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The Social Media as Means for Self-Expression Against Social Injustice and Agitation in Nigeria

John Ayodele Oyewole^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

This work strives to know the place of social media in social assertiveness. The research method is survey. The study uses convenience sampling to select 50 undergraduate students from Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko. The findings of the study indicate that the majority of the respondents adopt Facebook and WhatsApp as major social media platforms for expressing their disgust and grievances against social ills and unfavorable government policies. It is also discovered from the study that the majority of the respondents do not expect agents of the government to care about their voices but still find a bit of relief from expressing their grievances through social media. The study concludes that, in spite of this position, the social media remain an escape avenue and means of social assertiveness for the governed.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy has been argued to be the best option for governing a state. The western world adores democracy to the extent that, that any government in the world, especially in Africa that fails to adopt democracy as means of governance, is seen as opposing the ideals of the West. However, recent development in Africa indicates that many states in the continent are abandoning democracy for other forms of governance, particularly, the military system of government. Furthermore, it would seem that the alternative to democracy being embraced in some African states testifies to the peculiarity of Africa.

Many leaders in African states who publicly support democracy violate its principles of tenure in office, and many a time, the credibility of their mandate is either questionable or leaves much to be desired. A case in point is Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum who was overthrown in a coup d'état on 26 July 2023. His mismanagement of public funds and unconstitutional quest for tenure elongation were at the centre of his removal from office. Furthermore, the coup d'état in Gabon overthrowing President Ali Bongo Ondimba on 30 August, 2023 also registered the need to review the relevance of democracy to the African states. Up till April, 2024 some African states are still being governed by military system of government: Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea and Mali.

While the principles of democracy are people-centred, with the desire to improve the standard of living and making humanity so desirable to exhibit, it is clear that some African leaders have not come to terms with the principles of democracy. The sit tight syndrome of some African presidents is rooted in oligarchy or monarchy. Tenure elongation queries the fit of democracy in African system. Nonetheless, the main advantage of democratic

system of government is the granting of power to the people. Democracy encourages open distribution of natural resources and checks of excesses of leadership in order to prevent abuse of power, and thus bring humanity to the door step of every citizen. Perhaps it was the quest to restore the human dignity that Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999.

Since Nigeria got her independence in 1960, the system of governance has been military system and some periods of democracy leading up to 1999 when democracy became stable. Under the military system of government, freedom of expression was usually suppressed, and with the suspension of the constitution, the oppression of citizens was legal within the framework of the military operations. Specifically, Nigeria in the 80s and 90s were governed by the military decrees which in large part were against democratic ethics.

Albeit the military provided machinery for information dissemination, such were under the full supervision of the military leadership. Criticism of policies and leadership were met with sanctions. Broadcast stations that provided platforms for anti-government statements and releases were viciously dealt with by the military leadership, almost summarily. There was fear in the air and only the daredevil critics and intellectuals could challenge the government for suppression of freedom of speech.

Since the year 1999, Nigeria has become a democratically governed state, and there have been successful successions of change of leadership from a democratic leadership to another one via presumable credible elections. How has the freedom of speech fared under democratic setting in Nigeria? Answer to this question perhaps constitutes the driving force for this work. From Olusegun Obasanjo, to Musa Yaurdua to Goodluck Jonathan, and down to Muhammadu Buhari, tolerance

¹ Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of the Social Sciences, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria

* Corresponding author's email: john.oyewole@aaau.edu.ng

of freedom of government criticism varies. Perhaps on the basis of comparison, former President Goodluck Jonathan seemed to be the only president who permitted freedom of expression.

The focus of this study is an examination of freedom of expression under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari with special focus on how Nigerians endured his response to freedom of expression. Buhari led administration appears not to be media friendly. Some media organisations under his watch were muzzled and sanctioned when criticism on government policies come from them. A case in point was the sanctioning of Africa International Television (AIT) and other stations which reported the EndSARS protests. Naturally, citizens tend to cope with government that frowns at freedom of expression or repression of the press by constructing underdog ways of venting anger. This study investigates the potential ways of venting anger or displeasure with government handling of dissenting views. This research is thus a further development on the work of Oyewole (2021), titled, A Discourse of Selected Cases of Media Escapes; where the media are seen and used as an effective platform to gain immediate government's or non-governmental bodies' attention for citizens' outcry.

Statement of the Problem

From the western point of view, democracy is seen as the best system of government, mainly because it is believed that the people are directly involved in such government. Unfortunately, its principles have not been fully applied in Nigeria and some parts of the world, making it difficult to differentiate between democracy and the military government. Nigerians from time to time have been seeking a government that would promote humanity. Nigerian citizens under different rulers had used different means to express their grievances to the different governments, especially through public protests and strikes, but these were often met with a powerful resistance from the government of the day as organisers and participants of either protest or strike were crushed with the iron fist and even many paid the ultimate price. The Nigerian plight seems to increase under the regime of the immediate past president, Muhammadu Buhari.

It is no gainsaying, the fact that the EndSARS protest, for example, is an expression of agitation against the way the Nigerian police treat citizens. The protest took another dimension, as the protest turned to be an avenue for expressing bottled emotions concerning government insensitivity to the yearning of the people, which often are conveyed via the social media platforms. This study therefore, attempts to interrogate the social media platforms through which social agitations against the government, as well as social welfare of its citizens are presented. In addition, the study explores the probable reactions of government to such agitations as may be expressed in the social media.

Objectives of the Research

1. To find out the extent to which people use the media as a means of expressing social injustice.
2. To know the most available media people used in seeking social justice in Nigeria
3. To know the extent people believe that their voices channelled through the media would get the desired attention.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do people use the media as a means of expressing social injustice?
2. What is the most available media for seeking social justice in Nigeria?
3. To what extent do people believe that voices channelled through the media would get the desired attention of the government?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nigerian First Republic was led by Amodu Bello, but was short lived, when on 15 January 1966, some mutinous soldiers, led by Chuwuma Kaduna Nzeogu and Emmanuel Ifeajuna, overthrew the elected government in a coup d'état, in which twenty-two (22) people including the Prime Minister of Nigeria, Abubaka Tafawa Balewa were killed. Johnson Thomas U. Aguiyi-Ironsi later assumed the position of Head of state. The second coup d'état in Nigeria also known as the July Rematch was led by Lt. Colonel Murtala Mohammed which started also as a mutiny on 28 July 1966. In this coup d'état, General Joshua Aguyi Ironsi and Lt. Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi who was hosting a visiting Head of State, Aguyi-Ironsi in Ibadan was killed by northern soldiers. Many Igbo soldiers were eliminated and Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon was made the Head of state.

The Nigerian military government has produced different juntas that made life extremely tough and unbearable for the Nigerian citizens, with the likes of Buhari/Idiagbon, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, Sanni Abacha, among the deadly rulers that held Nigerians hostage for decades. A series of protests erupted under the regimes of Babangida and Abacha but were crushed with an iron fist. Under the civilian government, Nigeria witnessed President Olusegun Obasanjo, who once ruled as a military officer, after the demise of his boss, General Murtala Mohammed, on Friday, 13 February, 1976, in a failed coup d'état led by Major Dim. President Olusegun Obasanjo, working against the constitution, so desired to continue his reign after the second tenure as he attempted to change the constitution for his selfish motive, but met with a strong opposition and his hope of becoming life president was dashed. The coming of President Muhammadu Buhari, the second time, but now as a civilian ruler, was thought to be a relief for Nigerians who were already fed up with the past rulers who were indeed not leaders.

Unfortunately, police and military brutality and extortion,

corruption, tribalism, nepotism, kidnapping, and other heinous crimes were being committed by government officials and some individuals. The era of General Sanni Abacha was generally believed by Nigerians to have been the worst in Nigerian history. Even though it is a taboo to speak ill of the dead, many Nigerians rejoiced at the pronouncement of the demise of General Abacha, and freely spoke of the evil his regime inflicted on many Nigerians. However, what Nigerians experienced under the era of General Abacha as the Nigerian Head of state, was just an ice berg compared to the pain and evil perpetrated under the tyranny of President Muhammadu Buhari. Apart from the police brutality, no past ruler in Nigeria has ever practiced tribalism cum nepotism the way Buhari did. Nigeria is a country that has nothing less than two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups and languages; Buhari chose to appoint not just northerners, but solely the Fulani, particularly for the vital positions at the detriment of other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Before President Buhari took over power in 2015, corruption was believed to be at its peak under President Goodluck Jonathan. Unfortunately, corruption under president Buhari became worse than ever -it was more than being at its peak, as budget padding was corruptibly and legally enthroned.

As a result of this, Nigeria became a lawless state as many young people devised different means of survival, in which Internet fraud became prevalent among the youth. Those who engage in this act go by different names, such as: Yahoo boys, Yahoo plus, G –Guys, etcetera. The uniform men, especially the police in their hypocritical way, tend to curb Internet fraud and robbery resorted to direct extortion of the young ones they presumed to be rich and probably with questionable characters. Indeed, the police were benefiting financially from these young people, in which those who refused to comply with the extortion were either killed or brutalised. There were various complaints by the populace as regards police brutality against commercial drivers, and young rich youth and many innocent individuals in the name of curbing insecurity and fraud in Nigeria, but all the complaints fell on the deaf ears of the authority. The police brutality includes unlawful arrests, harassments, unfair treatments and tortures of suspects, and extra judicial killings by the Nigerian police.

This brought about the movement hashtag: #EndSARS which was first used in 2017, but experienced resurgence in October 2020, driven by widespread outrage and influential role of the social media, especially, Twitter to demand the disbanding of the Nigerian police unit by the Nigerian government. SARS is the acronym for Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) that was instituted in the late 1992 as one of the 14 units under the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department (SCIID) to curb criminal activities, especially armed robbery, car snatching, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and the bearing and use of illegal firearms.

Chiamaka Ozulumba (Thisdaylive.com 2021) recounts

how on 4 May, 2020, a 27-year-old 500 level law student at Nnamdi Azikiwe University at a beer joint was shot dead by the police. Likewise on 21 May 2020, a boy - an only son of his parents was on his way home after 20 o'clock was chased to his death by the police from the Nimo Unit. The youth began to post videos showing different brutalities and atrocities of the police on Twitter and Facebook. For instance, on Saturday, 3 October, 2020, a video showed a SARS police officer who shot dead a young Nigerian in front of Westown Hotel in Ikeja, Lagos State. It was alleged that the police officers in attendance took away the young man's vehicle, a Lexus SUV. Likewise on Monday, 5 October, 2020, there came another report of how a SARS officer killed a 20-year-old upcoming musician, Daniel Chibuikwe, popularly known as Sleek in his neighbourhood.

With the various atrocities of the Nigerian police trending on the Internet, there came a huge #EndSARS protest on the Internet. There were approximately 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag: #EndSARS on the Twitter social network alone. This brought about protests at different parts of the country with solidarity protests by Nigerians in Diaspora and sympathisers in many parts of the world. The actual street protests began on Thursday, 8 October, 2020. The campaign, hashtag: #EndSARS moved from social media to organised peaceful protests in Abuja, Benin, Calabar, Ibadan, Ilorin, Lagos, Jos, Kaduna, Ogbomoso, Osun, Owerri, Ughelli, London, America, Canada, Germany, Hungary, Ireland and South Africa. Thus the campaign became a global event. The #EndSARS protest was well received by international celebrities, such as Cardi B., Beyonce, Chiamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rihanna, Trey Songz, Big Sean, Jidenna, John Boyega, Kanye West, Drake, Diddy, Lewis Hamilton, Marcus Rashford, Odion Ighalo and Mesut Ozil. Besides, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Twitter, Jack Dorsey endorsed the movement with a special emoji and promoted donations for the support of the protest using Bitcoin. On 11 October, 2020, the Inspector General of the Nigerian Police Force, Ibrahim K. Idris announced (Ademoroti, Niyi, 11 October 2020) that it was dissolving the unit instantly and replaced it with another named called, Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT); but the protesters did not fall to that trick, for they believed that the newly formed unit would not be different from the old unit, and thus the protesters, bargained further and quickly tweeted saying #EndSWAT now. The protesters use the opportunity to make a further and clearer demands, calling for

- (i) The total disbandment of SARS and SWAT
 - (ii) End to police brutality
 - (iii) Initiate police reform from the lowest cadre to the highest cadre, and increase in police salaries
 - (iv) Transparent persecution of all officers involved in the heinous crimes, both past and present
 - (v) Ensure compensation to victims of police brutality.
- Google Africa also threw its weight behind the #EndSARS protest on its Twitter page condemning the Nigerian police

brutality, intimidation, oppression, while appealing to the government to quickly intervene and resolve the problems. What is important here is how the youth were able to use the social media, especially the Twitter to organise the various protests – where and when to meet and their understanding and cooperation were indeed impressive. The daily protests at different locations in Nigeria and in other countries on a daily basis were organised through Twitter starting from 8 October 2020 through 20 October 2020. The protesters were able to raise fund through cryptocurrency (Nairametrics, 13March 2021) with the help of Feminists Coalition, and were able to disburse funds for mental health support, security on protest grounds, medical emergency response, and relief for victims of SARS brutality and families of victims of extrajudicial killings. Many Nigerians and various voluntary organisations donated food, drinks, nose masks and raincoats after calls were made on social media. Moreover, EndSARS Online Radio was used to entertain the protesters at different times to keep their spirit high. Protesters were equally informed through the Internet of any imminent danger and where to escape to. In the same spirit of solidarity, Modupe Odele created a network of over 400 volunteer lawyers across Nigeria to represent illegally detained protesters. On October, 20 2020, despite the peaceful nature of the protests at different parts of Nigeria and worldwide, the Nigerian government responded with excessive force, leading to the carnage committed by the Nigerian Army at the Lekki Toll-Gate where protesters defied the curfew imposed by the State Governor, Babajide Sanwo-Olu. Many youth were killed and the fear of more killings to come brought an end to the EndSARS movement. The brutal end of the EndSARS movement raises concerns regarding democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression in Nigeria. It underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms within the Nigerian Police Force and the broader justice system. The pivotal role played by social media platforms, especially Twitter, in mobilising and amplifying the movement’s goals highlights the power of online activism in demanding accountability and the need for social change.

It may be difficult to actually name those who were co-ordinating the protest on the Internet for the safety of the organisers, but people like the publisher of the Sahara Reporter, Omoyele Sowore, Aisha Yesufu, Raphael Adebayo, Rinu Oduala and Segun Awosanya could be said to be among the big guns behind the co-ordination and organisation of both the Internet and street protest tagged, #EndSARS.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Dissatisfaction with government can be expressed in various ways. Some may take the form of street a protest and some may take the form of adopting the media space to vent anger. In the 21st Century, while it is still fashionable to hold a protest, information technology has made it possible to create a virtual political space that

facilitates debate, which by extension, could be used to feel the pulse of the public on acceptability of public policies. The social media therefore become a virtual possibility for expressing agitations for some educated and privileged Nigerians. It could be surmised that this is so because the platforms make it much easy to package one’s grievances before such are disseminated. In addition, such could prevent brutish physical attack of the police since such agitations are only virtual.

The Uses and gratifications theory postulated the various ways the media could be put to use. It also addresses the media audiences which might be grouped into two - using the technical term, consumers of media texts; and so there are passive and active audiences. The passive audience receives the media contents wholly without the choice of selection – just filled with the admiration of the media texts. Those who belong to this group could either be literate or illiterate; however, the active audience, are highly sophisticated people who use the media space to analyse government policies, express dissenting views and do so with full consciousness of their freedom of expression and audacity.

Because the Uses and Gratification theory expects the media to be used for self gratifications, it would not be out of place to expect that educated citizens would necessarily use the social media as means of venting their concerns about government policies. Therefore, in line with the postulates of the Uses and gratifications theory, this study surmises that many Nigerians would use the social media platforms not only for seeking pleasure and entertainment, but also for expressing serious concerns about their freedom, welfare and other policies which they find unacceptable.

METHODOLOGY

This study’s research method is a survey. The study’s population is the Nigerian youth. However, the study employs the convenience sampling technique to select 50 undergraduates from Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. A questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Sex of Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	28	56
Female	22	44
Total	50	100

Table 2: Age of Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 20 years	4	08
20-24 years	34	68
25 years and above	12	24
Total	50	100

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that the respondents for the study are majorly male and are between the age bracket of 20 and 24 years. One can infer that the respondents fall within the age bracket of young people who are capable of independent thinking with propensity for the use of the media, especially the social media for self-assertiveness.

Research Question One

To what extent do people use the social media as means of seeking social justice? Tables 1-7 provide data for answering this research question.

Table 3: Seeking Social Justice via Facebook

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Never	25	50
Rarely	09	18
Sometimes	10	20
Frequently	04	08
Always	02	04
Total	50	100

Table 4: Expression through WhatsApp

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Never	11	22
Rarely	10	20
Sometimes	19	38
Frequently	06	12
Always	04	08
Total	50	100

Table 5: Expression via YouTube

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Never	38	76
Rarely	09	18
Sometimes	02	04
Always	01	02
Total	50	100

Table 6: Expression via Instagram

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Never	31	62
Rarely	10	20
Sometimes	07	14
Frequently	02	04
Total	50	100

The above data presented in Tables 1-6 indicate that the social media platforms majority of the respondents adopt for airing their views about ills of society or expressing themselves about social injustice in Nigeria

are Facebook and WhatsApp. It is also clear from the above tables that most commonly used social medium platform for expressing their views on government policies and performance is Facebook. Next commonly used is WhatsApp. This perhaps is due to the fact that it is a social medium platform that is readily available to young people with features that facilitate spontaneous communication. Instagram and YouTube seem to be least social media platforms preferred by the respondents for expressing their views on the ills of government. Therefore, when looking for the social media through which young people express their grievances against the ills of government, one should look at both Facebook and WhatsApp. WhatsApp is perhaps key, because it permits many users to come together as a group. The advantages of WhatsApp enable young people to send their views to many people at a time.

Research Question 2

What is the Most Available Social Medium for Seeking Social Justice in Nigeria?

Table 7: The Most Available Social Medium for Expressing One's Thought

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Instagram	05	10
Twitter	03	06
WhatsApp	28	56
Facebook	14	28
Total	50	100

The data presented in the above Table indicate that WhatsApp is the most used social medium platform through which many young people express their thoughts concerning the ills of the government. It seems to be an escape for a suppressed emotions and grievances against government abuse of human rights. It is understandable that Twitter is the least utilised social medium platform as the federal government of Nigeria once banned its operation, leaving only a few people who bypassed the barrier via the use of VPN. The explanation of WhatsApp being the most easily accessible and preferred social medium platform for escape and expression of disgruntlement against unfavourable policies of government and ills of the society perhaps is due to the features of WhatsApp. Firstly, WhatsApp permits group interaction with limited numbers of administrators that moderate the conversations. Secondly, pictures, documents and voice notes can be sent to multiple pages via WhatsApp. Besides, voice notes are listened to and could be kept for a reference purpose in the future. This uniqueness gives it a beauty of instant communication. Thirdly, senders of messages can easily delete unwanted messages or messages sent in error. However, as lofty as this platform is, its limitation is that conversations among group members might not be viewed by government

agents, except those who are members of the group on WhatsApp. WhatsApp is therefore seen as a forum of like-minded people for escape or letting out some steam of dissatisfaction towards government policies.

Research Question 3

To what extent do people believe that voices channelled through the media will get the attention of government? This research question seeks to find out whether people believe government pays attention to their cry on traditional and social media.

Table 8: Is Government Moved by Dissenting Voices on Social Media?

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	05	10
Agree	20	40
Neutral	03	06
Disagree	09	18
Strongly Disagree	13	26
Total	50	100

Table 9: Does Government Pay Attention to People’s Cry on Social Injustice as Expressed via the Media?

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	03	06
Agree	08	16
Neutral	14	28
Disagree	18	36
Strongly Disagree	07	14
Total	50	100

Table 10: Does Government Pay Attention to People’s Cry via Traditional Media Such as Television, Radio and Newspaper?

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	06	12
Agree	13	26
Neutral	08	16
Disagree	11	22
Strongly Disagree	12	24
Total	50	100

If grievances were expressed, it must be that the government would listen to such grievances. The cry of the populace usually expressed to call the attention of the government. Unfortunately, the data on the above tables indicate that the respondents do not believe that government pays any attention to their cries via social and traditional media. The respondents have come to believe that government does not listen to the views of its people. Why then do they pour out their concerns

through the media? This brings to bear the position of social responsibility theory, which states that the media professionals owe a duty to the people to channel their views to government. It seems the media professionals carry out this duty of watchdog as well as bridge between the people and government as a duty. Therefore, as inferred from these data, it is implied that the media as tools for conveying the thoughts of the people to government originates from the media professionals themselves. It is also apparent from the data presented that respondents do not express their views about anti-people government policies mainly because they want government to pay attention to them.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that as powerful as the traditional and social media are, there is a tendency for people not to expect the Nigerian government to see them as fora for measuring the reactions of the people. People use the media for mere self-assertiveness, and in the process, get a sense of relief for expressing their concerns. Therefore, one may see the media, especially the social media as an “escape” in a sense that they allow one to vent emotions, notwithstanding if anyone pays less attention to it. It is not ideal, especially in democratically governed economies, for government to pay less attention to the cry of its people through social and traditional media. The Nigeria story continues to be a reflection of insensitivity of the government to humanity and the avenues where people normally express themselves with no hope of positive response to their plights.

The theory adopted for framing this study gave credence to the conclusion of this study. The uses and gratifications theory stresses the significance of a user of media in content creation. The study sees the users of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as content creators, creating communication content to reflect the reality of their social condition. It is also the hope of the users that agitations concerning the pitiable conditions of Nigerians would attract the agents of government. While this study admits that voices of the governed are expressed, without hindrances, such voices are viewed as insignificance to agents of government as perceived by the people themselves. It is also the position of this paper that the media professionals who convey these agitations and voices do so out of a sense of duty as media professionals.

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