

Social Media and Rape Discourse in Nigeria:

An Exploratory Study of Facebook

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Abstract

In recent years, social media has proved to be an indispensable tool for bringing women's rights issues especially rape to the attention of a wider public. Therefore, it is against this backdrop that this study examined the theme "social media and rape discourse in Nigeria: an exploratory study of Facebook." To aptly investigate the subject matter, this paper adopted mixed research methods, which are content analysis, interview, and observation. Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was adopted as the theoretical framework. The researchers' content analyzed and also observed posts in two Facebook groups between January and June 2020. In the same vein, five communication experts who were also social media users were interviewed to ascertain how social media (Facebook) has impacted rape discourse in Nigeria. It was found that social media users (Facebook) give priority to rape-related subjects and that the majority of the users of social media were anti-rape advocates as reflected in their comments on rape-related posts. Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed that social media is a fertile ground for public debate hence it has positively impacted the national rape discourse in Nigeria. The paper suggests that future studies should incorporate more social networking sites and time frames.

Keywords: Social media, Rape, Discourse, Nigeria, Facebook

Introduction

Worldwide, one in three women suffers from beatings, coercion into sex, or other forms of abuse (Sow, Bukaraba, Bisimwa&Chakupewa, 2020). According to the United Nations, one of every five women has experienced rape or attempted rape. In Nigeria and other parts of Africa, sexual violence especially rape against girls and women are gradually becoming ubiquitous and a subject of concern (Tade&Udechukwu, 2020). The rise of rape in Nigeria is scary (Ezeilo, 2020) because the number of rape cases has continued to rise, with new cases occurring almost daily (Ugwuanyi, 2018). However, the aforementioned circumstance is unexpected because one would anticipate that such a heinous act would be on a low scale in a country like Nigeria, which is known for its religiosity (Ugwuanyi, 2018).

In Nigeria, the frequency of rape cases is chronic and disturbing (Ogbu 2014, p.2). It has grown to be a source of concern for all good Nigerians (Ugwuanyi, 2018). The above is one reason why human rights campaigners rallied in Nigeria to raise awareness about violence against girls/women after a series of high-profile rape cases in the country (Aljazeera, 2020).

It was reported by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics in 2017 that there were about 2279 rape and indecent assault instances have been recorded. The rape and murder of a 22 years old university student by the name Vera Uwaila Omozuwa in June 2020 is one of the prominent rape cases that have captured Nigerians' attention. According to Oyinloye (2020), just within the space of ten days starting from 28th May 2020, over twenty cases of rape or sexual assault have made it to the top on social media.

Social media has emerged as a potent tool in recent years for bringing women's rights concerns, including rape, to a broader audience, inspiring action in cities all over the world, and pressuring legislators to increase their pledges to gender equality (Loiseau&Nowacka, 2015). In other words, social media platforms have the power to alter social norms about sexual assault and sexual violence by spreading ideas, attitudes, and information across a broad population or target audience (Prevention and Education Committee of the Task Force, 2014). Social media has recently been demonstrated to be a veritable instrument for the campaign against sexual violence especially rape. For instance, it was reported by the Voice of America in the year 2017 that a young lady by the name of

AmachiOnyekachi was molested sexually by a Nigerian policeman; hence, the young lady took the issue to Instagram to express her thoughts because she felt she would never get justice if she reports such case to the local police. The Deputy Commissioner of Police and a public relations officer in Kwara State, where the event occurred, saw the Instagram post. Onyekachi was asked to identify her assailant in an official statement, which she did, and the offending officer was prosecuted. From the foregoing, it is apposite to infer that social media platforms have made it easier for sexual assault victims to communicate with other victims about their violent experiences and exchange knowledge about their legal rights, court procedures, and welfare services (Loiseau&Nowacka, 2015, p2).

Lately in Nigeria, the case of Vera UwailaOmozuwa and other similar cases form part of the sexual violence cases trending on social media platforms with different hashtags such as #JusticeForUwa, #StopRape, #SexualHarrassment, #Believesurvivors, etc. This implies that hashtag activism has aided in bringing women's rights to the public's notice. (Ibid, p1). It is therefore in light of the above that this study seeks to examine how social media promote rape discourse in Nigeria.

Objective of the Study:

This research study is tilted towards achieving the following objectives:

1. To know if social media users give priority to rape-related posts;
2. To ascertain the responses of social media users to posts;
3. To know whether social media have impacted the national discourse about rape in Nigeria.

Research Questions:

1. Do social media users give priority to related posts shared online?
2. How do social media users respond to reports of rape?
3. How social media do impact national discourse about rape in Nigeria?

Literature Review:

Concept of Rape: There are extant definitions of rape both in academic corpora and in statutory books. In Nigeria, rape is a criminal offense (Ugwuanyi, 2018). Rape is defined by Section 357 of the Nigerian Criminal Code, which applies to southern Nigeria, as follows:

...unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl without her consent, if the consent is obtained by force or using threats or intimidation Sexual Ethics of any kind or by fear of harm, or utilizing false and fraudulent representation as to the nature of the act, or in The case of a married woman, by personating her husband is guilty of An offense which is called rape.

Conversely, In the Northern region of Nigeria, a man is considered to have committed rape when he:

...has sexual intercourse With a woman in any of the following circumstances: (a) against Her will; (b) obtained by putting her in fear of death or of hurt; (c) With her consent when the man knows that he is not her husband And that her consent is given because she believes that he is the man to whom she is or believes herself to be lawfully married; (d) With or without her consent when she is under fourteen years Of age or of unsound mind."

The above definitions are shallow and lopsided because the definitions were unable to holistically capture the meaning of rape. The truth of the aforementioned remark is related to the fact that the definitions assert that rape is only perpetrated by men against women thus ignoring the fact that men could also become victims to rape. Therefore, there is a need for the Nigerian legal system to overhaul its conceptualization of rape due to its lopsided nature. In light of the aforementioned, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (2012) Uniform Crime Commission's definition of rape was adopted in this paper. According to the commission, rape is defined as any penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with a body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person without the person's consent. Because both male and female genders may become rape victims, the definition given above is more precise and thorough.

Social Media: Social media as a concept has been defined differently by scholars. Buettner (2016) describes social media as a computer-mediated technology with the ability to enable users to develop, share, or exchange knowledge, ideas, pictures/videos, and professional interests online.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is referred to as a set of Internet-based applications that are predicated on the theoretical and technological underpinnings of Web 2.0 and that allow the production and distribution of User Generated Content. In contrast, social media was defined by Mayfield (2008) as an online platform that supports participation, openness, dialogue, and connectedness. In his view, Cox & Rethman, (2011) sees social media as a platform where people communicate while linked to the internet. Liou (2013) provided the following detailed explanation of social media:

Social media is a means of connecting people that allows for peer-to-peer interaction and gets people talking with each other on a mass scale. Social media tools or services use the internet to facilitate conversations and includes web-based and mobile technologies used to turn communication into interactive dialogue, where people can voice their opinion in many ways.

Social media empowers people to engage with other people (p.6)

Based on the above definitions, social media platforms are internet-inclined platforms that enable users to freely produce, share, and distribute information. This information may contain messages about sexual violence, such as rape, among other topics.

Media and Rape Coverage in Nigeria: An Empirical Review

There are extant empirical studies conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of the media in campaigning against sexual violence especially rape against girls and women in Nigeria. Even though it was observed by the researchers that most of these empirical studies focused on the print media, lately, few studies study sexual violence from the social media perspective. One of these studies is a study conducted by Awobamise, Jarrar, & Nnauife (2019) where the researchers adopted a mixed research method. The study looked at rape-related content on social media and how the online community responds to rape incidents. The study's findings revealed that Instagram users usually sympathize with rape victims, but they are more inclined to assign responsibility to the victim if the victim is older than 18 and if the accused rapist is a well-known individual or celebrity. The research also revealed that social media has contributed to the facilitation of the rape discourse in Nigeria by offering a forum for survivors to tell their tales and raise awareness of the issue of sexual assault

Armstrong & Mahone (2016) researched to evaluate how social media and bystander intervention may be used to predict someone's intention to

take part in a campaign against sexual assault. This study is similar to but distinct from the one reviewed above. In the fall of 2014 and the early months of 2015, the researchers conducted two survey studies solely to understand young adults' perceptions about social networking sites, rape culture, and group action. The study found that although gender, bystander intervention, and social network users' privacy concerns were significant predictors of preparedness to take collective action, the results demonstrated that social media plays a crucial role in the battle against sexual assault.

Oduah (2014) researched to investigate how mainstream media portray rape cases and related occurrences in Nigeria. To understand how rape cases in Nigeria were framed and represented; the study content analyzes the Guardian, Vanguard, and Daily Sun newspapers. The study's results showed that the newspapers do not prioritize rape cases. The study also revealed that rape cases received little to no attention even when they were reported since they were hidden deep within newspaper pages. Thus, based on the findings of Oduah's (2014) study, it could be deduced that the print media especially newspapers do not promote rape discourse in Nigeria as a result of their nature of coverage of rape stories.

Nwammuo (2015) conducted a study on the perspectives of women regarding press coverage of rape cases in Nigeria. The study used a qualitative methodology and 10 women who were chosen from five state institutions in South-Eastern Nigeria participated in focus group discussions. According to the study's findings, respondents thought news coverage of rape cases was "under-represented" rather than "misrepresented." Additionally, the respondents asserted that few rape instances, which were typically hidden inside pages, are reported in the majority of publications.

Specifically focusing on the sources of reports, the frequency of follow-up articles, and the prominence given to such reports, Ugwuanyi (2018) studied media coverage of rape cases. For the study, two newspapers—the Daily Sun and the Vanguard—were chosen, and content analysis was employed. Data for the study were gathered using a self-created coding sheet. The results of Ugwuanyi's (2018) investigation showed that most rape case stories used unofficial sources. It was also found that the two newspapers studied by the researcher had very few reports on rape follow-up cases. The newspapers also gave rape cases less attention.

An examination of newspaper coverage of sexual assault against women and children in a sample of Nigerian newspapers was carried out by Egbo (2011). The tool utilized to collect data was a coding sheet. Three

Nigerian newspapers' contents were examined in the research. The study revealed that Nigerian newspapers have not made a significant impact in addressing the issue of sexual assault against women and children because newspapers don't often report sexual assault.

From the above, it could be deduced that the print media in Nigeria do not give priority to cases of rape. Conversely, it was also observed that there are just a few extant empirical studies that examine the theme of social media and rape discourse in Nigeria. Hence, this study seeks to fill the gap by examining the theme "social media and rape discourse in Nigeria: An exploratory story of Facebook.

Theoretical Framework:

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) serves as the foundation for this paper (SCT). According to Eisengardt, Kathleen, and Graebner (2007), one of the theories that are most commonly employed in research on social media is the social cognitive theory. According to Pajares (2002), Albert Bandura first proposed the Social Cognitive Theory in 1986. According to the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), people pick up new skills by emulating others and receiving positive feedback (Bandura, 1989). According to the Social Cognitive Theory, external variables have an impact on behavioral change in addition to personal traits and internal motivations (Yoon & Tourassi, 2005). The theory proposes a conceptual framework to characterize the production, motivational, attentional, and retention processes that regulate observational learning (Adoyo, nd).

One area in which social cognitive theory has been utilized is the influence of social media on people's behavior (Adoyo, nd). Commenting on the nexus and applicability of the Social Cognition Theory to social media, Yoon & Tourassi, (2005) stated that people that are passionate about a subject and are well-versed in it tend to be the most current and disseminate fresh information on the subject on SNS as soon as it becomes available. They also have a strong desire to express their own particular opinions. These people are "influencers," and if there are plenty of them who are knowledgeable about and in agreement on a specific subject, news about that subject may spread more quickly and easily. SNS provides a rich environment for monitoring aspects of social cognition theory for a variety of themes due to the quick and widespread distribution of information and individual viewpoints.

From the above, it could be deduced that there is a nexus between this current research study and the social cognitive theory. The above claim is

associated with the fact that social media has the potency to influence the perception of its users on a variety of subjects (Rape Discourse Inclusive) via the dissemination of customized messages to achieve the desired change. Therefore, it is apposite to infer that via consistent dissemination of rape-related messages by social media users who are interested and familiar with rape as a subject matter other social media users tend to learn so many things about sexual violence especially rape against girls and women which would help enormously in widening rape discourse in Nigeria.

Methodology:

This research study adopted mixed research methods, which are content analysis, interview, and observation. In this study, content analysis was chosen as the research approach since it allows for the examination and evaluation of Facebook postings about rape in Nigeria. The postings that were posted in two Facebook groups between January and June 2020 make up the population of this study. The study content analyzed two Facebook groups which are: “Come to Adamawa”, and “Lagos Today”. The coding sheet served as a tool for gathering data. In this study, the unit of analysis is the rape posts found on the two Facebook pages Come to Adamawa and Lagos Today. Hence, the following variables formed the content categories; date of the post, the form of post, priority given to rape posts, and responses to rape posts.

The interview was also used to retrieve data in this current research study. Five communication experts who were also social media users were interviewed. The interviewees were conveniently drawn from Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria. Due to convenience and the location's accessibility to the researchers, participants were selected from the aforementioned area. The interview was conducted to confirm whether social media (Facebook) has impacted rape discourse in Nigeria. Similarly the researchers also meticulously adopted the use of observation to ascertain the potency of social media in promoting rape discourse in Nigeria.

Results:

The data generated from the content analysis, interview, and observations are presented and analyzed in this section.

Table 1: Rape-Related Posts

Facebook Groups	January	February	March	April	May	June	Total
Come to Adamawa	0	0	3	7	17	51	78
Lagos Today	1	1	7	5	10	25	49
Total	1	1	10	12	27	76	127

Source: Content analysis, 2020

Table 1 above illustrates the frequency, with which rape-related topics are reported on social media on the two Facebook groups, namely, Come to Adamawa and Lagos Today. The table shows that from January 2020 to June 2020, the two selected Facebook Groups recorded 127 rape-related posts. From January to February 2020, a total of two (2) related rape posts were contained in the two Facebook groups, one post emanating from each group. In March 2020, a total of ten (10) rape-related posts were contained in the two groups. In April 2020, the two groups recorded twelve (12) rape-related posts. In May 2020, a total of twenty-seven (27) rape-related posts were contained in the two groups while in June 2020, a total of 76 rape posts were contained in the two groups. This implies that there is perhaps a high rate of reported rape cases in Nigeria in May and June 2020 since happenings in society are always reflected in the virtual community.

Table 2: Forms of Posts

Form	Frequency	Percent
Opinion (Write-up)	88	69
News	14	11
Posters	20	16
Others	5	4
Total	127	100

Source: Content analysis, 2020

The format of rape-related postings in the two Facebook Groups from January to June 2020 is shown in Table 2. The table revealed that out of the one hundred and twenty-seven (127) rape-related posts, 88(69%) were in form of Opinion write-ups while fourteen 14(11%) fall under the news category. Conversely, 20(16%) of the posts were in form of posters on rape, and 5(4%) fall under others. This implies that social media posts on rape-related surfaces in different forms and styles on Facebook.

Table 3: Priority to Rape Post

Facebook Group	Comments	Likes
Come to Adamawa	7510	12467
Lagos Today	3275	4099
Total	10785	16566

Source: Content analysis, 2020

Table 3 above revealed that ten thousand, seven hundred and eighty-five (10785) Facebook users commented on the 127 rape-related posts made on the two Facebook groups. Conversely, sixteen thousand, five hundred and sixty-six Facebook users liked the rape-related posts in the two groups. Considering a large number of comments and likes, it is, therefore, apposite to infer that priority is given to rape-related posts on Facebook.

Table 4: Responses on Rape Posts

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Anti- Rape	10639	99
Pro -Rape	146	1
Total	10785	100

Source: Content analysis, 2020

Table 4 above revealed that out of the 10785 comments (99%) from the two Facebook pages, 10639 comments were against rape while 146 were in support of rape. This implies that the majority of the Facebook users in Nigeria were advocates of the anti-rape campaign as reflected in their comments.

Result from Interview on Impact of Social media on Rape discourse

Six communication experts who were also social media users were interviewed. This was done to confirm whether social media (Facebook) has impacted rape discourse in Nigeria. Data retrieved from the

interviewees indicated that social media platforms especially Facebook have played a significant role in fostering rape discourse in Nigeria and that this has aided tremendously in attracting the attention of policymakers on rape as a subject matter. One of the interviewees revealed that:

It is obvious and crystal clear that social media platforms are indeed promoting rape discourse in Nigeria. If you go through Facebook timelines, you don't need a seer to tell you that Facebook as a platform is broadening the national discourse on rape in Nigeria. I said this simply because of the numerous posts and debates on rape found in Facebook groups and timelines **(Interviewee 2)**.

Similarly, another interviewee stated that:

Based on the shreds of evidence emanating from different social media platforms not only Facebook, these platforms serve as a fertile ground for debate and discussions on different topics. Recently, in Nigeria, there are quite a reasonable number of posts on different social media platforms on sexual violence especially rape against women. Therefore, concluding that social media platforms have impacted national discourse on rape is not out of place. **(Interviewee 3)**.

Supporting the above view, another Interviewee said:

The unrestricted nature of social media platforms automatically make them relevant and also considerable in the area of national discourse. Based on my observations, it is not an overstatement to say that social media has tremendously impacted rape discourse in Nigeria most especially with the current high rate of reported cases of rape. Social media is one of the core factors that draw the attention of both the Federal government and Nigerians to rape.

Other interviewees also concurred that social media platforms are veritable tools with great potency to foster national discourse on rape and other themes. The interviewees further note that in Nigeria, even the traditional media do not play the role that social media platforms are playing in the area of creating awareness and giving opportunities for citizens to air their views on rape and other related sexual violence cases.

Result from Observations on Facebook and Rape Discourse in Nigeria

Recently, most especially between May and June 2020, it was observed by researchers that Facebook timelines, pages, and groups in Nigeria

have been saturated with diverse information on sexual violence especially rape against girls and women in Nigeria. There are quite a several Facebook groups that are specially and specifically dedicated to campaigning against sexual violence especially rape. It was also observed by the researchers that some of these Facebook groups were created between April and June 2020 as a result of the incessant cases of rape in Nigeria during the aforementioned period. Furthermore, a cursory look at some of the Facebook groups and posts made by Facebook users revealed that Facebook as a platform has the potency of broadening rape discourse in Nigeria. The above claim is associated with the fact that there is an avalanche of views and debates each time a rape case or subject is posted on Facebook. For instance, there is an erroneous belief among some Nigerians that rape is only perpetrated by men against women thus ignoring the fact that men could also become victims to rape. The interactive nature of social media especially Facebook made it possible for such issues to be discussed hence fostering rape discourse and also drawing the attention of policymakers to the need to overhaul the conceptualization of rape in the country. The screenshot picture below is one of the numerous posts that generated debates that have the potency of broadening rape discourse in Nigeria.

Source: Nairzi's Facebook Timeline, 2020

From the above Facebook screenshot posts, especially the comment session on the right-hand side, it could be deduced that Facebook has the potency of encouraging and widening national discourse on rape in Nigeria.

Discussion:

So many issues were raised and unraveled in this study. Therefore, this section is tilted towards discussing these issues in tandem with the research objectives and questions.

The first research question raised by this current study aimed at finding out whether social media users give priority to rape-related posts. To aptly answer the research question, this research study started by finding the total number of rape-related posts on the two Facebook groups that were content analyzed and it was found that a total of 127 rape-related posts were found on the walls of the two Facebook groups that were content analyzed between January 2020 to June 2020. It was also found that ten thousand, seven hundred and eighty-five(10785)users (Group members) commented on the 127 rape-related posts. The above finding conceded with that of Awobamise, Jarrar, &Nnauife (2019) who found a reasonable number of rape-related posts and comments on social media platforms in Nigeria. This implies that social media platforms (Facebook) give priority to rape as a subject matter.

Comparing the above findings with that of Oduah (2014), one would be tempted to infer that social media (Facebook) give more priority to rape-related subjects compared to newspapers in Nigeria. In Oduah's (2014) study it was found that most Nigerian media do not prioritize rape cases. In addition, Oduah's analysis revealed that even when rape instances were reported, they were obscured by other stories and received little to no attention. Similar to this, research by Egbo (2011) found that Nigerian media have not had much of an impact in addressing the issue of sexual assault against women and children. This suggests that social media platforms have started to make rape-related topics relevant in Nigeria and that this trend is indeed a great development as it would lessen their current cases of rape.

The second question this research seeks to answer determines how social media users feel about posts about rape. To answer this research question, it was found that out of the 10785 comments from the two Facebook pages that were content analyzed, 10639 comments were against rape while 146 were in support of rape. Awobamise, Jarrar, &Nnauife (2019) also found in their study that most social media users oppose rape or ask for authorities to intervene. This implies that the majority of the Nigerian social media users were advocates of the anti-rape campaign as reflected in their comments. Notwithstanding, It is important to note that, the researchers observed that the social media users that supported rape always try to justify the act of rape.

The last question that this research study seeks to answer was whether Facebook has an impact on the national discourse on rape in Nigeria. From the data obtained from the interviews conducted, it was found that social media platforms serve as a fertile ground for debate and discussions on different topics (rape inclusive)./ Furthermore, it was also found that the unrestricted nature of social media platforms automatically makes them relevant and also considerable in the area of national discourse. Hence, suffice it to say that social media (Facebook) has positively impacted rape discourse in Nigeria.

Conclusion:

Despite the limitations of this particular study, its results have made some reticent but insightful contributions to the theme "Social Media and Rape Discourse in Nigeria: An Exploratory Study of Facebook". First, the study was able to ascertain that social media users (Facebook) give priority to rape-related topics. Secondly, the study also unraveled that social media (Facebook) in Nigeria have come to widen the scope of public discourse and also give a voice to the voiceless and the downtrodden.

Limitations And Suggestions For Further Study:

The study only focused on two Facebook groups hence, this may not give a general representation of all the social medial platforms in Nigeria because the data obtained and analyzed is limited to the two Facebook pages. Hence Future studies can incorporate more social networking sites and time frames for the study.

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