Analysis of Readers Comment On 2019 General Elections Irregularities Published in Nigerian Online Newspapers

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Abstract

The research was a study on analysis of readers' comments on electoral irregularities at the 2019 general elections. The aim amongst others was to find out from the opinions, the dominant irregularities committed at the exercise, determine the solutions commenter's offer to curb elections irregularities and to find out if readers abuse the comments section of online newspapers. Content analysis was adopted as research method, while coding sheets was used as instrument of data collection. A total of 42 editions of the selected newspapers were coded. The population of the study was 4739 which consist of all the readers 'comments on all the news

stories published within the period of study were all sampled. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, simple table and percentages. Findings revealed that readers comment agree on one thing concerning electoral irregularities at the 2019 elections exercise. Findings also showed that the dominant irregularities at the exercise were more of violence and ballot snatching. More so, readers abused the comment section of the newspapers with abusive words and name calling. Further findings revealed that the solutions offered to elections irregularities were negative and not workable. The study therefore recommends that newspaper websites should have layed down rules for posting of comments on their platform and to have an app on their websites to deactivate such post, so as to avoid hate speeches unauthorized advert posts the study further recommends digitized voting system and amendment of the electoral act amongst others.

Keywords: Digitized voting system, Elections irregularities, Nigerian Online newspapers, Commenters, Online readers, Hate speeches

Introduction

The introduction of online news publishing by many newspapers has provided the opportunity to respond to news stories through their comments with immediacy on the Internet via websites and blogs. These comments often come in many forms such as correction, commendation, confrontation, abuse, displeasure, division, anger, explanation and advertising. Furthermore, such reactions often leads to a better understanding of the news story in focus or a denunciation of the report as false, public relations (PR) or biased story as posited by Harper (2010).

According to Kausar & Zobia (2006) most online newspaper readers are those in their late teens and mid-forties. Several studies have established the facts that most conspicuous users of the internet are adolescents and undergraduates. Reading (online or offline) has often been an interesting phenomenon across all ages and generations and serves as a vehicle for assimilation of knowledge whether in form of information, ideas or culture.

Generally speaking, reading enlightens the mind, makes the intellect sharper and makes an individual to travel far without any motion. Reading has been accepted as an interactive process, a communication process, an active process and a meaning induced process as posited by Braunger & Lewis (2006).

Reading is not just about printed copy but also about the ability to interpret anything that is intended to convey a message so as to facilitate communication. Thus, online reading of published news content differs a bit from printed (offline) copy in the sense that the former is device-based through a computer, smart phone, tablet or other micro-devices while the latter is presented in scrolls, books, slates or other hard surface.

Reading and commenting in digital formats have been made easier with Web 2.0 tools that allow for note-taking, highlighting, editing of comments or formatting while reading online materials such as the type of news content presented on newspaper websites.

On the other hand, Okonofua (2012) talking about print media that Nigeria has a vibrant newspaper industry with a number of active print outlets, and that as at 2004, there were about 95 reasonably regular newspapers: 20 national dailies, 23 national weeklies, 10 regional dailies, 19 regional weeklies, 6 provincial or local dailies, and 17 provincial or local weeklies.

As at 2012, the number had almost doubled. This fact is evident in Ayankunbi (2012) findings that the total number of newspapers in the country is presently within the range of 150. Majority of these newspapers now have websites where they post their news content or post breaking news as it occurs.

The print media is very agile in the transformation process to serve new readers who feed on its content via the internet due to either lack of their physical presence to purchase a hard copy of the newspaper or who prefer reading the papers online in a digital format. Most newspapers in Nigeria now have an online presence and are gradually placing about two-third of their daily content for their online readers who although do not purchase a hard copy but serve as traffic flow from which marketers of the medium often use to attract advertisers to the website.

When the Internet got a foothold in Nigeria, most publishers were initially weary and jittery as they felt it would take a sizeable portion of the reading public. Gradually, most publishing companies embraced the medium half-heartedly, placing only headlines and find out for their online readers. But over time for example, *Punch* newspaper started publishing full content on its website and shortly after asked readers to subscribe to it if they hope to read the full content of the news story. The online readers were asked to open an online account with the website after paying a subscription fee at a designated bank as posited by Mobilityng (2009).

The infiltration of the Internet by online-based discussion platforms, citizen forums and e-newspapers like *Sahara Reporters* via www.saharareporters.com, *Nigerian Village Square* via

www.nigerianvillagesquare.com, *Premium Times* via www.premiumtimesng.com, *The Cable* via www.thecableng.com, *the Will* via www.thewillnigeria.com,and*Nairaland*www.nairaland.com among others who continued to offer free news services and attracting more online advertising revenue through their readers.

Based on this singular reason, according to Giwa (2006) *Punch* newspaper and other mainstream newspapers had to dump the *Financial Times* of London (via *www.ft.com*) model of online subscription before accessing their newspaper services.

The new development made online readers have free access to Punch newspaper and other mainstream newspapers websites. The lifting of the subscription charges has gradually returned traffic to the newspaper websites. A cursory observation shows that some of the popular mainstream newspaper websites in Nigeria as at 2019 are: *www.vanguardngr.com*, *www.punchng.com*, *www.dailytrust.com*, *www.leadership.ng*, *www.thenationonlineng.net*, *www.thisdaylive.com*, *www.pmnewsnigeria.com* among others.

Driven by user-friendly internet applications and better connectivity, the introduction of Web 2.0 tools led to an explosion and expansion of the use of the Internet. Web 2.0 tools now allow readers of a website not only to read but also to make comments, post pictures/audio/video's, blog and form communities openly or anonymously with other readers thereby making online news story reading an interesting phenomena. This has made reading fun and is gradually increasing literacy levels across the globe as posited by Fernando (2013).

The downside of online interaction however seems to be that some people who comment on the Internet and especially on the comments section of newspaper websites often use their anonymity to aggressively twist the news, commend, abuse others, engage in defamation of character or throw-up divisive issues for debate using religious, ethnic political or tribal sentiments thereby leading to members abusing themselves.

Given the characteristics of online newspaper readers as stated above and what they do especially at the comment section of news, this study sought to analyze readers' comments on the issue of elections irregularities in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. Whether or not comments posted by readers of *online* newspapers on published stories of 2019 general elections in relation to irregularities are positive, neutral or negative especially on such news stories that generated heated debate on the newspapers website

Statement of the problem

According to Abiodun, Olusola, Kehinde & Nelson (2018) Nigeria is a country with different political, religious and ethnic diversities. This is one of the reasons elections in the country are always intense and always generating issues. Many elections have been conducted in the country and they are marred with one negative factor or the other ranging from election irregularities, violence, hate speeches and the host of others.

Users' comments on news stories may be based on politics, sports, economy, education, oil and gas as the case may be. One of the topical issues in Nigeria more recently was the issue of the 2019 general elections. No doubt, this attracted a lot of public opinion especially in the aspect of irregularities at the 2019 general elections exercise. It is on the basis of this, that this study sought to analyze readers' comments, the issue of elections irregularities, violence and so on as posited by Abiodun, Olusola, Kehinde & Nelson (2018) in their study.

In addition, these issues have generated a lot of arguments and even comments among online newspaper readers. Thus, this study assessed whether or not comments posted by readers of *online* newspapers on published stories of 2019 general elections in relation to irregularities are positive or negative suggestions especially on such news stories that generated heated debate on the newspapers website. It also examined whether or not readers abused the comments section of *online* newspapers website as provided to give them a voice and serve as a feedback mechanism between the news medium and the public.

Objective of the study

The aim of this study is to analyze readers' comments on 2019 general elections irregularities published in Nigeria online newspapers.

Specifically the objective of the study is to:

1. determine if the readers' comments agreed on one thing about irregularities or not.
2. determine from the opinions the dominant irregularities committed at the exercise
3. determine the solutions commenter's offer to curb elections irregularities
4. find out if readers abuse the comments section of online newspapers

Review of empirical studies

Kim, & Kim, (2005), conducted a study on analysis of readers' comment in internet newspaper. The main objective was to find out how the new media replace, supplement, or

reinforce the traditional media. The study adopted public sphere theory as the theoretical framework.

Findings from the study revealed that there is a correlation between interactivity and discussion content in response to news articles on Ohmy news.

The study recommends that a readers' comment box and bulletin board should be shown where people can interact with each other and present their opinions freely. Both studies are similar in subject matter, theoretical framework but this study focuses on analyses of readers' comments on the 2019 general elections irregularities as published on Nigeria online newspapers.

Similarly, Oyedele & Agberu (2018), did a study on analysis of comments on online news stories about Chibok girls' release published by *Sahara reporters* and the *Vanguard* newspapers. The study examined how readers reacted to online news stories on the release of these Chibok girls. Qualitative content analysis and the public deliberation theoretical framework was adopted for this study.

Findings from the study revealed that most of the commenters' saw the release of the Chibok girls and the whole abduction story as a scam and political propaganda. The study also discovered that readers' believe that the Chibok girls are shielded from the press and that the girls looked too healthy to have been in the confines of Boko haram for years. Although this was raised to support the fact that Chibok girls' saga is a scam. The study showed that despite all evidences that school girls were kidnapped from Chibok community by the Boko Haram terrorists, readers of online news stories on the release of these girls concluded that nothing of such occurred.

Again, most of them were totally against the strategy purportedly used by President Buhari and his party to condemn and thereby defeat former President Goodluck Jonathan based on the abduction saga. Most of the commentators displayed religious, political and ethnic sentiments in their deliberations on the saga. They saw the Chibok girls' abduction as a Northern agenda to Islamize Nigeria.

The study however recommended that trainings and public enlightenment on media literacy and open and increased promotion of national unity for the free media space not to become platforms for dividing the country. Both studies are similar in the survey methods and subject matter adopted for the study.

Furthermore, Adeyanju (2014), conducted a study on analysis of online newspapers readers' comments on the Chibok secondary school girls' kidnap. Public Deliberation Theory, an offshoot of Habermas concept of the 'public sphere' was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study. The researcher used Mckeess post-structuralist approach and made educated guesses about the contextual meaning of the comments. Online versions of two newspapers, Daily Trust and Vanguard were used as the incentive for the study. Data for the study were compiled over a three week period through purposive sampling technique. Findings revealed that online comments are often influenced by ethnic, religious and cultural affiliations. Also, banality, frustration and hostility are present in the tones of commenters. Both studies are similar in the survey methods, theoretical framework and subject matter adopted for the study.

Furthermore, Joseph & Targema (2018), conducted a study on hate speech in readers' comments and the challenge of democratic consolidation in Nigeria: a critical analysis. This study investigates the nature of readers' comments on online news sites in the country, their place within the context of hate speech rhetoric, and their implication on democratic consolidation in the country. The study was hinged on Social Responsibility Theory.

The study employed quantitative and qualitative content analytical methods to investigate the manifestation of hate speech in online readers' comments. From a sample of 250 comments (10% of the population)from ten stories on prominent online news platforms in Nigeria, Findings revealed that, although quantitatively, positive comments dominated the study population, qualitatively, the trend of discussion is disturbing, as commentators employ the use of hate language, verbal assault, name calling, insults and derogatory words to describe subjects.

To this end, the study concludes that readers need to exhibit a high sense of responsibility in the course of interaction on the online comments platforms. Where such responsibility is not self-enforced by commentators, news platforms should remove comments that contain venomous hate language in the interest of national unity, democracy and development.

The study recommends that there is need to explore how effective the platforms are in managing the myriad of ethno-religious conflicts that have engulfed the nation. Similarly, there is a need to investigate how the platforms have helped to ensure gender inclusiveness and representation within the public sphere. This research effort should tilt towards unravelling how the online readers' comments platforms have empowered women to participate actively in public debates, and make meaningful contributions to issues that are within the public domain. Such

research exploits will help to ascertain the place of online readers' comments to the advancement of contemporary society. Both studies are similar in terms of subject matter.

Theoretical framework

This study was hinged on the public deliberation theory which is also known as public sphere theory. According to Al-Saggaf (2006), the public deliberation theory evolved from Habermas' concept of the "public sphere". The public sphere is a domain of social life in which such critical aspect of the society such as public opinion can be formed.

Although, Habermas' work was largely on the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere; the one that stresses the intellectual space as an avenue for critical debate can be applied to online deliberative space. Poor (2005), adapting Habermas's idea of public sphere, identifies three elements necessary to form a public sphere.

The suitability of interpreting online conversation as a "public sphere" has been criticized as some of the comments sometimes are not rational and critical (Al- Saggaf,2006); however, they possess the capability of encouraging quality public deliberation on political issues as posited by (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009).

The first is the provision of a deliberative space for those previously excluded from political discourse. The second element holds that the public sphere should be formed through mediated discussion while the major proposition of the third is that ideas presented should be considered based on merit and not on the social standing of the commenter.

Applying these three elements to this study, this study will explore the public sphere provided by the selected newspapers for those who have been excluded from offline political discourse (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Manosevitch and Walker, 2009).

This study, however, selected news stories from The Daily Trust, The Punch, Nigerian Tribune and Vanguard newspapers that have enough comments on the 2019 General Elections Irregularities and did not look into the social, political or financial status of the commenters. The propositions of the theory are relevant to this study because the study analyzes readers' comments to the news stories published on the online newspapers; and the platforms allow users to contribute to and discuss topical issues raised in the news

Research methodology

This study employed quantitative and qualitative content analytical methods. While the population for the study comprised of all online newspapers published within the period of study

(February 2019 to March 2019). The researcher access the necessary online editions and only stories related to the topic under study were selected for analysis However, since it was practically impossible to select, study and attempt a detailed analysis of all the newspapers, four national dailies were purposively chosen out of the Nigerian online newspaper landscape. They include: *Vanguard, Daily Trust, The Punch and The Nigerian Tribune*, based on their perceived level of readership and years in the online platform for content analysis. The reason for the selection was based on the fact that they fall within the top ten Nigerian online newspapers in Nigeria as rated and published by allnetinfo.com cited in Ogunwande, Kur, & Babalola, (2019).

Furthermore, the selected online newspaper have a daily circulatory range of 100,000 copies and above which according to (Udoakah 1996: 52) in Omale, 2007) is up to standard requirement for a national newspaper. The circulation range mentioned here implies that the paper have national spread and national audience appeal. In addition, the selected online newspapers have a very good online presence to its credit.

Therefore the population of the study comprise of the total number of readers' comments in the selected online newspapers for analysis..

The data or comments for the study were compiled for over a two months study period. In other words, a total of 1,271 commenters were identified from The Vanguard, 2,910 from The Punch, 457 from The Daily Trust and 101 from The Nigerian Tribune newspaper websites respectively making a total of 4739 comments from 42 stories.

Table 1: Distribution of Selected Online Newspapers Showing the Population of the Study

S/N	Online newspaper	No of news stories published	No of reader's comments
1	The Punch	17	2910
2	The Vanguard	12	1271
3	Nigerian Tribune	5	101
4	Daily Trust	8	457
	Total	42	4739

Simple random sampling technique was adopted to sample the comments on news stories published by the selected online newspapers. Below is a constructed calendar showing the sample size collected for the study.

Table 2: Selected Issues Dates of the Four National Newspapers for Analysis.

YEAR	MONTH	DATE	DAY
2019	February	18	Monday
2019	February	19	Tuesday
2019	February	20	Wednesday
2019	February	21	Thursday
2019	February	22	Friday
2019	February	23	Saturday
2019	February	24	Sunday
2019	March	9	Saturday
2019	March	10	Sunday
2019	March	11	Monday
2019	March	12	Tuesday
2019	March	13	Wednesday
2019	March	14	Thursday
2019	March	15	Friday

Unit of Analysis

According to Wimmer & Dominick (2000:147), the unit of analysis is the smallest element of content analysis but also the most important. The following were the unit of analysis:

i. Straight News stories

ii. Features

iii. Editorials and

iv. Cartoons/comic strips

Table 3: Format on New Stories on Elections Irregularities at the 2019 General Elections

S/N	Unit of Analysis	The Punch	Vanguard	Nigerian Tribune	Daily Trust
1	Straight news stories	17	12	5	8
2	Feature article	-	-	-	-
3	Editorial	-	-	-	-
4	Cartoons/ comic strips	-	-	-	-
	Total	17	12	5	8

Content Categories

Content categories are central to content analysis research. The focal nature of content categories to content analysis has been emphasized by Wimmer & Dominick (2004) that " at the heart of any content analysis is the category system used to classify media content" in this case readers comment. In this study, categories were constructed to select the message behind the comment(s) made by the commenter's based on the online newspapers news story content, these categories were constructed in consonance with the requirement size advanced by Budd, Thorn & Domohew cited by Akpan (1990) that:

i.   Categories must reflect the investigative research questions

ii. Categories must be exhaustive

iii. Categories must be mutually exclusive

In line with the above, the content categories for this study were designed to provide information that would answer the research questions. Categories were exhaustive because they ensured that items were placed in their relevant category.

Four categories of comments were adopted for the study to facilitate the coding process. These categories were defined as follows:

i.   Agreement/Disagreement

ii. All forms of irregularities (pre elections irregularities/post elections irregularities)

iii. Positive suggestions/Negative suggestions

iv. Abuse/Non-abuse

- **Agreement:** refers to comments that indicated or agreed that there were irregularities at the 2019 general elections and grossly condemn the act

- **Disagreement:** refers to comments that disagreed that there were no irregularities at the 2019 general elections and justifies the act.

- **Electoral irregularities:** refers to all forms of electoral malpractices at the 2019 general elections. Such irregularities are further classified in to the following:

  (a) Pre elections irregularities: refers to refusal to stop campaigns, stealing of electoral materials and coercion.

(b) Irregularities at the actual elections exercise: refers ballot box snatching, vote buying, underage voting, thuggery, violence, possession of offensive weapons and vote apathy.

(c) Post elections irregularities: refers to over voting, rigging, and voter intimidation.

- **Positive suggestions:** refers to comments that points the way forward by proffering solutions to curbing elections irregularities in Nigeria

- **Negative suggestions:** refers to comments that does the give a way forward nor proffer solutions to the menace and comments that suggests any form of violence as the way forward

- **Abuse:** refers to comments that carry insulting messages, employ the use of offensive and abusive language to describe subjects (people, regions, religions, tribe or any other victim), employ name calling to refer to subjects, and use stereotypes and pejorative adjectives to describe subjects. Negative comments possess most of the attributes of speech acts that are considered as hate speech.

- **Non Abuse**; refers to comments that are constructive in nature and do not insult or attack subjects. These kinds of comments do not necessarily agree with views of other commentators, but express their disagreement constructively, devoid of insult, name calling and hate language.

Coding

According to Wimmer & Dominick (2000) coding entails integrating placement of a unit of analysis into a content category. This was achieved in the study by having two coders (the researcher and a student of the Department of Information and Media Technology) examine the sample publication of the online newspapers to identify all news stories, features, editorials and cartoons that made reference to elections irregularities at the 2019 general elections

Inter-coder Reliability

Inter-coder reliability test is used to test or access the degree to which the coders agree. The higher the degree of agreement between the coders, the more valid the result of the content analysis. At the heart of the inter-coder reliability test is the desire to ensure that the agreement between the coders did not occur by chance.

Using Holsti's (1959) formula according to him coder reliability is calculated thus:

$CR = 2m$

n1 + n2

where **M** is number of coding decision on which the coders agree and **n1** and **n2** are the total number of coder decision arrived at by the 1st and 2nd coders respectively. The result of the coders work was:

Total coding decision is 357 decisions on which both coders agree was 300 issues and disagreed on 57 issues.

Decisions on which both coders agreed 300

Using Holsti's formula $\quad \dfrac{2\{m\}}{357+357} = \dfrac{600}{714} \qquad .84$

The above result show that .84 is in line with the rules stated by Wimmer & Domunick (2000), he states that most published content analysis typically report a minimum interceder reliability coefficient of about .75 or above.

Presentation of Data

Table 4: Readers' Stand on Electoral Irregularities

Response	The Punch		The Vanguard		Nigerian Tribune		Daily Trust		Grand Total	%
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
Agreed	2367	81.3	872	68.5	19	18.8	301	65.9	3559	75.1
Disagreed	543	18.7	400	31.5	82	81.2	156	34.1	1181	24.9
Total	2910	100	1271	100	101	100	457	100	4739	100

Table 4 revealed that 75.1% of the readers' comments agreed on one thing concerning electoral irregularities in the 2019 general elections exercise in Nigeria**.**

Table 5: Dominant Electoral Irregularities Committed At The 2019 General Elections

S/N	Form of Elections Irregularities	The Punch	Vanguard	Nigerian Tribune	Daily Trust	Total	%
1	Ballot box snatching	2	-	2	1	5	12
2	Violence	4	3	-	2	9	22
3	Coercion	1	-	-	-	1	2
4	Vote buying	4	1	1	-	6	15
5	Thuggery	1	2	2	-	5	12
6	Underage voting	1	-	-	-	1	2
7	Voter intimidation	-	1	-	-	1	2
8	Rigging	2	3	1	-	6	15
9	Voter apathy	-	1	-	-	1	2

		The Punch	The Vanguard	Nigerian Tribune	Daily Trust	Grand	%
10	Refusal to stop campaign	1	-	-	-	1	2
11	Possession of offensive weapons	-	-	-	1	1	2
12	Stealing of electoral materials	1	1	1	1	4	10
13	Over voting	-	-	-	1	1	2
	Total					42	100

Information on Table 5 shows that out of the 42 news stories published by the selected newspapers, violence was the dominant form of electoral irregularities committed at the 2019 general elections, followed by vote buying and rigging respectively.

Table 6: Solutions Commenters' Offer to Curb Elections Irregularities in Nigeria

Response	The Punch		The Vanguard		Nigerian Tribune		Daily Trust		Grand	%
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Total	
Positive	1196	41.1	278	21.9	7	6.9	69	15.1	1550	32.7
Negative	1714	58.9	993	78.1	94	93.1	388	84.9	3189	67.3
Total	2910	100	1271	100	101	100	457	100	4739	100

Table 6 shows that 67.3% of the readers' comments on solutions to elections irregularities at the 2019 elections were negative and therefore does not suggest a way forward to curbing the menace on our Nigerian elections system.

Table 7: Use and Misuse of Comment Section of Online Newspapers

Response	The Punch		The Vanguard		Nigerian Tribune		Daily Trust		Grand	%
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Total	
Abuse	2475	85.1	971	76.4	73	72.3	362	79.2	3881	81.9
Non-Abuse	435	14.9	300	24.1	28	27.7	95	20.8	858	18.1
Total	2910	100	1271	100	101	100	457	100	4739	100

Table 7 shows that 81.9% of the readers' comments abused the comments section of the online newspapers as it was characterized by hate speeches, trading of blames and name calling.

Discussion of findings

The first objective of this study was to determine if readers comment agree on one thing about elections irregularities or not The analysis reveals that majority of The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune* website readers who commented on news stories related to electoral irregularities in the 2019 general elections had agreed on one thing. This suggests that the readers strongly believed that electoral irregularities occurred before, during and after the 2019 general elections.

This aligns with Al-Saggaf (2006) public deliberation theory which states that public sphere is a domain of social life in which such critical aspect of the society such as public opinion can be formed. Whether they agree or not may not mean much to them, provided that their opinion has been aired. All they know is that it is a social platform where they have the right to their opinion.

The result also confirms Katz et al (1974) position that audiences are very active rather than passive in their information reception and personalization to suit their beliefs. Despite that The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune* newspapers journalists and editors reported and presented the news in line with their house style and profession, the readers may have chosen to interpret and react to the news based on their own preconceived or biased convictions due to various intervening factors irrespective of what the encoders meant initially meant to achieve.

The study also indicates that more readers preferred making comments on news items that are straight news. This may be due to the fact that straight news stories are shorter to read as a result of the 5W's and H (Who, What, Where, When, Why and How) which are often straight to the point with shorter sentences on news events that happened including appropriate pictures and cartoons to back it up.

These reader's behavior align with Okonofua's (2012) submission on the uses and gratifications theory which he states is more concerned with how people use media for gratification of their needs. In this case, people choose what they want to see or read and different media compete to satisfy each individual's needs. Those media outfits that cannot satisfy these needs are easily jettisoned by the readers.

The finding is also in conformity with Erjavec & Kovavic (2012)'s submission that the Internet's interactivity, anonymity and credibility not only aids the facilitation of messages with positive content but also messages that encompass words of hatred thereby

promoting prejudiced communication. They also point out the potential of producing hate speech in the comments section, as could be seen in the case of posts and replies on newspaper websites such as The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The Daily Trust and The *Nigerian Tribune*.

Findings from content analysis shows that out of the 42 news stories published by the selected newspapers, violence was the dominant form of electoral irregularities committed at the 2019 general elections, followed by vote buying and rigging respectively.

The readers' comments do not deny the fact that violence was dominant in the exercise. They strongly believed that the media exaggerated as published by The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune* journalists/editors

The finding is in agreement with the Reception Theory's postulation that readers not only acknowledge the dominant message, but that they are often not willing to completely accept it the way the encoder has intended. Hall (1973) notes that the reader to a certain extent shares the text's code and generally accepts the preferred meaning, but is simultaneously resisting and modifying it in a way which reflects his or her own experiences and interests.

The finding is also in agreement with the uses and gratifications theory which explains how active and interactive readers on The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper websites are using new technologies and applications like the Internet and Web 2.0 tools not only to receive messages, but also to select certain messages they intend to act on, which they eventually do by reading and commenting on those specific messages that they have so chosen, according to their beliefs. Here, readers generally modify the contents or draw meanings that reflect their own interests and extraneous meanings different from the encoded message.

Further Findings from the third objective of the study showed that the readers' comments on solutions to elections irregularities at the 2019 elections were negative and therefore does not suggest a way forward to curbing the menace on our Nigerian elections system.

Based on the findings of this research question, it is evident that negative reactions by majority of the readers on the subject matter may have ended up confusing or reshaping the views of others who commented on news stories of the 2019 general elections. The comments point to negative suggestions over the electoral irregularities as expressed by readers through their comments, but a cursory look indicates that the overwhelming influence of majority of

those with pessimistic comments may have drowned those supporting the candidate on the websites thereby making the minority to reassess their stance or sticking to such views.

Further findings of this study confirms the Uses and Gratifications theory which states that people are more concerned with what they do with the media rather than what the media does to them. (Anaeto et al, 2008). It confirms that readers of The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper websites readers are not just passive receivers of messages or media content but have active influences on the messages. This position is a mixture of accepting and rejecting elements.

Findings from the last objective of the study which sought to find out if readers abuse the comments section of online newspapers **revealed** that 81.9% abused the comments section of the newspaper, while 18.1% did not abuse the comment section of the online newspaper. From these percentages, we can deduce that majority of those who commented on news stories related to electoral irregularities in the 2019 general elections, before, during and after the election on The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper websites misused the comments section of the websites as it could not have been the intention of a respected newspapers companies to set up a website for the purpose of castigating people and describing them in such undignified terms or phrases.

This confirms Dare (2015)'s submission on comments section of newspaper websites:

> *A good deal of the feedback is often perverse and petulant.*
> *Columnists and other commentators are excoriated for not doing*
> *what they had not set out to do. Their academic and professional*
> *qualifications are called into question. Their looks are derided.*
> *Their antecedents up to three generations back are vilified. Name-*
> *calling, coarse and vulgar abuse and ethnic baiting are standard*
> *fare…For, instead of serving as the digital-era equivalent of*
> *Habermas' public sphere, it is often a hate-filled platform for*
> *trading insult and abuse and perpetuating prejudice.*

Majority of the readers who commented on the news stories altered words linking electoral irregularities with terrorism, religion and tribalism among others in a manner that may likely provoke disagreement while other commenters used words that tend to promote the subject matter so as to gather electoral votes or a favorable image. The fact that such indecent comments

were allowed showed accurately that The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper websites does not have a moderator that sieves comments which may turn its platform into a violent community of negative commenters that incite rational members of the public.

The comments section in websites (especially newspaper websites) is meant to grant freedom to readers of published online content (whether news, entertainment, sports, academics or fashion) to express themselves in an interactive format that contributes to knowledge and feedback which becomes even more beneficial to non-commenting readers, the medium publishing the content and the general public for gauging reactions towards a particular story or news item. However, Newman (2009) argues that the freedom expressed in the platform should be within a regulated atmosphere of freedom of speech so as to ensure it does not become a vicious playground that leads to abandonment of the platform by those members of the society who are supposed to benefit from it.

Due to the growing misuse of the comments section of newspaper websites such as that of The *Vanguard*, The *Punch*, The *Daily Trust* and The *Nigerian Tribune*, Brodesser-akner(2010) states that some media critics have advocated its total removal from websites as conversations on it as the harsh and abusive comments there often demoralize passive and active readers including the authors of published content. They further argue that most comments on newspaper websites tend to unconsciously dilute the news story or change readers'perception away from the initial messages intended by the reporter, editor or author.

However, Richmond (2010) as earlier discussed in the literature review, cautions that calls for the removal of comments section is unnecessary as a good moderation of such websites will solve the problem. This conforms with Jarvis (2010:2)'s submission that the tool is not the problem (any more than blogging tools or printing presses are). "If you eliminate comments that's even more insulting than not listening to them and it risks giving up the incredible value the public can give if only they are enabled to. The issue is how you play host."

Summary and Conclusion

This study investigated the analysis of readers' comments on 2019 general elections irregularities published in Nigeria. Four research questions were put together to achieve the objectives of the study. The findings show that majority of the comments related to electoral irregularities, as posted on the comments section had agreement connotations. The comments

were indecorous and full of unverified accusations, especially "Buhari saying death awaits ballot box snatchers".

Readers do not react to stories or news elements the same way on newspaper websites due to individual and psychographic differences.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, the study recommends that newspaper websites should have layed down rules for posting of comments on their platform and make it available as pop up upon visit to the website for commenters to take note of and to have an app on their websites to deactivate such post, so as to avoid hate speeches and unauthorized advert posts

The study also recommends that only commenters with valid internet protocol (IP) address and means of identification should be enabled by the system to comment. The study further recommends digitized voting system to help curb ballot snatching, reduce physical violence and to stop elections irregularity to a very large extent. The study also suggested the amendment of the electoral act

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