

**SOCIAL MEDIA ABUSE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR
DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's democracy has been under the siege of incessant crises and these crises are a culmination of the country's successive years of corruption, human rights violation and in recent times the misuse of social media (through the use of propaganda, cyber bullying and cyber harassment) that heats up the polity and generates bitter politics, hate and bigotry. The implication of this is that it creates a rife environment for continuous electoral violence and ethnic strife that consequently undermines democracy. In the light of this, the objective of this paper seeks to identify how the wrong use of social media can be a threat to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Qualitative method based on document investigation was adopted and the findings from this paper revealed that some of the causes of social media abuse is the culture of gross impunity of the Nigerian society and the lack of effective regulation of social media by governmental institutions. It therefore concludes and recommends that effective policies must be enforced to end the culture of impunity and abuse of social media in order to put an end to ethnic cynicism, ethnic conflicts and hateful politics that breeds sycophants, political violence and the consequent destruction of public administration in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Administrative Collapse; Democracy; Ethnic Strife; Impunity; Political Violence; Propaganda; Social Media Abuse*

INTRODUCTION

Social media abuse has emerged because of globalization and a societal shift from face-to-face contact towards technology-based interactions. Thus, social media abuse has risen as a new form of strategy for intimidating and provoking victims especially for politically motivated intents. Hence, social media abuse is a new form of political participation involving online violence, harassment and stereotyping in order to establish some form of political relevance and dominance and so the globe has become more interconnected than ever before as a result of digital technology (Ologundudu, 2022). Thus, technology continues to advance continuously and swiftly and is therefore changing our modus operandi, lifestyle, political communication, economic activities, political atmosphere, public administrative systems, policy making processes and ways of operating in modern society (Olojede, 2021). However, despite the sophistication, advancement and interconnectedness social media has brought in facilitating democratic tenets, it does not come without its dark sides. Some of

which include cyber bullying, sarcasm, innuendos, ridiculing, manipulation and falsification of electoral results, propaganda, political trolling, satire, malicious and inciteful messages, misinformation, slander as well as the circulation of phony news (Mohammed, 2021). Thus, in this context, social media abuse is the use of computers, iPhone, iPad, cell phones and other electronic devices for making demeaning or politically provocative utterances against individuals, groups or a state that heat up the polity. Essentially, social media abuse focuses on the use of information communication technology as a means through which individuals or groups express their hate, contempt and bigotry towards their known or perceived political enemies or rivals via sending messages that embarrass or harass their opponents. Other forms of social media abuse include sending gross, misrepresenting and spurious messages to blogs, interactive web journals, websites, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, twitter and WhatsApp platforms via mobile devices to arouse hate, prejudice and bias against a political group that spirals into

political violence and genocide. Hence, social media abuse is not only a perilous social media behaviour, but also detrimental and antithetical to the survival of nascent democracy in Nigeria. Unfortunately, social media abuse involving taunting, mocking, negative labelling, intimidation, gaslighting, name calling, issuance of threats, rumor spreading, ethnic, religious or gender-based stereotyping, misogynistic or sexually debasing comments and libel triggers and leads to the spread of sectional and political strife and conflicts all of which pose a threat to democracy in Nigeria (Olojede,2021).

Aside that (Tsegyu and Kelvin,2021) has observed in recent times social media has been identified as platforms that aid terrorism and encourage insecurity and it is also used as channels for recruiting malicious individuals for propaganda especially among politically deviant users. For example, in Nigeria, Bokoharam is actively involved in the use of social media platforms in distribution of propaganda contents and the reach is unimaginably wide and so beyond

the division and dissension social media abuse creates, it has also been observed that this repugnant and unpleasant pandemic has gained normalcy among many internet users across the globe as many in a bid to engage in political activities become involved in using social media for threats, viciousness, terror and bigotry against the perceived supporters of their opponents. However, threats, viciousness, terror and harassment should be unlikely occurrences in the Nigerian cyber space because of the communal culture Nigerians are known for, yet the issue of social media abuse has persisted which has now snowballed into making the political atmosphere tensed, heated, volatile and unsafe and thus turned electoral activities into an opportunity for electoral violence, ethnic strife and unnecessary blood bath (Olojede,2021).In the light of this, the study seeks to examine the negative impact of social media abuse and its implications for the survival of democracy in Nigeria.

Conceptual clarification Social Media Abuse

Social media is an invaluable means of disseminating

information to the citizenry. Hence, it has become a powerful tool for propaganda, maliciousness, terrorism, electoral violence and insurgencies. In lieu of the Nigerian situation, it acts as a two-edged sword wherein it allows citizens unlimited access to information without limitations at the same time, it has been used as a tool to circulate unverifiable and deceptive information to citizens (Ani, Anikwenze and Isiani,2020). Thus, with all the socio-political, economic, technological and educational benefits social media has brought to man, it has not come without a costly price. Oluwagbohunmi (2017) noted that many internet users particularly in Nigeria have misused social media by disseminating provocative and misleading information that has generated ethnic conflicts and has also caused political, economic and national security threats in which has created a rife environment for constant political violence, electoral rigging, bigotry, corruption, sycophancy, injustice, mudslinging, prejudice, rage and political polarization. Unfortunately, these social media vices paralyze politics and creates

political apathy that leads to the destruction of Nigeria's nascent democracy. Therefore, Social media abuse can be seen as any activity involving harassment, altercations or mistreatment carried out by an offender against a victim through the use of internet before, during and after electoral campaigns. This suggests that social media abuse is any reprehensible social media activity in which computers or internet networks are used as a tool for intimidation, cruelty, inflammatory statements, and blackmail particularly for political motives (Olojede,2021). Similarly, some desperate politicians employ some deviant internet users to engage in smear campaigns in order to defame their opposing political candidates and damage their public image as well as their reputations during various elections. Thus, they do this by employing different manipulative tactics such as the production and dissemination of hate speeches to engineer violence in some particular regions and create disharmony, hate and dissension against their perceived political opponents or ethnic groups in order to slothfully and craftily get

the electorates on their side so they can win elections (Ekwueme and Ugwuta,2017).Therefore, social media abuse is the unconventional and contemporary form of perverted political participation in which perpetrators intentionally offend their targeted victims using e-mails, Facebook, Instagram, websites, twitter and WhatsApp platforms to endanger their perceived political opponents in order to encourage hostile political attitudes. Sadly, all of these volatile socio- political behaviour often riles the electorates up into political rage, intra and inter party conflicts, ethic and communal clashes and violent hatred which undermines elections and consequently sabotages Nigeria's crippling democracy (Olojede,2022).

Concept of Democracy

Democracy as a way of government is firmly rooted in the belief that people in any society should be free to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems. In the same vein, democracy as a political system is designed to widen the participation of ordinary citizens in government, the powers of which

are clearly defined and limited. Similarly, democracy is essentially a method of organizing a society politically. Therefore, there are five basic elements of a democratic society namely equality (One man, one vote),popular sovereignty (ultimate political power rests with the people),respect for human life (articulation and aggregation of the people's needs),rule of law and liberty of the people (freedom of speech, the press, conscience and assembly).In the light of this, democracy is a meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) either directly or indirectly for the major positions of governmental power (Ogundiwin and Ogu,2022).

Thus, democracy is a form of government in which citizens in a state have political investments of political participation and trust. It essentially has to do with the ability of the people to control decision making. This explains why the central thing about democracy is to ensure that power actually belongs to the people. Therefore, democracy emphasizes freedom of the individuals in

various aspects of political life, equality among citizens, justice in the relations between the people and the government and the participation of the people in choosing those in government. In the light of this, the foregoing indicates that democracy entails institutional arrangements for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will. In this sense, democracy is an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. What these general conceptions suggest is that democracy as a system of government stresses the sovereignty of the people (Omotola,2006).Thus in real democracy, everybody must be allowed to participate in decision making (direct democracy).It must be a pluralistic system that is as decentralized as possible Hence, democracy is built on the equality of citizens ;the freedom of the citizens to associate with one

another for the realization of their ideals and the defense and promotion of their interests and the freedom of their citizens to choose between the different political platforms of various political parties and candidates and see to the actualization of the platforms they have voted for if their choices win (Babaleye, Ibitoye and Odurome,2020).

Types of Social Media Abuse that Sabotages Democracy in Nigeria

According to (Ologundudu,2022; Olojede,2021) there are various forms of social media abuse which shall be addressed below:

1. **Flaming:** This is a type of abusive social media behaviour that involves sending politically upsetting, rude and obscene messages in order to trigger the victim's attention.
2. **Cyber Harassment:** This is another type of unpleasant social media behaviour that involves the act of consistently sending a person or group of persons offensive or provocative messages with the intent of tempting or riling them up

them to engage in political violence

3. **Cyber Stalking:** This is another aggressive form of social media abuse that involves the act of intimidation which includes threats of kidnap or assassination to an individual, ethnic group or community if they do not support or vote for a particular political candidate during elections
4. **Denigration:** This is a dangerous social media behaviour that involves sending or posting false, malicious or cruel statements about a person or group in order to tarnish their reputation and create political and ethnic animosity that leads to electoral violence or genocide
5. **Masquerading:** This is another volatile social media behaviour that involves pretending to represent a particular political party, or political candidate and sending or posting materials that portrays the victim in a controversial light in order for the electorates to cast aspersions on the integrity of

the victim or to put the victim in potential danger.

Reasons for Social Media Abuse

According to (Nwufu and Nwoke,2018; Olojede,2022) they highlighted reasons for the prevalence of social media abuse amongst internet users which will be highlighted below:

1. **Poverty and Unemployment:** Poverty connotes inequality and social injustice and this traumatizes and angers the youths especially when they see the political class brazenly and disrespectfully flaunting their assets and celebrations on social media and using national resources that is meant to generate development and alleviate poverty engage in ostentatious living and reckless waste while majority of the youths languish in abject poverty. Thus, they see social media as a convenient and accessible avenue to engage in trolling, cyber bullying and harassment in order to either attract the attention of the political class

to their travails or vent out their frustration, anger and displeasure against poor governance, infrastructural decay, political impunity, poverty and unemployment.

2. **Codes of Conduct and Policies that address what constitutes social media social media abuse are not clearly articulated:** Policies and laws that address social media abuse especially as it relates to political participation are usually not stated expressly, explicitly and communicated to all internet users and members of the public. Similarly, effective penalties are often not clearly outlined, implemented or enforced on the consequences of hate speech and social media abuse particularly when it concerns politically relevant issues detrimental to democracy. Thus, the lack of holding social media abusers accountable for their antidemocratic activities constitutes one of the reasons why social media abuse is prevalent and has become a

threat to the survival of democracy.

3. **Power of Anonymity:** In cyber space, social media abusers often take advantage of the relative power of anonymity social media provides to engage in anti-democratic activities that are malicious and inciteful for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill-will or needless anxiety for politically motivated purposes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employed the systems theory to explain the study. Fundamentally, systems theory which was propounded by David Easton in the 1940s stated that the political systems are systems of interconnection and exchanges that impacts on society. Essentially, political systems are structural systems that exist within an environment and directly affects the society through daily and continuous transactions

(Enemuo,1999). Thus, when the constant interactions and nature of a political system which relates to each other is innately filled with impunity, derision, and corruption, it reflects in the relationship and communication on the cyber space. In other words, if the administrative culture, institutional structure, and socialization process of a particular political system is chaotic, violent, full of bigotry, prejudice, bias and civil unrest, it reveals itself on the cyber space. This basically means that the inclusivity, social justice, respect for the rule of law and democratic tenets a society has for one another in the political environment is reflected on the internet and the execrable contempt, ethnic aversion, political disregard, resentment, inter and intra party animosity, and communal irascibility a society has for one another is also reflected in the society. Hence, the recurring menace of social media abuse in the cyber space is only a manifestation of the inherent state of disharmony, heated political environment, electoral violence, ethnic resentment, political turpitude, politics of bitterness,

economic injustice, terrorism and political upheaval in Nigeria's political system and environment. Thus, the appearance of disdain, hate, threats, intimidation, viciousness and other forms of social media abuse continuously posing as a threat to democracy only gives an insight or revelation into the level of pervasive violence in Nigeria's political space and administrative environment that sabotages democracy.

METHODOLOGY

Documentary method was adopted for this study. Hence, data was sourced from local, national and international academic publications. These consisted of relevant text books and academic journals. The data gathered from the aforementioned method was analyzed using qualitative descriptive technique.

SOCIAL MEDIA ABUSE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

The recourse to win elections at all costs is not unconnected to the nature and character of a lot of Nigerian politicians. Hence, social media abuse has become brazen, audacious, brash and pervasive

because of the winner takes all syndrome which has become deeply entrenched in the Nigerian political system and also because once elections are won or lost, losers know the torrid time that awaits them. Again, electoral victory confers on the winners unrestricted access to state resources at all levels which are often administered not only as their personal estate, but also as an instrument of patronage to reward kinsmen, family members, party loyalists and cronies while the electoral losers become disempowered. Thus, some of the desperate politicians sponsor and encourage all forms of social media vileness to harass, oppress, intimidate and frame-up their perceived opponents in a bid to desperately win election. Hence, they do this by using the internet to engage in ballot rigging, vote buying, disruptions of the result collation process, multiple registration, voting by proxy, outright disenfranchisement, encouraging the sponsorship of violence in opposition stronghold by state officials, party agents and political thugs and outright falsification of electoral results. Unfortunately, these acts of social

media abuse do not come without its consequences. Some of which are corruption and electoral violence which leads to weak democracy and by extension the collapse of public administration. Hence, these types of frail democracy can be likened to authoritarian democracy, neo patrimonial democracy, democracy without choice, illiberal democracy, and pseudo democracy. Sadly, these has been the reality of Nigeria since 1999 (elections without democracy) (Omotola,2021) some of which creates legitimacy crisis, ineffectiveness of public administration and births the propensity of military invasion into governance as can be seen in recent times especially in countries where military coup has occurred such as Burkina Faso wherein Burkina Faso's army ousted President Roch Kabore in January,2022 for failing to contain violence by Islamic militants. Mali- group of Malian colonels led by Assimi Goita ousted President Ibrahim Boubcar Keita in August,2020 over deteriorating security, contested legislative elections and allegations of corruption (Bate,2023).

Furthermore, social media abuse has also created a heated political environment that has sabotaged the survival of democracy in Nigeria. This can be seen in the political upheaval Nigeria constantly experiences. For example, state sponsored suppression, insurgencies, crisis of resource control, secessionist moves, ominous clamor for power shift to southern Nigeria, ethnic and communal clashes, genocide and terrorism have all contributed to the rape of democracy in Nigeria which has now being made worse by the invasion of COVID19 pandemic, inflation, food insecurity, banditry as well as the vested instability in the Niger-Delta and other oil-producing areas which all culminate to the destruction of democracy in Nigeria (Olojede,2022).

In addition to that social media abuse creates a political environment that makes democratization almost impossible thus the wrong use of social media has created misinformation and impunity which has spiraled into socio-political resentment and hatred that has destroyed democracy by

increasing political instability, political violence, economic uncertainty and insecurity and so this lawlessness caused by propaganda has encouraged the establishment of unnecessary and very violent militias like Odua People's Congress, Bakassi boys, Unknown gun men. Eastern Security Network, Egbesu Boys and Bokoharam. Lastly, the bastardization of social media especially on political issues has destroyed democracy by introducing anarchy and impunity into the political system wherein the spread of falsehood, sycophancy and cover ups of incompetencies has given political leaders the impetus not to feel responsible or accountable to the people and this has created room for poverty, cultural degradation, collapse of administrative institutions and failure of policy programmes (Itodo, Ayuba and Adeyi,2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the reasons for the pervasive impunity in the use of social media especially at the detriment of democracy in Nigeria is the empowerment of some

nefarious politicians who are desperate to have an enduring presence on the political power and influence of the nation. Thus, they recruit some malicious internet users to generate and circulate misleading and spurious information to cause dissension in such ways that can threaten the stability of the political system and administrative structures just in a bid to win elections. Therefore, it has become necessary for the government through its agencies like the Federal Ministry of Communications, Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development and Federal Ministry of Information and Culture as well as media professionals, CT specialists, Public Administrators, the academia and local government leaders to work together collaboratively in ensuring enlightenment campaigns and workshops are done at the grassroots level on the implications of the wrong use of social media and its implication for not just our nascent democracy but on nation

building and our overall national life.

In addition, enforceable policies which carry weighty penalties should be enacted for those guilty of sponsoring the enablement and misuse of social media as well as the abusers of social media. Furthermore, it is of utmost importance that relevant agencies should be established to monitor the misuse of social media so that the abuse of social media will not lead to the annihilation of our political and consequently public administration in Nigeria.

Lastly, it is important that the academia and researchers need to complement the efforts of the government in clamping down on the wrong use of social media by designing and setting up courses that expose what social media basterdization is and how dangerous social media can be when abused especially for the survival of democracy national development and public administration in Nigeria.

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