, these researchers shed light on its long-lasting

effects on people and specifying the issue of low self-esteem as a principal indicator. The data they gathered and analyzed proved that there is a strong relationship between social media and self-esteem, showing that the increase in social media usage causes a low self-esteem of individuals (Muquadas Jan et all, 2013). Here, the one of the disadvantages of social media is being addressed clearly.

During COVID-19 breakout, the usage of social media has increased due to people's increased connectivity. The results of the research conducted by these scholars demonstrated that social media have been used to seek social supports from the respondents, online networks and offline friends, relatives, and colleagues. The study also examined that the usage of social media platforms is perceived as easy and accessible to every individual for sharing, posting, and reacting to any medical information regarding the pandemic. This Conclusion means that during the pandemic, social media was limited to and well oriented towards OCIVD-19 (Muhammad Saud, et all, 2020).

In Mauritania, however, the only research which focused on social media, particularly Facebook it how it might be a women's empowering tool was conducted by Zeine Ghalla. This research showed that Facebook provides a platform to Mauritanian females to empower themselves in terms of liberty, motivation and competition compared to men (Zeine Ghalla, 2019). Though this study is an opening eye to the Mauritanian context in relation to social media, still It was limited to one platform, ignoring other important and growing in importance platforms.

This article, then, is different in the sense that it looks at social media as one identity regardless of the variety of its platforms as a change motive. It tries to look at the new trends presented by its actors and how it is changing identities and introducing new changes in the Mauritanian

society and above all, measuring the readiness of social media users to embrace this change.

> *Research Question*

The research questions asked via this paper is whether we are really witnessing, with the growing popularity of social media, a visible change in the socio-cultural context of Mauritania? To answer this questioning, different approaches combining theoretical and empirical analyzes will be used and applied on the following questions:

- For what reasons can one consider that social media is an emerging provocative element to the Mauritanian society?
- How do social networks influence the society and creates new values and cultural identities?
- Are we really witnessing a socio-cultural change in the Mauritanian society due to the social media?

III. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In this study, a quantitative research design was used where data was collected as per the availability and convenience of the respondents. 18 questions among which 17 Closed-ended questions and one open question, were distributed. Target people were young students mainly from the university as well as high School and the questionnaire was sent via google Forms which is an instrument of data collection in French and English. After the deadline given to the data collection, 100 responses were collected out of 120 shared questionnaires.

The respondents, mainly students, were asked to give answers that best describe their opinions on their perception of social media and to what extend they are tied to it and most importantly, whether they believe that it is a leading factor in the changes the Mauritanian society is going through.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

100 respondents have reacted to the questionnaires giving complete answers and describing how do they use social media on daily bases. Table 1 summarizes the personal information of the respondents and gives an idea about their backgrounds:

Table 1 Demographic Variables

Question	Number of Respondents	Pourcentage	Total
1. Biological sex			
Men	67	67%	100
Women	33	33%	
Age			
Under 18	06	06%	100
Between 18 and 25	60	60%	
Above 25	34	34%	
2. Marital Status			
Single	80	80%	100
Married	16	16%	
Divorced	04	04%	
Widow	00	00%	
3. Education			
None	08	08%	100

Primary	01	01%	
Secondary	12	12%	
Vocational	04	04%	
University	75	75%	
4. Current situation			
Student	67	67%	100
Employee	19	19%	
Both of the choices	08	08%	
None of the choices	06	06%	

It is obvious that most of the respondents are young men students who are still single with a university degree. This is aligned with the semi-structured questionnaires released among youth since this thematic concerns much more young people and it is a current issue nowadays. Women seem to less respond to the questionnaire.

The second section is on social media usage. It concentrated on the media platforms that these respondents do naturally use as well as the degree of its usage by them. Through these data, it seems that Mauritanians are big Facebook users, then comes Snapchat and TikTok, Instagram and LinkedIn are less used by Mauritanians with a standard usage.
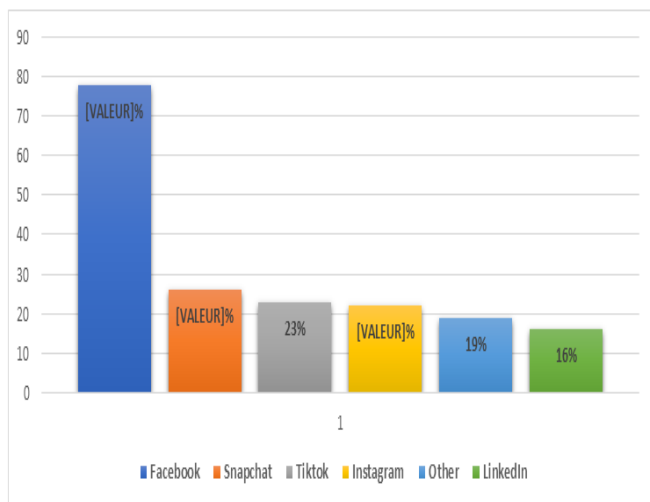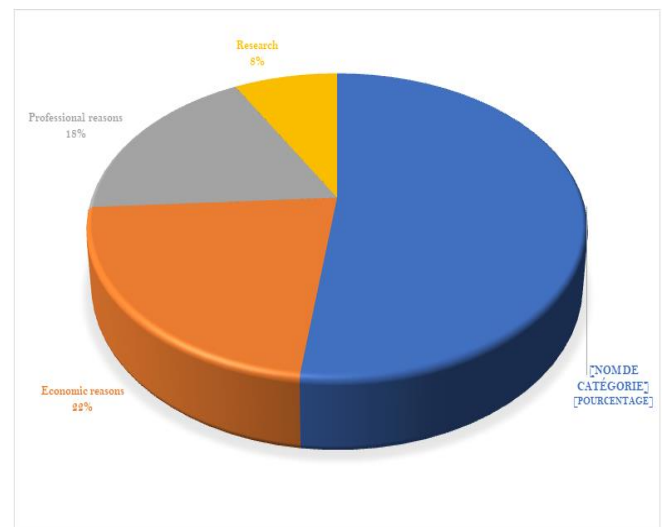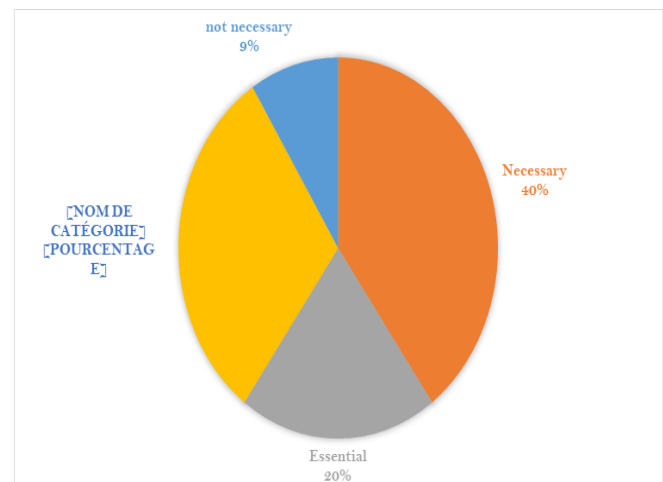

Graphic 1 Social Media Platforms
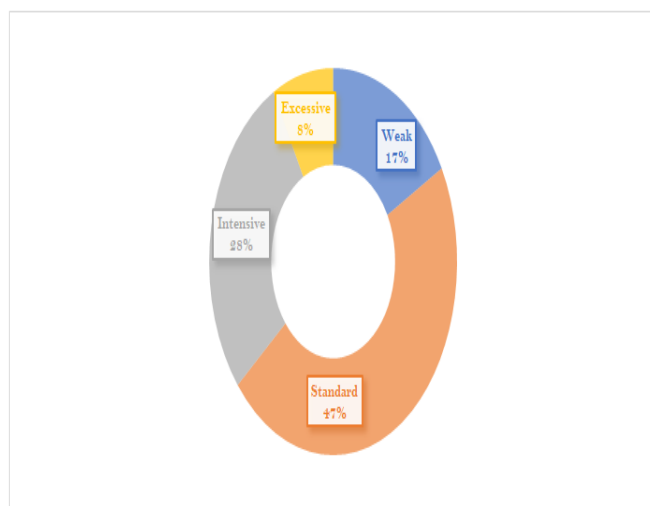
Graphic 2 Social Media usage

Respondents were also asked why do they use social media? The majority expressed that they use them for entertainment. Moreover, they have revealed that they they evaluate this usage as necessary if not important.


Graphic 3 The Reason behind using Social Media

Graphic 4 Evaluation of Social Media usage

The third section was about the influence of social media on individuals. Data shows that most of the respondents believe that social media have a direct impact on people's behavior; moreover, they have idol on social media who influences them on many areas with a possibility of imitating him/her. This idol, according to the participants, is influencing them on the way they look with a positive impact and perhaps no impact on how to be a positive version of themselves.

Table 2 Social Media Influence on Individuals

| Question	Number of Respondents	Pourcentage	Total
10. Do you believe that social media influence people's behavior?			
Yes	83	83%	100
No	03	03%	
Probably	12	12%	
I do not know	02	02%	
11. Do you have an idol on social media?			
Yes	61	61%	100
No	39	39%	
12. In which areas does this idol influence you?			
Look	37	37%	100
New believes	29	29%	
New ideas	19	19%	
Other	15	15%	
13. How do you qualify this influence?			
Positive	62	62%	100
Negative	21	21%	
Dangerous	10	10%	
I do not know	07	07%	
14. Do you think that you imitate this idol sometimes?			
No	38	38%	100
Yes	24	24%	
Probably	23	23%	
I do not know	15	15%	
15. Do you think that this person is helping you becoming a better person?			
Yes	24	24%	100
No	38	38%	
Probably	23	23%	
I do not know	15	15%	

The last section concerns the Mauritanian society itself. It aims at understanding whether the Mauritanian society undergoes a change thanks to social media and if yes, in which areas. Data confirmed that there is a visible change in the Mauritanian society which is viewed as negative and mainly concerned with the socio-cultural norms.
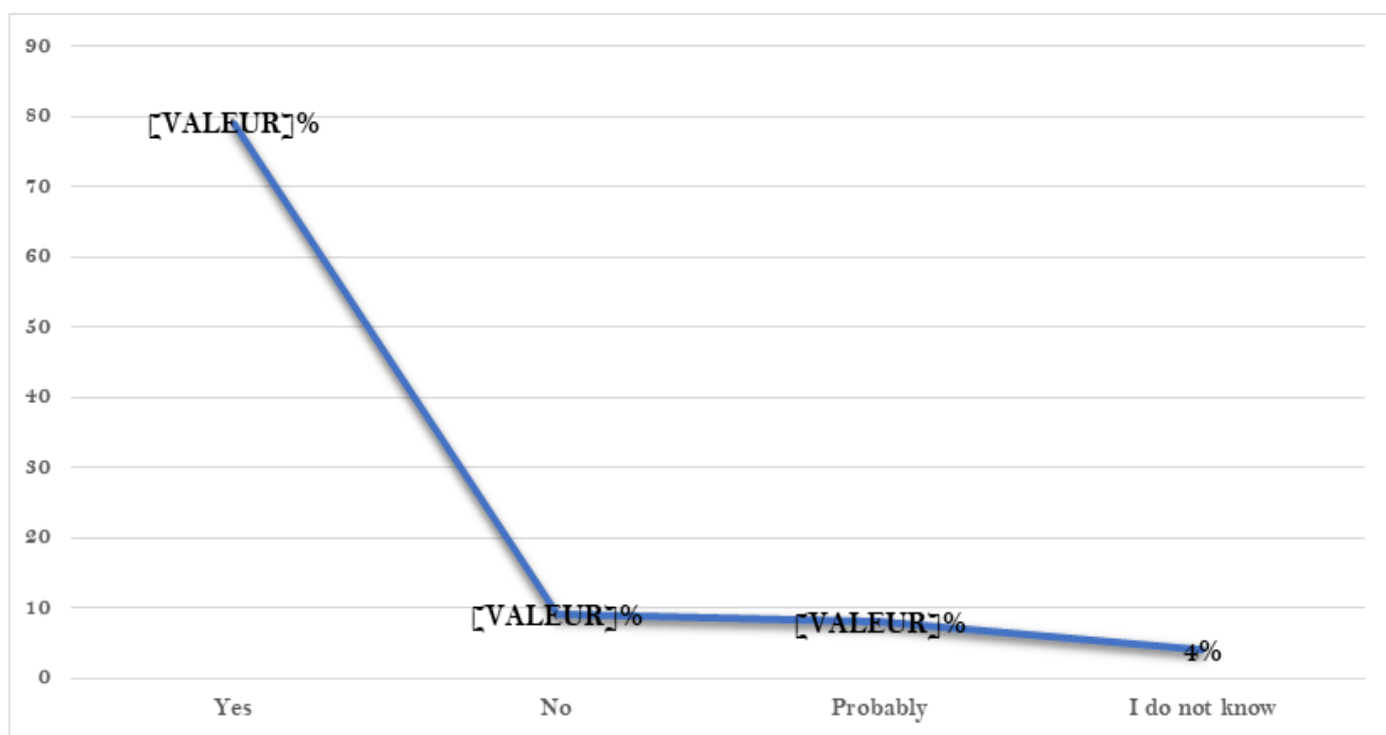
Graphic 5 Mauritanian Society Change
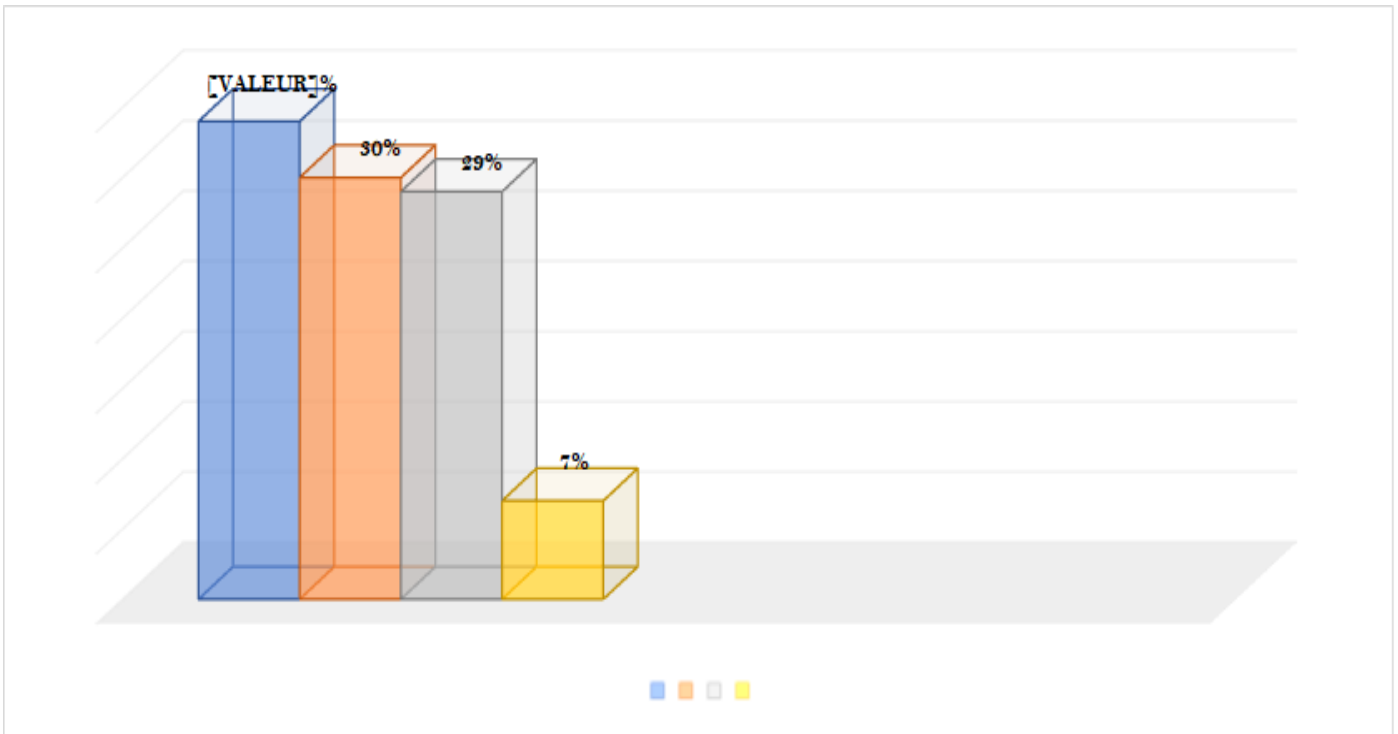
Graphic 6 Area of Change
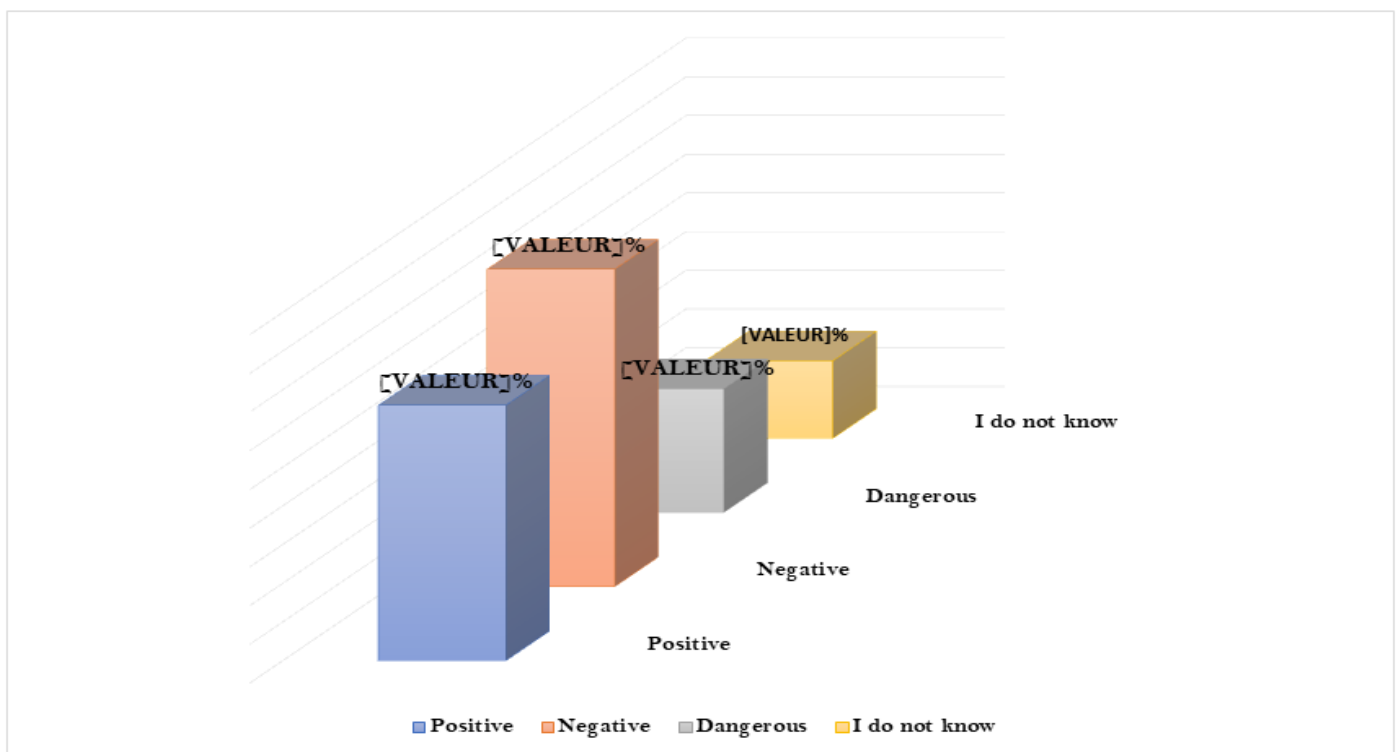
Graphic 7 Nature of Change

➢ *Further Research*

The paper came up with some insights for future research and considerations. For example, this study dealt with social media in its totality and through numerous platforms; however, other studies might be done on other aspects of social media, like for example the digital economy which is now a trend in the field of self-employment as well as entrepreneurial activities thanks to connectivity in general and social media in particular.

Another theme which might be studied is how the phenomenon of "fashionistas" is viewed by the Mauritanian society and how gender dimension can be considered in such theme. Here, being a fashionista is not only a hobby but rather a virtual paid work and a successful business done via social media, making it a value chain, mainly snapchat, Instagram and Facebook. This means that it is a theme that is worthy studying.

> *Policy Implication*

No one can deny that media in all its format has both a positive and a negative side. The findings of this paper implies that there should be a real inspection from the state on the content of media broadcasted in the country. This is because it is somehow seen as threatening to the social components of the society which might be a driving power of shaping new identities. It is obviously showed that even widely used by individuals, still there is some questioning on the impact of social media on the social layers of the community as well as on the psychology of its users.

It is widely important to establish a social media usage policy that defines the rules of conduct and accountability for all users. This is important because it is the only way to regulate its impact through non harmful content. Not only this policy will regulate the social media usage, but it will also guarantee that no dangerous content will be internally diffused. This regulation can be done through control over the accepted platforms, content as well as users' protection of rights.

V. CONCLUSION

Devoted to the impact of social media on Mauritanian society, this paper reveals the complexity surrounding this media concept with a multidimensional character. The study of social representations of social media made it possible to assess the reception of the concept and to understand the reasons for its impact on the societal level. Between the impact and the change, the new shaped identities do invite us to consider social media as a social object constructed with the social representations.

This paper showed that Mauritanians are highly exposed to social media through entertaining platforms (Facebook and Snapchat) more than professional ones (Twitter and LinkedIn). It also revealed that social media has a strong impact on individuals and on the society as a whole making room to socio-cultural changes brought from abroad which are not necessarily neither positive nor welcomed by the society.

> *At the end, this study presents several recommendations which can be employed by decision-makers and communities to minimize negative social media impact on the Mauritanian society:*

- The need to raise awareness among youth about the negative impact that social media might have on the society;
- The need to have a national policy to regulate social media use;
- The importance of having training sessions addressing youth on the positive usage of social media;
- The necessity of having similar sociological studies to enlighten the society about all social adds;

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