

Perception on the Use of Social Media in Propagating Security Issues in the Post COVID-19 Era: A study of Owerri Residents, Imo State

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Abstract

At the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic, both the government and all health agencies around the world including the Nigeria Center for Disease Control swing into action to pass information on the nature of the virus and its means of transmission for adherence to safety health measures in order to contain the spread of the virus. Relying on the height of decay in the Nigeria's health sector, the citizens were too pessimistic on the possibility of Nigeria surviving the pandemic if it really hits the country. In this regard, as these messages are being aired in all forms of the media, the masses share mixed feelings on the realities of the virus and doubt if it had possibly spread into Nigeria. Against this background, this study examined whether the citizens see NCDC's post as a true reflection of the realities of the virus and whether they adopt the health safety measures shared in NCDC telegram and twitter handles. The study adopted the survey research method in studying 400 social media users purposively selected from Awka metropolis. The social exchange and source credibility theories were used as theoretical framework. Findings shows that though the respondents are well exposed to social media information from NCDC, they hardly believe NCDC to be sincere to Nigerians on the true position of the virus. It was recommended that more efforts should be put into transparency to make the citizens see NCDC as a credible source of information in health emergencies.

Keywords: Covid-19, Health sector, Social media, Safety measures, Credibility

Introduction

While numerous countries around the globe are focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and mobilizing all available resources in the fight against the virus, several African countries Nigeria inclusive are dealing with both security issues and the virus (Idowu, 2020). Security is perhaps one of the biggest menaces facing the world today, particularly our country, Nigeria. More than ever before, we are living in the period of grave security challenge in Nigeria (Ejirefe, 2021). This resonates well with the assertion of Onifade et al. (2013) Nigeria has been engulfed in a firestorm of insecurity, resulting in the murders of countless innocent citizens, foreigners, members of the country's security forces, elected politicians, and government employees. The insecurity problem has grown to epic proportions, causing the country's political and economic leaders, as well as the entire nation, to lament the loss of loved ones, investments, and the lack of security in most sections of the country including Imo State. In the wake of these security issues, even in the post COVID-19 era, the social media has not helped matters.

The influence of social media networks is rapidly changing. It is changing how people connect, create, save, share, and react to information. It is also converting traditional news media into a more interactive and inter-activity media, in which users can contribute, remark, discuss, and even further share the news.

Furthermore, social media's strength comes in its ability to establish extremely effective platforms on which people may freely participate and communicate anywhere, at any time, in real time, and on a global scale (Nigerian Communication Commission [NCC], 2019).

The rise in mobile phones and the Internet have increased the use of social media in Nigeria. Though, growing use of information and communication technology might help with social, political, and economic progress, it can also expose people to violent extremist groups' radicalizing impact. Terrorists can use social media as an operational tool to recruit, train, and communicate with their supporters and potential recruits (Cox, et al., 2018).

Several scholars have stated, according to Agbawe (2018), that while social media has brought a multitude of prospects for transforming societies and advancing humankind through interactive information exchange, it has also created a catalogue of security issues that the society is currently dealing with. In similar vein, Chukwuere and Onyebukwa (2018) note that in a developing country like Nigeria, social media platforms, which are seen as online-based tools and services that link individuals and enable contact with one another via the internet, play both harmful and good functions. This is because these platforms have the potential to push undesirable agendas

that could jeopardize a country's security makeup. This was unarguably evident during the Endсар saga immediately after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Corroborating the above assertion, Ayih, *et al.*, (2020) observe that the recent farmers/herders conflicts in virtually all part of Nigeria and other insurgent attacks in Nigeria, citizens use that as an opportunity to fabricate information related to these attacks in order to achieve their political, philosophical and religious aim on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp and so on. The resultant effect of this is security tension in the society.

Because social media is an open world of communication with limited regulation by government agents, terrorists, separatists, political organizations, religious groups, individuals, and others use it to spread information and ideas; and most of the time, some of this information is false, putting Nigerian national security at risk and in recent times this is the case in Imo State, Nigeria (Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018). The spread of misinformation and propaganda on social media is widely considered to have grave societal consequences (Joshua, *et al.*, 2018).

The power of social media cannot be overemphasized. The social media is a powerful platform that can be used for a variety of purposes no doubt about that (Poliska, 2016). After the first wave of COVID-19 the issue of insecurity heightened. The power of

social media makes it a viable platform where the issue of insecurity can be propagated if it falls on the wrong hand Etumnu, (2020). While the people of Imo state may perceive the use of social media to keep in touch with events, the same social media may be used to propagate insecurity that can threaten the very fabric of national integration in the country and create an atmosphere of fear and anxiety (Onifade *et al.*, 2013).

Therefore, it is against this backdrop this study sought to examine Owerri residents' perception of the use of social media in propagating security issues in the post COVID-19 era.

Statement of the Problem

In the wake of covid-19 era social media has provided many opportunities and benefits, it has also created social and security threats that could have a negative impact on society and national security. For example, social media can be used to spread false information, espionage, subversion, sabotage, propaganda, hate speeches, incitement, bullying, social and political mobilization, and the distribution of dangerous software (NCC, 2019). Allcott and Gentzkov (2017) agree that social media platforms are well-suited to the spread of misleading news that has the tendency to cause security threat in any given society.

The nature of social media makes it a platform where anyone or group can use to advance their cause. The high level of social media penetration

and use in all corners of society may have contributed to the security issues the country is battling with. Chukwuere and Onyebukwa (2018) did note that, as far as social media exists, it will continue to pose a threat to the national security of Nigeria. Owing to this notion, the Owerri residents may perceive that the social media may be an instrument to be used to propagate insecurity in the state. As a result, this study sought to investigate Owerri residents' perceptions of the use of social media in propagating security in the post-COVID-19 era.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following questions

1. To what extent Owerri residents are exposed to social media in the post Covid-19 era vis-à-vis security issues?
2. What is the perception of Owerri residents on the use of social media in propagating security issues?
3. In what ways has social media been used to propagate security issues within the state?

Review of Related Literature

Social Media and National Security Problem

In our present world, millions of social media users all over Nigeria are connected to several events as they happen. Some leverage on the platform to promote propaganda, fake news,

incite some sections of ethnic groups in the end, create security problems. For instance, the Boko Haram, Biafra agitators, Fulani/herdsmen are guilty of using the social media to promote insecurity (Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018).

With regards to some comments on some of these social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp etc., the peace and stability of Nigeria are sometimes threatened. This was the case of the Endsar saga after the first wave of the Covid-19 era. The fact that social media has empowered its users to become social communicators and content creators, there will always be a problem that is capable of causing security challenges in Nigeria as a result of the use of social media (Cann, 2011; Nsude & Onwe, 2017).

Terrorist groups are not the only ones utilizing social media to threaten a country's peace and security; civilians are also using it to terrorize one another through fake news and fabricated postings that spread misinformation and fear. One example is the rise in the amount and variety of unconfirmed news or information coming on social media platforms from the northern and southern Nigerian corridors. Furthermore, the misuse of social media has been linked to some national security problem (Kimutai, 2014). The majority of the time, this news and information is neither confirmed nor verified, resulting in the spread of fake news. Thousands and millions, on the other

hand, react instantly when news of any kind of attack or terrorist news is broadcast, attacking one another based on ethnicity, religion, and tribe becomes the order of the day. Simultaneously, such news incites anxiety, conflicts, and violence in society (Kimutai, 2014; Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018; Nsude & Onwe, 2017).

While social media has aided in the fight against insecurity, it has also exacerbated Nigeria's security issues. In light of this assumption, Attah (2014) point out that, because everyone is on social media, security agencies have used it to look for anti-social and deviant behavior in our society. The ability of social media to bring about societal transformation, growth, and promotion is undeniable. However, the absence of regulation and oversight has led some researchers to regard them as a threat to democratic nations, thereby constituting a security risk in Nigeria (Omede & Alebiosu 2015).

Empirical Review

Nsude and Onwe (2017) conducted a study on social Media and Security Challenges in Nigeria and it was revealed that social media is a welcome development because of its several benefits, such as the speed at which information is disseminated, improving learning opportunities and so on. Social media is used for sharing false information and such information could lead to insecurity in Nigeria. The study revealed, among other things,

that social media has played a significant role in Nigeria's security challenges. Agbawe (2018) conducted a study on the challenges and prospects of social media with a focus on Nigeria, and it was found that digital natives are very knowledgeable and aware of the social media platform, and it also has certain horrifying effects on them, which have, of course, become formidable challenges to their growth. Despite the grave issues identified, the study found that social media holds some promise in terms of changing the form of society and the way businesses are conducted.

In a research conducted by Ayih, et al. (2020), the implications of social media usage on national security in North-Eastern Nigeria, it was discovered that the current status of security in the region is appalling. Furthermore, the study found that propaganda, fake news dissemination, and hate speech were the primary ways in which social media platforms aided insecurity in North Eastern Nigeria. As a result, the study concludes that there is a link between social media use and security problems in Nigeria's North East.

In a study on the effects of social media on national security conducted by Chukwuere and Onyebukwa (2018), it was revealed that social media has increased social connection among individuals and that social media platforms are employed in promoting social and national insecurity, such as the situation in

Nigeria's northern and south-eastern regions. It was also found that insurgents, Biafra agitators, and herders utilize social media platforms to spread their agendas, and that the general populace also uses social media platforms to spread propaganda, some of which is fake news. The investigation also revealed that Nigeria's security situation is dire. Onifade *et al.* (2013) conducted research on Nigeria's insecurity problem and the importance of moral standards and virtue ethics. It was revealed that Nigeria's security challenge has taken on a formidable dimension that necessitates not only a multi-stakeholder approach, but also that Nigerian leaders, politicians, and their allies must be forced to demonstrate and uphold moral values and virtues in all of their actions in order to lead by example and avoid unnecessarily heating up the polity through their actions and comments.

In a study on social media and terrorism undertaken by Kimutai (2014), it was revealed that terrorist groups use social media to interact with cyber-crime groups and to organize fundraising efforts that are undertaken in part or entirely on the Internet. The study also discovered that community criminal organizations such as the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), 'Mungiki', and 'Sungusungu' heavily rely on social media to recruit, communicate, propagandize, and radicalize its members. Alakali, *et al.* (2017) in a study conducted on social media, hate

speech, and foul language in Nigeria, it was found that while respondents were aware that hate speech and foul language have legal implications, they were unaware of the legal duties imposed on perpetrators of hate speech and foul language in Nigeria. It was also revealed that social media contributes to insecurity by disseminating malicious content such as propaganda, fake news, and hate speech, among other things.

Etumnu (2020) carried out a study on the effectiveness of social media in combating hate speech, fake news and extremism and it was revealed that social media platforms have not been effective in combating extremism, hate speech, and fake news in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The Technological determinism theory was used as the theoretical foundation of this study. This theory was propounded by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and was further developed by Marshal McLuhan in 1964 (Okpongpong & Ukpong, 2021). The principle of the theory is hinge on that fact that technology in any given society defines its nature; technology is viewed as the driving force of culture in a society and that technological advancement leads to newer ways of life in a society and virtually affects all aspect of the society, hence change the society either positively or negatively (Asemah, *et al.*, 2017). The theory proposes that as we move from one

technological age to the next, media technologies change how we as individuals in a society think, feel, behave, and how society functions. It best explains the impact of ICT on how information is consumed, retrieved, and transmitted in our current society (Nsude & Onwe, 2017). According to Asemah et al. (2017), Technological determinism theory points to technology as the force which shapes society by implication, the modes of communication shapes human existence as its tends to dictate users behaviours.

It is believes that the invention and development of new technologies are linked to the current social, historical, economic, and cultural changes in human society. These technologies stress that new media, in particular social media, is transforming the world into an interactive forum, allowing individuals to express themselves, engage with friends, share personal information, and publish their own opinions on issues on the social media (Nwabueze, 2017).

The relevance of this theory is based on the fact that media technology influences how we behave and how society functions. It is obvious that in our modern society, where everything happens on social media and other virtual spaces, the tendency of social media to be used to spread fake news, propaganda, and hate speech, among other things, is likely, which can lead to security issues. In a nutshell, social media can

be leveraged to propagate insecurity in Imo State and, by extension, Nigeria.

Research Methodology

In order to collect data for the study, a survey research design was used with a questionnaire as the instrument. According to the 2016 National Population Census, projected population Owerri urban has a population of 555,500 people. Using the Wimmer and Dominick online sample size calculator the sample size was determined to be 384.

Using a multistage sample procedure, copies of the questionnaire were sent to people of Owerri metropolis, Imo State. Owerri, which is part of a cluster, has already been separated into three areas: Owerri North, Owerri West, and Owerri Municipal. In the second stage, two communities from each local government area were purposively chosen because residents within these places are likely to have smart phones with good network service and have a high level of literacy. Amakohia and Egbu (Owerri North), Umuguma and Nekede (Owerri West), Umuonyeche and Umuororonjo (Owerri Municipal) were the communities chosen.

In stage three, with six communities to choose from, the researchers distributed the questionnaire proportionately to the communities; that is, $384/6 = 64$. As a result, the researcher purposively shared 64 copies of the questionnaire to respondents who have smart phones in these communities.

The simple percentage and mean analysis methods were used for data presentation and analysis. For the mean analysis, the 4 point Likert scale was used.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For the purpose of data analysis, 384 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to respondents. However, out of 384 copies of the questionnaire shared, 369 (96%) were returned valid, while 15 (4%) were invalid. Therefore, the analysis was done based on the 369 returned copies of the questionnaire.

Sociodemographic Data

Analysis of sociodemographic data revealed that they were 244 (66%) male and 125(34%) in the study, for age distribution 15-20 (44, 12%), 25-30 (124, 34%), 35-above (201, 54%) it means those around 35-above were more in the study. For educational attainment, primary education had nothing, secondary 35(9%), tertiary 239(65%), non-formal 15(4%) and others 80(22%) by implication those in tertiary education were more in the study.

Research Question 1: To what extent Owerri residents are exposed to social media in the post Covid-19 era vis-à-vis security issues?

Table 1: Respondents’ response on whether they have social media of any kind in their smart phone or any social media enable device.

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	369	100%
No	-	-
Can’t say	-	-
Total	369	100

Source: Field survey, 2021

Analysis of data from table 1 above showed that all the respondents 100% confirmed that they have social media on their smart phone and other social media enable device. This means that are all likely to provide the appropriate data needed for the study.

Table 2: Respondents’ response on since the post COVID-19 era how long they spend on social media on issues bordering on security

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than an hour	75	20%
An hour	115	31%
Two hours	136	37%
More than three hours	43	12%
Total	369	100

Source: Field survey, 2021

Analysis of data from the above table 2 revealed that 37% of the respondents are of the view that since the post Covid-19 era they spend are at least two hours on social media and on issues bordering on security. This implies that majority of the respondents confirmed that they spend two hours on social media and on issues bordering on security.

Table 3: Respondents’ response on how often you visit social media in a week to find out issues concerning security since the post COVID-19 era

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	289	78%
Twice weekly	66	18%
Once weekly	14	4%
Not at all	-	-
Total	369	100

Source: Field survey, 2021

Analysis of data from table 3 showed that 78% of the respondents did indicate that they visit the social media on daily basis to find out issues concerning security since the post covid-19 era. This means that respondents on daily basis visit the social media to find out issues concerning security since the dawn of post covid-19 era.

Table 4: Respondents' response on the extent they are exposed to social media since the post COVID-19 era vis-à-vis security issues

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Large extent	245	66%
Moderate	87	24%
Low	37	10%
Not at all	-	-
Total	369	100

Source: Field survey, 2021

Analysis of data from the above table 4 revealed that 66% of respondents are exposed to a large extent to social media since the post COVID-19 era vis-à-vis security issues. By implication, respondents are largely exposed to social media messages that have to do with security issues.

Research Question 2: What is the perception of Owerri residents on the use of social media in propagating security issues?

Variables	SA	A	D	SD	N	M	Decision
Do you think social media users have use the platform negatively and as such encourage security problem	160 (43%)	128 (35%)	47 (13%)	34 (9%)	369 (100)	3.1	Accept
Do you think the lack of control of social of social media by government has contributed to security problem in the state	132 (36%)	168 (46%)	38 (10%)	31 (8%)	369 (100)	3.0	Accept
Do you think that since social media accommodates all persons it is an avenue for such persons or groups to propagate content that is capable of causing security threat	178 (48%)	110 (30%)	49 (13%)	32 (9%)	369 (100)	3.1	Accept
Average mean						3.0	

Source: Field survey, 2021

Variables: SA=Strongly Agree, 3.3-4.0: A=Agree,2.5-3.2:D=Disagree, 1.8-2.4:SD=Strongly Disagree, 1.1-1.7

Decision Rule: If the average mean score is lower than 2.5 (1 - 2.4), the researchers decide that Owerri residents are not of the perception that social

media is use in propagating security issues. But if the average mean score is higher than 2.4 (2.5 – 4.0), the researchers decide that Owerri residents is not of the perception that social media is use in propagating security issues.

Analysing data from the table above revealed that at an average mean of 3.0 (N=369), respondents have the perception that social media is use in propagating security issues. This means that respondents believe that social media contribute to the security problem in the state.

Research Question 3: In what ways has social media been used to propagate security issues within the state?

Variables	SA	A	D	SD	N	M	Decision
Social media has been used to spread fake news that in turn sparkle security problems	175 (47%)	124 (34%)	48 (13%)	22 (6%)	370 (100)	3.2	Accept
Social media has been used to spread hate speech that is capable of inciting people against each other	115 (31%)	155 (42%)	55 (15%)	44 (12%)	370 (100)	2.9	Accept
Social media has been used to mobilized agitators for a particular cause that can lead to security threat	165 (45%)	127 (34%)	36 (10%)	41 (11%)	370 (100)	3.1	Accept
Average mean						3.0	

Source: Field survey, 2021

Variables: SA=Strongly Agree, 3.3-4.0: A=Agree,2.5-3.2:D=Disagree, 1.8-2.4:SD=Strongly Disagree, 1.1.7

Decision Rule: If the average mean score is lower than 2.5 (1 - 2.4), the researchers decide that the above mentioned ways have not been used in social media to propagate security issues within the state of Imo State. But if the average mean score is higher than 2.4 (2.5 – 4.0), the researchers decide that the above mentioned ways have been used in social media to propagate security issues within the state of Imo State.

Analysis of data revealed that at an average of 3.0 (N=369), respondents confirmed that the Social media has been used to spread fake news that in turn sparkle security problems; it has

been used to spread hate speech that is capable of inciting people against each other and that it has been used to mobilized agitators for a particular

cause that can lead to security threat among other ways.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from data analysed revealed that an average of 70% respondents are exposed to social media content vis-à-vis security issues in the post Covid-19 era to a large extent. This could be linked to their educational attainment as they would want to know what is happening around them as to be abreast of the security of the state. This is in line with the finding of Agbawe (2018), whose study revealed that digital natives are very knowledgeable and aware of the social media platform, although it has certain horrifying effects on them, but despite that, social media holds some promise in terms of changing the form of society and the way businesses are conducted. This finding resonates well with the Technological determinism theory this study was anchored on as exposure to social media will definitely have a way to affect the way we do things as the theory postulates. In consonance with this finding, Chukwuere and Onyebukwa (2018), in their study did note that social media has increased social connection among individuals and that social media platforms are employed in promoting social and national insecurity, such as the situation in Nigeria's northern and south-eastern regions.

Communicating findings, it was revealed that at an average mean of 3.0 (N=369), respondents have the perception that social media is use in

propagating security issues. They believe that social media users have used the platform negatively and, as such, encourage security problems. Again, the government's lack of control over social media has contributed to security challenges in the state, and they are equally of the opinion that, because social media accommodates all people, it is an avenue for such people or groups to propagate content capable of causing security threats. This finding is in tandem with that of Nsude and Onwe (2017) findings which revealed that as much as social media is a welcome development because of its several benefits, social media is used for sharing false information and such information could lead to insecurity in Nigeria and that social media has played a significant role in Nigeria's security challenges. In the same vein, Kimutai (2014) found that terrorist groups use social media to interact with cyber-crime groups and to organize fundraising efforts that are undertaken in part or entirely on the Internet and, as such, promote insecurity. This finding gives credence to the principle of the technological determinism theory that states that technology in any given society defines its nature; technology is viewed as the driving force of culture in a society and that technological advancement leads to newer ways of life in a society.

Furthermore, finding from data analysed, revealed that at an average of 3.0 (N=369), respondents are of the

view that the social media has been utilized to spread fake news which lead to security problems; they confirmed also to the fact that it is handy in spreading hate speech that is capable of inciting people against each other. Additionally, social media has been used to mobilised agitators for a particular cause that can lead to security threat as the case may be. This finding is in agreement with Ayih, et al. (2020). In their finding, it was revealed that propaganda, fake news dissemination, and hate speech were the primary ways in which social media platforms aided insecurity in North Eastern Nigeria. Similarly, in the study of Alakali, et al (2017), it was revealed that social media is the centre where fake news, propaganda, malicious content, hate speech, and foul language thrive in Nigeria and, by implication, lead to insecurity. This could be the reason why in the Etumnu (2020) study it was revealed that social media has not been effective in combating hate speech, fake news and extremism in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In our contemporary society, there is no doubt about the impact of social media. It is because of the influence it has that is why it is being used for several purposes. Based on the findings, it is safe to conclude that in as much as social media has a lot of benefits the level of exposure to social media has contributed a great deal to promoting security problems in Imo State and, by extension, Nigeria.

Respondents confirmed the fact that the nature of social media makes it a key factor in some of the security problems society suffers as anyone that has access to it can use it to propagate fake news, hate speech that is capable of causing security threats.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the following recommendations are made

1. Based on the fact that a great number of people are largely exposed to social media, the platform can also be utilized to sensitize users to promote peace because it can be used to discuss the way forward of insecurity.
2. Social media users should be cautioned by those in authority or regulators not to use the platform negatively as its negative effect can be devastating on the security state of the country.
3. The fact that anyone can use social media to promote security issues through the spread of fake news and hate speech platforms should be fact checked to reduce the amount of malicious content that is capable of sparking security spread. Furthermore, the platform should be monitored to ensure that it is not used to promote an agenda that could destabilize the country's peace.

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