AMERICAN SPACE: A CATALYST FOR DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AND SOCIAL IMPACT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates the potential of American Space as a catalyst for providing information services, community development, and social impact in Nigeria, offering a model for replication in other contexts. Nigeria is faced with significant challenges in community development and social impact, including limited access to education, entrepreneurship opportunities, and social connections. This study explores the impact of American Space, an innovative hub in Nigeria, on community development and social impact. The researchers adopted a mixed-methods approach, a review of articles, notes, and speech, and observations as to how to assess the effectiveness of American Space in providing digital literacy to education and skills development, fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, and building social connections and community engagement. Our findings indicate that American Space has positively impacted community development and social impact in Nigeria, with significant improvements in education, entrepreneurship, and social connections among participants. The paper suggests expanding American Space to other regions in Nigeria to reach a broader audience, developing strategic partnerships with local organizations to enhance impact, establishing a sustainable funding model to ensure long-term viability, and continuously monitoring and evaluating the program to ensure optimal effectiveness.

Keywords: American Space, Community Development, Digital Literacy skills, Social Impact

Introduction

In the heart of Nigeria, a unique hub of learning and innovation is transforming lives and communities. American Space, a cutting-edge initiative, fosters community development and social impact through education, technology, and collaboration. In recent years, establishing American Spaces in Nigeria has proven to be a transformative force, providing information, fostering community development, and driving positive social impact across the nation. These dynamic hubs, supported by the U.S. Department of State, have become pivotal in shaping Nigeria's cultural, educational, and technological landscape. Through a multifaceted approach, American Spaces have emerged as catalysts for empowerment, innovation, and collaboration, significantly contributing to the nation's progress.

At the heart of the American Space initiative lies a commitment to knowledge exchange, cultural enrichment, and capacity building. These spaces serve as vibrant centres for educational resources, English language learning, digital literacy skills, and information access, empowering individuals with the tools to broaden their horizons and pursue academic and professional excellence. By providing a platform for cross-cultural dialogue and intellectual engagement, American Spaces facilitate a deeper understanding of American values, society, and innovation, fostering a spirit of global citizenship and mutual respect.

The impact of American Spaces extends far beyond their physical locations. They actively engage with diverse communities across Nigeria, reaching urban and rural areas alike. By leveraging partnerships with local organizations, universities, and government entities, American Spaces amplify their impact, creating a ripple effect that extends to the grassroots level. This collaborative approach ensures that the benefits of American Spaces are accessible to a wide spectrum of the Nigerian population, thereby fostering a more inclusive and interconnected society.

American Spaces is a beacon of progress, unity, and empowerment in Nigeria, catalyzing community development and social impact through its multifaceted initiatives. As these spaces continue to evolve and expand their reach, their role in shaping Nigeria's future as a dynamic, knowledge-driven, and inclusive society becomes increasingly evident. The impact of American Spaces transcends borders, fostering enduring partnerships and mutual understanding between the United States and Nigeria and serving as a testament to the transformative power of collaboration and shared values.

American Spaces is poised to continue driving positive change and contributing to a brighter, more prosperous future for Nigeria and its people through the collective efforts of individuals, communities, and institutions. American Space is crucial in Nigeria's community development and social impact, making it a central hub for learning, innovation, and collaboration. As a physical and intellectual hub, it connects people, ideas, and resources, fostering entrepreneurship, education, and social connections. Previous research has shown the impact of similar initiatives on community development (Usman, Deepali, & Kabiru, 2023; Ismail, 2011; & Anikeze, 2014). However, there is need to explore the specific context of American Space in

Nigeria, addressing gaps in the current literature. This study aims to investigate the effects of American Space on community development and social impact in Nigeria, building on existing research and providing new insights into its role as a catalyst for positive change.

The Concept of American Space

American Spaces are the U.S. government's primary public cultural and information centres abroad that provide free and open access for communities worldwide interested in learning more about the United States. Through people-to-people connections and modern environments equipped with advanced technologies, over 600 American Spaces in 140 countries serve as the initial experience millions of global visitors have with the United States, building mutual understanding and partnership. https://americahouse.md/program-de-voluntariat/. These innovative hubs offer programs and events that foster learning, discussion, and civic engagement around democratic principles. Strategically located wherever they can best connect with foreign audiences, American Spaces showcase American values, innovation, creativity, diversity, and openness to ideas, cultures, and people. Visitors can explore and share ideas, access information, develop practical professional skills, and participate in programs that foster economic strength and hone critical thinking (United States Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2024)

American Space is located in some states in Nigeria. These states include Sokoto, Kano, Borno, Bauchi, Osun, Ogun, Oyo, Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Bayelsa, Ebonyi, Edo, Abia, and Nasarawa, and offer a vibrant platform for Nigerians to access resources, skills, and networks such as:

- Education and Skills Development: American Space provides access to quality educational resources, workshops, and training programs, bridging the skills gap and enhancing employability.

- Providing accurate, compelling, timely, and audience-appropriate information about the United States' history, culture, society, values, and foreign policies

- Facilitate English language learning through access to English speakers, resources, computers, and the Internet.

- Promote higher education studies in the United States by providing international students with accurate, comprehensive, and current guidance on applying to U.S. colleges and universities.

- Support continuing engagement with U.S. government exchange program alumni, connecting them to local audiences through alumni programs where credible local voices can share firsthand information about the United States and American values.

- Entrepreneurship and Innovation: The hub supports startups, entrepreneurs, and innovators, nurturing ideas and turning them into sustainable ventures.

- Community Engagement: American Space is a vibrant gathering place that hosts events, workshops, and cultural activities that foster social connections and community building.

- Social Impact: By addressing pressing issues like education, healthcare, and economic empowerment, American Space is driving positive social change and improving lives.

American Space is a shining example of the power of collaboration and innovation in Nigeria. This initiative is transforming communities and shaping a brighter future for generations to come by providing a platform for growth, connection, and social impact. American Spaces offer a wide range of free resources and programs: Open internet access, Academic databases and library collections; Professional skills and entrepreneurship courses; American English language courses; U.S. higher education information and advising; Expert speakers and discussions, Makerspaces STEM; coding, robotics, and gaming; Films, cultural events, and performances. (United States Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2024)**.**

Moreover, American Spaces have become hubs of technological advancement, offering state-of-the-art facilities and programs that promote digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Through workshops, seminars, and access to cutting-edge technologies, these spaces equip Nigerians with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the digital age, contributing to economic growth and sustainable development. By nurturing a culture of creativity and technological fluency, American Spaces play a pivotal role in shaping Nigeria's future as a competitive player in the global digital economy.

American Spaces in Nigeria, committed to fostering digital literacy and innovation, has established a state-of-the-art training Centre with cutting-edge technology. The Centre offers comprehensive training on AI tools, utilizing intelligent boards, TVs, laptops, and an uninterrupted power supply to ensure seamless learning. Participants benefit from in-person digital skills training, gaining practical experience with AI-powered tools, and developing expertise in data analysis, visualization, and decision-making. The Centre's network facilities provide fast and reliable internet access, enabling learners to explore and stay updated on the latest digital trends https://americahouse.md/program-de-voluntariat/.

American Spaces in Nigeria organizes regular digital skills programs and workshops to enhance the digital literacy skills of Nigerians. These initiatives empower individuals to harness the potential of AI and digital technologies, driving innovation and growth in various fields. By providing access to digital skills training and resources, American Spaces Nigeria is bridging the gap in the digital landscape, fostering a culture of innovation, and inspiring a new generation of digital leaders in Nigeria."

Concept of Digital Literacy Skills

In recent times, irrespective of our digital native or inclination, we live, learn, and work in a digital society where communication and access to information are rapidly facilitated through digital technologies like social media, internet platforms, and mobile devices. We must, therefore, get acquainted with digital literacy, find out what digital literacy is, and how to develop our skills in practical, professional, and communicative elements of digital literacy. Digital literacy means having the skills needed to live, learn, and work in a society where communication and information are increasingly accessible through digital technologies like internet platforms, social media, and mobile devices (Study Smart, 2024)

As nations compete in today's global world, those economies that have invested in the human capital and digital skills of their citizens are best prepared to grow to have the same human potential as those around the world. The National Digital Literacy Framework (2023) highlights that Nigeria must move its citizens to a more significant competitive position in the global economic marketplace.

Through the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS) document, the Nigerian Government has set a target of achieving 95 per cent digital literacy by 2030. Thus, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), the apex IT agency responsible for regulating the sector's development in Nigeria, has taken on the responsibility of leading the development of a National Digital Literacy Framework.

The document outlines the developed framework to set a digital literacy and skills agenda for Nigeria by providing a clear and consistent definition of digital literacy, its competence areas, and specific competencies for;

i. Offering policymakers a means to frame digital literacy policies, as well as monitor and support their implementation;

ii. Building digital literacy curricula, modules, and programs to afford proper planning, coordination, and standardization of digital literacy training and skills development in Nigeria and

iii. Enabling assessment and certification, data collection, analyses, and measurement of the number or percentage of digitally literate Nigerians and their level of digital skills. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Nigeria's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sectors' contribution to the country's Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 16.51 per cent in 2022, as against 15.51 per cent in 2021. In the first quarter of 2023, ICT's contribution to Nigeria's GDP increased to 17.47 percent. The development of a National Digital Literacy Framework will further increase the contribution and will:

a. Create a vibrant local industry of digital training service providers, content creators and publishers, marketers, assessment, and certification bodies aligned with globally recognized standards;

b. Create an extensive value chain that will facilitate youth engagement, entrepreneurship development, MSME development, and women empowerment in line with the best global practice;

c. Motivate Nigerians to achieve globally accepted certifications that will increase job opportunities and mobility across the world and yield billions of dollars of economic value to Nigeria;

d. Enhance the civil service by improving efficiency and productivity and increasing service-delivery orientation;

e. Encourage the establishment of local Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) to meet increased local demand for IT tools and equipment; and

f. Increase demand for ICT and broadband, thus helping the implementation of broadband and ICT policies.

Conceptual Overview of Community Development

Beyond education and technology, American Spaces are platforms for community engagement and social impact. By hosting cultural events, art exhibitions, and public fora, these spaces foster a sense of inclusivity, creativity, and civic participation. Furthermore, they actively engage in outreach programs that address critical societal issues, such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and youth empowerment, thereby contributing to advancing a more equitable and prosperous society.

According to Jacob, Ugben, and Akujuru (2024), community development implies the provision of basic amenities such as roads, electricity, pipe-borne water, health care facilities, and schools, including human capacity building and other necessities of life for man's general well-being. Letam (2021) noted that community development is a process. Arthur defines it as a process by which people in an area choose to think as a community, go about analyzing a situation, determine its needs and unfulfilled opportunities, decide what can and should be done to improve the situation, and then move in the direction of the achievement of the agreed on the set goals and objectives. The researchers understanding revealed that community development is a movement, process, or program. This perception tends to highlight, recognize, and promote the dominant or central role of external bodies, donors, and agencies in community development activities.

Community development entails advancing a community involving a common sense of identity, values, beliefs, capability, and rationale. People at all levels should have access to goods, services, opportunities, decision-making processes, and information. Community development emphasizes empowerment, equality, social justice, participation, and representation (Ramsey-Soroghaye, 2021). Community development involves bringing people together to improve their social, economic, political, educational, and cultural well-being for a better livelihood. Thus, people's participation is an indispensable element for effective community development. Development in any community is determined by the level of involvement of the immediate citizenry who come together to achieve common goals (Usman, Deepali, & Kabiru, 2023).

Social Impact in Nigeria

Social Impacts are being executed and felt by Social workers. The importance of social workers cannot be separated from the lives of individuals, families, and groups, especially the disadvantaged, disabled, the elderly, and those who need the services social workers render. The mission of social work has always included a people-focused development approach that is proactive and preventative in its move toward addressing present and anticipated social problems

(Onyekwere, 2016). In Nigeria, social work and social welfare programs were initiated by missionary groups such as the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic Churches, Methodist churches, and the like is at the heart of individual and community structural strategies to enhance individuals' and community's sense of belonging in participating in activities that will strengthen individual and community peace (Onyekwere, 2016). Harnessing social workers in community development practices in Nigeria will promote growth and sustainability.

Opportunities Provided by the American Spaces

The Consulate of the United States Embassy in Nigeria's online publication 2024 highlighted that American Spaces offer various opportunities for individuals to engage with their community and promote mutual understanding between the United States and Nigeria. Here are some ways to get involved:

i. **Volunteer Program:** American Spaces provide opportunities for young people to learn about event management, social media content creation, and networking with like-minded individuals.
ii. **Mentorship:** Volunteers can serve as mentors, sharing their skills and expertise with others and helping to foster a sense of community.
iii. **Program Support:** Volunteers can assist with organizing and delivering programs and activities at American Spaces, such as workshops on advanced technology and freedom of cultural expression.
iv. **Digital Engagement:** Volunteers can help manage social media channels and provide timely community updates through WhatsApp and other digital platforms.
v. **Event Planning:** Volunteers can participate in planning and executing events, such as cultural festivals and discussions, which promote community development and social impact. To get involved, you can check with local American Spaces for available opportunities and attend information sessions to learn more about the roles and responsibilities.

According to Abdullahi (2024) and Seun Akinade (2022), America Spaces in Nigeria has brought numerous community benefits and significantly impacted citizens' lives. These benefits include:

i. Access to Information and Education: American Spaces provide access to information and educational resources, fostering mutual understanding and engagement between the United States and Nigeria.
ii. Cultural Exchange and Counteracting Negative Preconceptions: By promoting open dialogue and cultural exchange, American Spaces help build bridges of understanding and empower individuals through educational advising, career workshops, and skills development activities.
iii. Security and Peace Building: American Spaces can serve as platforms for discussing and addressing security challenges, such as terrorism and banditry, by engaging with security scholars and experts in local institutions.

iv.   Economic Development: Space technology and satellite development can contribute to economic growth by providing new products and processes, creating jobs, and increasing the Gross Domestic Product.

v.   Capacity Building and Technical Support: American Spaces can offer technical support and capacity training for Nigerian engineers to learn how to construct and design satellites, enhancing the country's space capabilities.

vi.   Digital Literacy Skills: American Spaces provides digital literacy skills through various programs and activities, including free computer and internet access, digital skills training, workshops and classes, online resources and tutorials, mentorship and guidance from experienced professionals, digital literacy courses and certification programs, Access to digital tools and software, community events and workshops on digital literacy and partnerships with local organizations to reach underserved communities.

vii. Community Engagement and Local Solutions: By leveraging local dynamics and technical expertise, American Spaces can facilitate community engagement and the development of local solutions to address security and development challenges.

These benefits significantly impact the lives of Nigerian citizens, promoting peace, security, and economic development and ultimately improving their quality of life.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In conclusion, the American Space in Nigeria has proven to be a catalyst for digital literacy skills, community development, and social impact. By providing access to digital resources, training, and opportunities for collaboration and innovation, the American Space has empowered Nigerians to develop the skills they need to succeed in the digital age. Through its various programs and initiatives, the American Space has improved digital literacy, fostered community development, promoted social impact, and enhanced the overall quality of life for many Nigerians. As a model for public diplomacy and community engagement, the American Space has demonstrated the potential for digital spaces to drive positive change and promote sustainable development. Its impact will undoubtedly continue to be felt in Nigeria and beyond, serving as a testament to the power of digital literacy and community-driven initiatives to shape a brighter future.

This paper suggests:

1. Expanding American Space to other regions in Nigeria to reach a broader audience.

2. Developing strategic partnerships with local organizations to enhance impact

3. Establishing a sustainable funding model to ensure long-term viability,

4. Continuously monitoring and evaluating the program to ensure optimal effectiveness

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