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AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND ACTIVITIES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined audience perception of social media influence on government policies and activities. Three objectives guided this study while two theories: Audience Gatekeeping Theory and Social Network Theory served as the theoretical underpinnings upon which this study was anchored. Survey Research Method was used while Purposive Sampling, Simple Random Sampling and Convenience Sampling Techniques were used to select 300 respondents from the population of this study with online questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. Findings revealed that social media platforms are popular means through which people are exposed to contents (news and information) on government policies and actions on daily basis in Nigeria. Despite the revelation that social media activities fuelled hate speech and violence, social media helped to stimulate public interest in the activities of government, enhance public understanding of happenings around actualization of government policies and provided a citizens-government interaction and feedback mechanism that help enhance citizens' capacity to hold powerful political and public office holders accountable for their actions and inactions. This study however recommended that there should be regulated and responsible use of the social media through self-censorship, highlighting guidelines as eligibility criteria (for being a member of an online platform) and orientation by government and civil society groups on the proper use of social media.

Key words: *Audience, Influence, Government Activities, Government Policies, Perception, Social Media.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, social media have revolutionalised human communication patterns in a way never witnessed before now (Okoro & Nwafor,2013). The main index of social media technologies, which is, speedy and unhindered flow of information within a twinkling of an eye, has promoted liberty and actualized human's right to freedom of speech and expression (Okoro & Nwafor,2013). Going further, social media platforms give liberty to the users to become both the producers and receivers of information (Ahmed, et al., 2019). The implication of this, is that, citizens via social media platforms can dodge the run-of-the-mill practice of news making in the conventional media, which involves the rigour of both gatekeeping and framing (Hermida, et al, 2012). Ahmed et al, (2019)'s emphasised that this new role

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ascribed to audience by social media technologies in virtual communities has deemphasized the traditional role of the media as the producers and the audience as the receiver.

In an effort to differentiate and substantiate traditional media role in response to the stance of Ahmed et al. (2019), Neuman et al. (2014) describes conventional media role as that which is official and prescriptive while social media role is tagged reactionary and preemptive (public feedback). Essentially, the dynamism in social media message creation gives leeway to easy information production, transmission and reception compared to that of the conventional media. With social media technologies, both the initial poster (of a message) and the sharer (the third party) play the role of gatekeepers to the general audience. According to Achor (2017), both the poster and the third party assume three notable gatekeeping roles, which are: the originator, the transmitter, and the influencer.

As the originator, such individual initiates an idea, encodes it in form of chats, tweets, video, or audio and as the transmitter, such individual posts (transmits) such encoded messages in their social media handle (Facebook, Twitter, Tittok, Snapchat, Instagram, etc). As the influencer, such individual (initial poster) also controls the flow of the messages (chats, tweets, video, or audio) by sharing them to groups and friends, who at the same time re-share in their various social media handles. Notably, in the process of sharing or forwarding the messages, the content could be edited or amplified to suit any intended goal (Achor, 2017). Against this background, social media users now specifically perform audience gate keeping role via the selection of what to post, how to post it and when to post it in the myriad social media platforms available worldwide.

With this role, social media technologies have impacted all spheres of human endeavor from global commerce, religion, culture, peace, conflict and, most importantly, governance (Ashiekpe & Mojaye, 2017). Via the social media, many dictatorial and sit-tight political gladiators have been ousted and replaced with more democratic ones as evident in the 'political tsunami' witnessed in some African countries in the wake of the popular Arab spring in 2011/2012 (Ufuophu-Biri & Ojoboh, 2017). This Arab uprising, originated via Facebook, Twitter and Youtube fuelled protests that ended the protracted reigns of such dictatorial and sit-tight political figures, such as; Tunisia's Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and Libya's Muammar al-Gaddafi. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) posit that the social media have provided a platform where people across the globe can ventilate their opinions about government and governance as well as empowered citizens to perform check and balance roles on public and political office holders. Also, through the social media technologies, people can demand transparency, probity, and accountability in government; and encourage a higher level of political participation among users (especially youths) as being witnessed now in the build-up to 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Across the globe and in Nigeria, social media technologies have been used to curry the attention of citizens on sundry issues, such as; political participation, the clarion call for patriotism for one's country, tackling insecurity and terrorism and calling out government failures. On involvement in political activities during elections, political parties and the Independent National Electoral

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Commission (INEC) make frantic efforts to connect with Nigerians via their various social media handles on the need to have maximum political participation. On the need for patriotism and tackling insecurity as well as terrorism, the Federal Government always engage the citizen (via social media handles) using their various agencies to create and disseminate messages on such subject matter. A notable one recently is the "if you see something, say something" campaign by the Federal Ministry of Information.

Social media in a heterogeneous and plural society like Nigeria have been used in both positive and negative ways. Among the negative ways are the spread of fake news, misinformation, deliberate falsehood including hate speech while the positive usages include using the social media for spreading information on healthy living, giving updates on happenings in the country and globally as well as educating the users on issues of national and global importance (Manning, 2014). Citizens have also used the social media technologies to mobilise and co-ordinate people on some impactful social campaigns and protests against perceived failures in government's policies and actions. Examples are: #Endsars protest in 2020 (coordinated via twitter and other networking sites) initiated against the perceived unruly and unconstitutional conducts of Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigeria Police Force (this later degenerated to protest against bad governance in Nigeria) , Occupy Nigeria protest initiated against the removal of fuel subsidy by the Nigerian government in January 2012, and the #BBOG (Bring back Our Girls) campaign coordinated on Twitter and other social networking sites to draw public attention to the seemingly forgotten story of over 200 Chibok Community School girls abducted by Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria's North-east. Others are: online public push for the removal of Kemi Adeosun in the wake of her NYSC certificate scandal, online public push for the removal of former SFG, Babachair Lawal when he was involved in grass cutting contract scandal, call for Abba Kyari's dismissal due to his scandal with the United States involving Hushpuppi' case, protest against the prolonged stay of President Buhari's ministers who showed interest in contesting the presidency, protest for the removal of CBN governor- Godwin Ifeanyi Emefiele in the wake of his involvement in politics, among others.

Today, there are abundance of studies on the nexus between social media and politics (Cheng, Muno & Moritze, 2015; Achor & Nnabuko, 2017; Ahlgvist, Black, Holoner & Helmonen, 2008) In fact, issues of politics and governance dominate the online media platforms as Nigerians prepare for their every-four-year process of electing people into various political offices come 2023. Numerous studies (Cheng, Muno &Moritze, 2015; Achor and Nnabuko, 2017; Hermid et al., 2012; Ahlgvist, Black, Holoner and Helmonen, 2008) have emphasised the power of the social media and its contribution to politics, globalisation, economy, among others. These studies affirm the multiplier strengths of social media on the issues highlighted above since its cameo.

However, there is limited studies on the perception of the audience on the influence of the social media (as utilized by users) on government policies and activities. Putting perception into the context of this study, perception refers to the cognitive process through which an individual organises, interprets and makes appropriate meanings from the information they are exposed to. Not only does perception create people's

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experience of the world around them, but also allows them to act appropriately within their environment (Ahlgvist, et al. 2008). According to Segard (2015), there is a relationship between perceptions and technology use because perception defines how various technologies are assessed, embraced or rejected as well as utilized for certain purposes (of concern to this study is the use of social media technologies to influence government policies and activities in Nigeria).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the perception of the audience on the influence of the social media (as utilized by users) on government policies and actions in Nigeria.

1.1 ObjectiveS

The broad objective of this study is to investigate the perception of the audience on the influence of social media (as utilized by users) on government policies and activities. The specific objectivities include:

I. To determine the level of audience exposure to social media contents on government policies and activities.
II. To assess the nature of social media contents on government policies and activities.
III. To evaluate audience perception of the influence of social media contents on government policies and activities.
IV. To examine the attitude (actions) of audience towards the use of social media for building an inclusive and hate-free democratic society.

1.2 Research Questions

Prelude on the research objectives, these are the research questions:

1 What is the level of audience exposure to social media contents on government policies and activities?
2 What is the nature of social media contents on government policies and activities?
3 How do audience perceive the influence of social media contents on government policies and activities?
4 How do audience act towards the use of social media for building an inclusive and hate-free democratic society?

1.3 Research Hypothesis

The following null hypotheses are formulated:

H_{01}: Audience are not exposed to social media contents on government p olicies and activities.

H_{02}: Social media contents on government policies and activities are mostly negative.

H_{03}: Social media contents have no influence on government policies and activities.

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H_{04}: Audience do not act towards using social media for building an inclusive and hate-free democratic society.

2. LITERATYRE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Audience Perception

Audience within the domain of social media and as contexualised in this study refers to social media users, especially youth of ages 18-35 who belong to the digital native (people who are ICT compliance) category. According to Hermida (2015), there are four categories of social media users, namely: professionals, sharers, creators and bonders. The distinction among the categories is thin as each and every social media user can fall within each category depending on their present usage status.

Professional users refer to those who use social media technologies for the advancement of their professions and businesses while sharers are those who share tweets, chats, videos, audios and other news items created or posted by others on their personal social media handles and platforms (Hermida, 2015). Further, creators are those who, with the lack of censorship feature of social media, initiate or create tweets, chats, videos, audios and other news items on issues of national or international importance while bonders are people including friends and relatives as well as acquaintances who use various social media platforms to share messages of affection, socialization and hope (Hermida, 2015). Such individuals also use the social media platforms for dialogue and bonding (Hermida, 2015).

Sheomaker and Vos (2009) alongside Achor and Nnabuko (2019) in their contribution to Network Gatekeeping, classify social media users into four typologies, namely: everyday users, institutional users, networked individual users and professional communicators. The identified actors, according to them, converse, mediate, tweet, chat to one another, comment on posts, share information and retweet tweets. As a result of these interrelationship, the identified typologies mediate the multi-directional flow of information as backed by the model of redefined gatekeeping (Achor & Nnabuko, 2019; Barzilia-Nahon,2008).

Perception, on its part, refers to the cognitive process through which an individual organises, interprets and makes appropriate meanings from the information they are exposed to. Not only does perception create people's experience of the world around them, but also allows them to act appropriately within their environment (Ahlgvist, et al. 2008). According to Segard (2015), there is a relationship between perceptions and technology use because perception defines how various technologies are assessed, embraced or rejected as well as utilized for certain purposes.

According to Belch and Belch (2014), perception is an individual process which depends on individual's internal factors such as experiences, moods, beliefs, attitude, expectation and needs. The perceptual process is also influenced by the characteristics of a stimulus (Fennell, 2017).

Essentially, audience perception of social media contents hinges on varying psychological interpretations of the types of the contents shared cum the tone of the contents as used by social media users in conversing or discussing such contents (Lee, 2012; Chen & Ng, 2016). In this paper, the concern is to examine audience perception of social media influence on

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government policies and activities in Nigeria.

Social Media Technologies

We posit in this paper that social media are web 2.0 enabled platforms which enable users (individuals or organization and their public) who may be wide, heterogeneous and diverse to meet, converse, interact, share information, ideas, knowledge, collaborations and awareness in a way that is not censored.

Social media are in different forms, such as magazines, weblogs, internet forums, social blogs, social networks, podcast, video and social book marking, micro blogging, photographs or picture (Kaplan & Haenein, 2010; Achor, Nwachukwu, & Nkwocha, 2015) and these platforms include; Facebook, Youtube, Tiktok, Wikipedia, Twitter, Instagram, Instant blog, WhatsApp, 2go, etc. These social media platforms, according to Kaplan & Haelin (2010), are broadly categorised into social networking sites (E.g Facebook), blogs and micro blogs (E.g Twitter, WhatsApp), collaborative projects (E.g Wikipedia), content communities (E.g YouTube), virtual game world (E.g World of Craft) and virtual social world (E.g Second life).

In Nigeria, about 30.9 million Nigerians are active users of various social media platforms while this figure is projected to rise to 36.8 million in 2023 (Clement, 2019). Essentially, social media users are not only able to receive and consume contents on the social media, but are also empowered to produce and disseminate information they deem fit, making them 'prosumers' in the process. That is, users are both producers and consumers of contents.

Government Policies and activities in Nigeria

Government policies refer to the specific programmes of actions championed by the government to achieve its goals in different sectors of the nation's economy. It expresses the decisions, goals, as well as the actions adopted by the government for social, political and economic management (Hassel, 2015). In Nigeria, the government has numerous policies and has embarked on different actions and activities to actualize its goals. There are policies in agriculture, finance, economy, education, security, health, etc while specific actors are appointed to man and ensure the actualization of the policies. In some instances, there are inadequacies in the actions and personalities of these appointed actors. This is sometimes reinforced by the (in)actions on the part of the presidency and/or the inadequacies of major actors in the nation's helms of affairs. These inadequacies usually attract public outcry, especially on the social media. The social media users via different platforms create, tweet and retweet different contents on such inadequacies and such is presumed to have specific influence on government's further actions, activities and policies. This, is essentially the focus of this study.

Examples of these inadequacies and the accompanied protest of the social media users are: #Endsars protest in 2020 (coordinated via twitter and other networking sites) initiated against the perceived unruly and unconstitutional conducts of Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigeria Police Force (this later degenerated to protest against bad governance in Nigeria) , Occupy Nigeria protest initiated against the removal of fuel subsidy by the Nigerian government in January 2012, and the #BBOG (Bring back Our Girls) campaign coordinated on Twitter and other social networking sites to

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draw public attention to the seemingly forgotten story of over 200 Chibok Community School girls abducted by Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria's North-east. Others are: online public push for the removal of Kemi Adeosun in the wake of her NYSC certificate scandal, online public push for the removal of former SFG, Babachair Lawal when he was involved in grass cutting contract scandal, call for Abba Kyari's dismissal due to his scandal with the United States involving Hushpuppi' case, protest against the prolonged stay of President Buhari's ministers who showed interest in contesting the presidency, protest for the removal of CBN governor-Godwin Ifeanyi Emefiele in the wake of his involvement in politics, protest against the prolonged Twitter ban in Nigeria, among others.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theories, namely: Audience Gatekeeping Theory and Social Network Theory.

2.2.1 Audience Gatekeeping Theory

This theory was propounded by Shoemaker and Vos (2009) as a way to addressing the gap or failure of the traditional gatekeeping theory in recognising the audience or the gated on whom gatekeeping is exerted. The theory holds that the audience in the typical traditional gatekeeping models in media studies have roles that were neglected. The audience or the gated community, according to the theory, shares and determines the importance of news (set news agenda), thus, breaking the traditional news room routine and bureaucracy of setting agenda in the public domain. Social Media in the Audience Gatekeeping Theory, enable users to dialogue and interact with news, news makers and institution. This user-to-user interaction is integral and central to gatekeeping process (Kwon, 2012) as audience via social media can filter information and post or promote only certain pieces which appeal to them (Meraz & Papacharissi,2013). Essentially, The Network Gatekeeping Theory holds that every social media user is a gatekeeper with the authority to decide which information they will share and those not to share (Diakopoulos & Zubiaga,2014).

The relevance of this theory to this study is that it does not only affirm the nomenclature of social media users as "prosumers" but also, affirms their position as the gatekeepers of news and activities which set agenda in the public domain. From this theory, if individuals as gatekeepers gate keep what they produce on social media, the negative aspect of the social media use (hate speech, misinformation, falsehood, etc.) would be curbed. Thus, it can be deduced from this theory that information produced on social media whether positive or negative is deliberate.

2.2.2 Social Network Theory

This theory as propounded by John Bannes (1954) focuses on how people, organization or group interact with others in their network. It dwells on the role of social interaction in transmitting information, channeling personal or media influence and enabling attitudinal or behavioural change (Dunn, 1983). The theory recognizes two concepts: network and nodes. Network is the connection, such as the social media networks while nodes are individual actors or organisations within the network (social media) (Liu, 2017). A fascinating concept of the theory is the six degrees of separation. According to this six degrees of separation, the more people you know and interact with within the network, the smaller the world becomes. Hence, with the ties among the nodes, you just need six right connections

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(interaction with just or less than six nodes) to reach anywhere in this world.

The import in the propositions of the Social Network Theory is that any content share, tweet or re-tweet on the social media platforms has reached everywhere in the entire universe. Thus, it would have specific effects on whom the contents are directed to because, as posited by the Audience Gatekeeping Theory, the audience (social media users) set agenda in the public domain. Therefore, if individuals as gatekeepers produce negative or positive contents or information, such message or information would reach everywhere in the entire universe with specific effects as set out in the message/information. This typifies how comments and users' activities on government policies can go far online and the effect the tone set out in the message can have on all the media audience and their reactions towards the government.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey research method because of its suitability in examining people's perception and opinion (Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafo & Okpanachi, 2017). The population of study comprised all the youth in the Southwest Nigeria between the ages 18-35 who are tagged digital natives (conversant with ICT and allied technologies). According to Worldometer (2022), the population of people in southwest Nigeria is about 47 million and the youth represent about 35% of this population. Out of the population, a sample size of 300 was drawn out using the recommendation of Comrey and Lee that a sample size of 50 is very poor; 100 is poor; 200 is fair; 300 is good; 500 is very good; and 1,000 is excellent (Asemah, et al., 2017).

A multi stage sampling technique was used to select the respondents. At the first stage, purposive sampling was used to decide that digital natives (people aged 18-35) would be selected for this study. At the second stage, simple random sampling was used as each and every youth in the southwest region was given equal chance of being selected in the final sample. The last stage was based on Convenience Sampling as the first set of respondents to fill the web-based questionnaire to reach 300 responses based on the count were selected in the final sample. Out of the 300 respondents, 65 respondents were from Lagos state; 58 respondents were from Oyo state; 52 were from Osun state; 43 respondents were from Ogun state while 41 respondents each were from both Ondo and Ekiti states.

Data were collected using online likert scale questionnaire with responses ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Prior to administration (sending out the questionnaire), the instrument was subjected to content validity by three research and media studies experts who affirmed that the contents were modest, clear and intelligible enough to elicit responses that would actualize this study's objectives. On reliability, a pilot survey (online) was conducted using 20 respondents from the North central region of Nigeria (Offa and Ilorin, Kwara state) who were sent the online questionnaire for filling. The result of the pilot study, yielded a Cronbach Alpha of .898 (89.8%), implying the reliability of the data set. The choice of Offa and Ilorin as the destination for the pilot test was based on the recommendation by Hassan, Schattner and Mazza (2006) that a pilot should be done preferably using respondents from a population different from the actual population to be used for the study. Thus, Offa and Ilorin in the Northcentral region of Nigeria were considered close to the

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southwest region in language, culture and development.

For analysis of the result, descriptive statistics of percentage (%), mean (x) and Standard Deviation (SD) were used. The mean and standard deviation are considered the strongest and most widely used descriptive statistical tools in social science research (Asemah et al., 2017). Specifically, the responses to each statement on the 5-scale likert questionnaire were averaged to determine the mean cut-off point for the study at 3.00, while the standard deviation benchmark for the study was pegged at 1.41.

3.1 Decision Rule

The decision to either accept or reject a statement was adapted from Nworgu's (2006) recommendation that where a computed mean score is equal to or less than the bench mark (cut off point), the outcome is negative (rejected) but where a computed mean is greater than the benchmark, the outcome is positive (accepted). Accordingly, a high mean and low or moderate standard deviation indicated that the responses were markedly different (high variability), while a low mean and a low or moderate standard deviation indicated a low variability in the responses.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

All 300 copies of questionnaire administered were properly filled and used for the analysis. Thus, there is 100% response rate.

In the analysis, 65% of the respondents were male (195); the least age of the respondents was 20 and the highest was 35, the modal age range was 26-35 years (215). A total of 45 (15%) of the respondents have had primary education , and 129 (43%) have secondary education , while the remaining 126 (42%) have had various levels of tertiary education . Most of the respondents 165 (55%) were self-employed, 42 (14%) are civil servants (42), and the remaining 93 (31%) were either students or unemployed.

Table 1: Respondents' Use of Social Media and Exposure to Online contents on government policies and activities

Items	Responses	Frequency (%)
Respondents' use of social media	Yes	300 (100)
	No	-
	Total	300 (100)
Most frequently used social media platforms	WhatsApp	122 (41)
	Twitter	75 (25)
	Facebook	96 (32)
	Instagram	2 (0.4)
	YouTube	5 (1.6)

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	Total	300 (100)
Extent of social media usage	Daily	254 (84.7)
	Weekly	42 (14)
	Monthly	4 (1.3)
	Total	300 (100)
Frequency of exposure to social media contents on government policy and activities	Always	265 (88.3)
	Sometimes	30 (10)
	Rarely	5 (1.7)
	Never	-
	Total	300 (100)

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Table 1 showed that all the respondents (100%) used the social media, with WhatsApp (41%), Facebook (32%) and Twitter (25%) ranked as the most frequently used social media platforms. 254 (84.7%) of the respondents said they make daily use of the social media and 265 (88.3%) of the respondents said exposure to online contents on government policies and activities has become an always-occurring experience. This finding indicates the commonness and power of social media as communication platforms to engage and review contents on government policies and activities on social media platforms.

Table 2: Respondents' Perception of the Nature of Social Media Contents on Government Policies and Activities

Items	**SA (%)**	**A (%)**	**N (%)**	**D (%)**	**SD (%)**	**X SD**	**Decision**
Social media contents on government policies and activities are mostly negative	48 (16)	59 (20)	4 (1)	165 (55)	24 (8)	2.6 (1.3)	Reject
Most contents on government policy and activities on social media are false and unreliable	216 (72)	25 (8)	10 (3)	35 (12)	14 (5)	3.6 (1.5)	Accept
Government policy contents found on the social media are never current and outdated	5 (2)	3 (1)	5 (2)	275 (91)	12 (4)	1.9 (1.0)	Reject
Conversations among people on social media on government policies and actions are often mundane, trivial and rarely highlight	25 (8)	15 (5)	10 (3)	207 (69)	43 (15)	2.1 (1.2)	Reject

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important issues of the society							
Social media contents on government policy and activities are generated by anyone and everyone	285 (95)	8 (3)	-	7 (2)	-	4.2 (1.7)	Accept

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Table 2 showed that respondents accepted that the peculiar nature of social media contents on government policies and activities are false and unreliable (N =58%; X = 3.4; SD =1.5) and accepted that contents are generated by anyone and everyone on social media (N =98%; X = 4.2; SD =1.7). The respondents, however, rejected the notion that discussion (among social media users) on government policies and actions are often mundane, trivial and rarely highlight important issues of the society (N =84%; X = 2.1; SD =1.2). They equally disagreed that the contents are often outdated (N = 95%; X =1.9; SD =1.0) while they also disagreed that social media contents on government policies and activities are mostly negative (N = 63%; X = 2.6; SD=1.3).

Table 3: Respondents' perception of the influence of social media contents on government policies and activities

Items	**SA (%)**	**A (%)**	**N (%)**	**D (%)**	**SD (%)**	**X SD**	**Decision**
Social media contents and discussions about government policies and activities fueled the hate speech phenomenon in Nigeria	248 (82)	15 (5)	5 (2)	27 (9)	5 (2)	3.8 (1.2)	Accept
Social media have facilitated the unhindered dissemination of information on government policies and activities at a reduced cost and without needless censorship	216 (72)	25 (8)	10 (3)	35 (12)	14 (5)	3.6 (1.5)	Accept
The increasing level of political tension and youth violence (E,g Endsars, protest against subsidy removal, protest against Chibok girls kidnapping, etc) in Nigeria is traceable to the use of social media in discussing about	287 (96)	10 (3)	-	-	3 (1)	4.7 (0.5)	Accept

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government policies and actions plus inactions							
Social media contents on government policies and activities have stirred up public interest in activities of government and the actors	215 (72)	45 (15)	10 (3)	25 (8)	5 (2)	3.4 (1.3)	Accept
Exposure to social media contents on government policy and activities have given me a better understanding of happenings on the policies, activities and inactions of the government	287 (95)	8 (3)	-	5 (2)	-	4.5 (0.7)	Accept
Social media merely empower users to discuss about government policies, activities and inactions online without enough motivation to act offline	85 (28)	45 (15)	20 (7)	148 (49)	2 (1)	1.7 (1.0)	Reject
Exposure to contents on government policy and activities on social media has encouraged me to fight for a particular cause	215 (72)	10 (3)	5 (2)	45 (15)	25 (8)	3.2 (1.2)	Accept
Social media have provided me the opportunity to get feedback from government	237 (79)	45 (15)	12 (4)	-	6 (2)	4.2 (1.4)	Accept
Social media contents on government policies and activities have made it easier to hold powerful political and public office holders people accountable	255 (85)	40 (13)	-		5 (2)	4.8 (0.4)	Accept

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Data in Table 3 above identified some of the perceived influence of social media contents on government policies and activities to be : the enhancement of the flow of discussion on government policies and activities without needless censorship (N= 80%; X = 3.6; SD = 1.5), creation of opportunity for direct interaction with feedback from government (N = 94%; X =4.2; SD = 1.4) as well as hold powerful political and public office holders accountable (N = 98%; X =4.8; SD = 0.4), awakening of interest to fight for a cause among users (N = 75%; X = 3.2; SD =

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1.2),enhancement of public understanding of happenings on the policies, activities and inactions of the government (N = 98%; X =4.5; SD = 0.7), and empower users to discuss about government policies, activities and inactions online with motivation to act offline (not just a talker but with corresponding offline actions (N = 50%; X = 1.7; SD =1.0). On the flip side, the online media were also perceived to have contributed to the growing phenomenon of hate speech in Nigeria (N= 87%; X = 3.8; SD =1.2) and increased political tension as well as both online and offline protest in Nigeria (N= 99%; X =4.7; SD =0.5).

Discussion of Findings

The study affirms the popularity of the social media platforms among Nigerians. All the respondents revealed that they have used, at least, one of the various web 2.0 based platforms for communication, with WhatsApp (41%), Facebook (32%) and Twitter (25%) ranked as the most frequently used social media platforms. This finding corroborates the findings of previous studies (Ajayi & Adesote, 2015; Clement, 2019; Akpoghiran & Erubami, 2019). This popularity of social media usage among Nigerians could be linked to the web 2.0 peculiar strengths and traits of convenience, interconnectivity, interactivity, universality, and affordability which allows geographically dispersed, wide and heterogeneous users to interact without restriction of censorship. Also, daily usage was found to be the dominant pattern of social media use among majority of the respondents (84.7%) with monthly usage the least usage pattern (1.3%). This is consistent with the findings of Ashiekpe and Mojaye (2017). This persistent usage can be said to be as a result of the engaging nature of the social media platforms where messages and information among friends or members of a network group can easily be shared. Meanwhile, many of the information and messages shared are laced with contents on government policies and activities including their inactions (Ajayi & Adesote, 2015). This is reflected in the responses of (88.3%) of the respondents who said that they are always exposed to media contents on government policies and activities on the social media.

Table 2 showed that respondents identified the peculiar nature of social media contents on government policies and activities to be false and unreliable (N =58%; X = 3.4; SD =1.5) and that the contents are generated by anyone and everyone on social media (N =98%; X = 4.2; SD =1.7). The respondents, however, rejected the notion that discussion (among social media users) on government policies and actions are often mundane, trivial and rarely highlight important issues of the society (N =84%; X = 2.1; SD =1.2). They equally disagreed that the contents are often outdated (N = 95%; X =1.9; SD =1.0) while they also disagreed that social media contents on government policies and activities are mostly negative (N = 63%; X = 2.6; SD=1.3).

Further, in Table 2, the findings indicated that the respondents largely perceived social media contents on government policies and activities as false and unreliable. However, respondents said that often times the users' discussion on government policies and actions including inactions are centered on important issues in the society. This is in agreement with previous study in which online communication media were found to be promoter of half-truth and outright falsehood (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Apuke & Appollos, 2017). This has been described as a major weakness of the social media, which needs to be addressed for the success of online communication efforts

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via social media platforms to wax stronger. On the positive side, social media contents on government policies, actions and inactions were perceived to be current and tailored towards majority of citizens, based on User Generated Contents (UGC). Unequivocally, this extant attribute of the social media gives it the nomenclature: "the media of the now". Social media also have simultaneity attribute where users can post news, photos and videos about events simultaneously as they are taking place and these contents can be edited and reposted by the users with the UGC feature. Thus, this UGC phenomenon birthed the 'prosumer' concept (a situation whereby the ordinary consumers of news (social media users) are also producing news for others to consume.

On the perceived influence of the social media contents on the policies and activities of the government, respondents perceived that online platforms have positively contributed to the growth of democracy by facilitating the unrestricted flow of information on government policies and actions on social media at reduced cost and without needless censorship. As a result, the social media have also stimulated public interest in the activities of government and public officials, enhance public understanding of issues around government policies in a way that has enhanced the capacity of citizens' to hold powerful political and public office holders accountable for their actions and inactions. Hence, social media provide a citizen-government interaction and feedback mechanism. Evidently, this is a power shift from and alteration to the top-down structure of communication by the mainstream media. Ideally, this takes the world and Nigeria in particular, closer to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Similarly, being "prosumer" brings social media users and citizens closer to Karl Marx's principle of power redistribution and control in which the tools and means of distribution are said to be in the hands of the workers.

Despite this influence of social media platforms on government policies and activities, the platforms also significantly contributed to the growing phenomenon of hate speech, political tension and violence. This has birthed politically active 'netizens' with enough motivation for offline willpower to act according to the direction of the online contents and discussions they are exposed to. This goes in tandem with the conclusion of previous studies (Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Apuke & Appollos, 2017; Erubami,2020) that online communication platforms encourage political cynicism and other harmful political outcomes as well as violence.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has revealed that the social media platforms are popular means through which people are exposed to contents (news and information) on government policies and actions on daily basis in Nigeria. Despite the fact that news and information on government policies and actions could be false, it is also revealed that social media could be used for the expression of hate speech that could fuel violence. However, social media provides the platform for citizens to get information on the policies of the government as well as the action and inaction of government officials. Furthermore, social media enhances the capacity of citizens to make government and its officials accountable for their (in) actions, and provides citizens-government interaction and feedback mechanism. In the light of the above, it can be concluded that social media activities

influenced government policies and activities in Nigeria.

In the realm of recommendation to curb the abuses associated with social media, it is recommended that social media users should act responsibly while utilising their "prosumer" status as conferred on them by the social media. They should be sensitive to the expectations and needs of the populace and the nation as a whole, thus, adopting self-censorship approach to checkmate their responses and discussions around government policies and actions as well as inactions in order not to cause unnecessary violence through hate speech, tribalism and bias.

Also, there should be a statutory mechanism to regulate the abuse of social media platforms without tampering with citizen's right to freedom of speech and expression. This can be in form of guidelines to using social media (failure of which such individual will be barred from the platform) and orientation by government and civil society groups on the proper use of social media.

Lastly, this study covers the Southwest region of Nigeria, it is recommended that future researchers should use respondents from other regions in Nigeria for this same topic in order to expand the scope of generalisation of the findings.

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