FUPRE Journal

of

Scientific and Industrial Research

Online Media Audience Awareness and Response to Political Cyberbullying and its Implication to Development in Nigeria

IKPEGBU, E. [1,*] , OKPAKO, E. A. [2] , CHIEMEKE, S. [3] , OMOROGIUWA, O. [4]

[1]Department of Mass Communication, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria.
[2]Department of Cyber Security, Faculty of Computing, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State.[3]Department of Computer Science, Faculty of Science, University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria
[4]Department of Computer Science & Information Technology, Igbenedion University Okada, Edo State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Tensions are usually high during political campaign periods in Nigeria as politicians seek to influence the electorates to their favour. In the process, they express sentiments that sometimes threaten or disparage their opponents. Online media platforms have been one of the most adopted means for politicians, leading to political cyberbullying. This study focused on online media audience awareness and response to political cyberbullying and its implication to development in Nigeria. The study had two objectives on the awareness level and response to the issue. The researchers anchored the study on the Selective Processes Theory, and approached it through qualitative survey research design. There were 224 respondents drawn from online media users in Nigeria. A Google designed form was administered through emails and WhatsApp platforms. The study adopted the four-point Likert scale format with 2.5 as the criterion for decision. The researchers found out that online media audience is averagely aware (3.26 AWMS) of political cyberbullying in Nigeria. Secondly, the respondents have a high negative perception (3.56 AWMS) about political cyberbullying, which is good for development. It was therefore concluded that with the knowledge and perception, politicians may not benefit from political cyberbullying in the future. The study recommends that mainstream media should increase anti-political cyberbullying campaign through its online media platforms.

1. INTRODUCTION

An opposition political party's vice-presidential aspirant in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, IfeanyiOkowa of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), observed that "We are beginning to see bullying in the cyber space of our country, I think that everybody should have his space, time, to be able to think, make comments without being bullied" (von.gov.ng). This statement was made amidst the growing tension and rival interest in quest for power. Cyberbullying increases as politicians and their supporters seek to gain public support.It poses a lot of discomfort to many since it flows through communication platforms(Camacho et al., 2014).

Politically motivated aggression is seen as the newest aspect in the cyberworld, which has now informed the conceptualization and analysis of "political cyberbullying" to decipher its nature, effects, and victims. And for those who are involved in it, it could be a means of demonstrating cyber power, which is, using the cyberspace to create advantages that can influence online users (Kuehl 2009), (Bauman 2019). Bullying is the aggressive, intended and repeated behaviour exerted by someone or a group of persons on a weaker person. It became more prevalent during COVID19 pandemic (Hymel and Swearer 2015), (Smith 2019), (www.cdc.gov), (www.psychiatry.org).Studies show that there is a strong correlation between traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Olasanmi et al., 2020).

Online communication has changed the way of information gathering, processing and dissemination. People can now interact with one another across national frontiers from one part of the world to the other without having to travel physically. People can also generate content by themselves and disseminate to the global online community through social media. The impact has also been felt in the media profession. Journalism is no longer limited to the hardcopy print, published by any newspaper organization nor is news obtained only from radio or television set. Information is now at the finger tips and obtained from mobile devices with professional editorializing or all-comers publication (Cohen 2015), (Koundal and Mishra 2018).

In spite of the benefits derived from online communication, it has also posed some challenges to the society. As people are free to create and post whatever they lay hands on through blogs, social media, email, etc. some tend to use the means to harass, insult, ridicule or intimidate perceived opponents, especially, in the political space.

Consequently, people's reputations are smeared online, which often translate into real life experience or even worse than face to face abuse (Ornebring 2010), (Maho 2016).

Political communication, especially throughonline media, can play a significant role in Nigeria's political process. Given that it could influence previous general elections in the country, any means of spreading false information, defaming political actors, threatening candidates or discrediting opponents tantamount to cyberstalking and cyberbullying (Reid 2015), (Omojuwa 2015), (Maho 2016). The prevalence of this also implies that both victims of political cyberbullying and citizens can be adversely affected. Granted that the knowledge of an issue is important in knowing to go about it, the awareness of political cyberbullying in Nigeria among online media audience is critical in addressing the issue. When online media users are able to identify political cyberbullying, they would know how to relate with it; and if they perceive it as appropriate or inappropriate, they would correspondingly respond to it in that light.

The media can help to redefine the landscape by redirecting attention towards constructive online political communication and contribute to national development. The media should be in the forefront to promote connectedness among people because it decimates cyberbullying, given that it offers protective mechanisms against nonconformist behavior problems (Lucas-Molina et al., 2022), (Fortunato and Martin 2016), (Abreu et al., 2020). Observations indicate that political cyberbullying is a regular phenomenon in Nigerian polity when campaigns are approaching, and mostly, during the real election seasons. With the 2023 general elections activities, there is the need to ascertain if online media audience is aware of political cyberbullying and how they respond to it. It is on this premise that this

study was built. In other words, how does online media audience perceive political cyberbullying in Nigeria?

This study was able to ascertain online media audience awareness and response to political cyberbullying in Nigeria, through specific objectives, which were to:

1. Find out online media audience level of awareness of political cyberbullying in Nigeria.
2. Ascertain online media audience perception of political cyberbullying in Nigeria.

1.1 Selective Processes

The Selective Processes Theory traces its lines to the principles of Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Leon Festinger in 1967, who argued that information that is inconsistent with one's preexisting beliefs, values and goals creates psychological discomfort (dissonance) that should be relieved. Furthermore, a common experience is for people to maintain the knowledge of themselves and the world. He also stressed that when people kn ow about things that are not consistent with them psychologically, they strive to make such consistent (Baran 2009). It is in a bid to identify these various ways that the Selective Processes Theory was formulated. The Selective Process is seen as a filtering mechanism that screens out unwanted sensory data, which identifies and highlights the most relevant pattern for it.

Scholars argue that mass communication is limited in creating the effect: Reinforcement is or could be abetted by predilection and the interwoven mechanism of selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention (Klapper 1960). It can be identified in three phases as selective exposure (attention), selective retention and selective perception (Baran 2009), or delineated into four: selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception and selective retention (Whitaker and Ramsey 2012). They distinguished "exposure" from "attention" and placed "retention" as the last phase, contrary to other perspectives (Baran 2009).

Selective exposure or attention takes place when people expose themselves to messages that they think are in consonance with their already-held attitudes or interests while avoiding those that do not align. Selective perception deals with the mental recasting of a message that conforms to one's attitude and beliefs. On the other hand, selective retention refers to how people remember best and longest information that is in tune with their already-held interests. The online audience is supposed to be exposed to, attend to, perceive, or retain political messages from politicians. Where political cyberbullying exists, they should be aware of it and respond individually to it.

1.2. Politics and Political Communication

The best communications obtainable in a society cannot stand in for good governance, whereas good governance is very realistic when there is innovative communication process to support it (Tworek 2017). This goes to say that intelligent politicians will endavour to work their way through with smart communication techniques that would enable them to market themselves or their candidate. Sometimes, this might be done through unscrupulous means. For some, Nigeria's politics is marked by a low level of tolerance for political views that are critical of the government or opposing party. While democratic process is expected to develop to a matured height, the practice has not reached expectations (Adibe et al., 2017).

Political communication is a convergence of five basic elements: First, individuals and organization who have interest to promote; second, media organizations'

selection and framing of contents. The third, deals with communication platforms' capacity to transmit and retrieve information; fourth, laws and policies guiding election campaigns; and finally, audience seeking information to satisfy needs and curiosity (Fortunato and Martin 2016). It then follows that a firm grasp of these elements is an imperative in understanding what transpires in the political communication matrix.

The greater concern lies in the role of the media towards individuals and organisations who have peculiar agendas to communicate to the people. In democracy, the media has an important role to inform and educate citizens on what is happening and how individuals can actively take part. This primus role is now dynamic given the presence of social media. To appreciate these vagaries therefore would be to situate media theory into the political communication environment.

2.2 Online Media Audience

The audience is perhaps, the single most critical factor in mass communication, given that the entire process is aimed at meeting the needs of the people with information, education or entertainment. And given the advancement of communication technologies, especially, the Internet, the audience has moved from a passive receptor to an active contributor with unique identities (Zhao 2018). The audience now plays the role of producers, products and consumers, which makes them important subject matter to give attention to in this era (Ayo-Obiremi and Adelabu 2020). This new era of technological advancement is identified as the digital age wherein people are more media dependent because of media diversifications and convergence (Livingstone 2016). There are more personal devices like laptops, mobile phones, e-books and computers, which has made the era to be described as a "4+ screen

world" because of the identified devices (Cohen 2017).

There are also diverse kinds of contents and forms such as more TV channels, more video games; more interconnectivity between media and telecom services; and the shift from one-way mass communication to an interactive communication experience have increased the stake of the audience in the communication matrix. Taken as whole, online audience decision on what to read, listen, watch or share develops an audience traffic that keep the various media platforms functioning with unique offerings (Webster 2014).

Media audience can be identified from various perspectives. They can be seen as the mass audience or niche audience (Cullum 2018), (Stevenson 2014). In the former, reference is made of consumers of contents that are directed at a large number of people, while the latter deals with a small number of people who are influential and have unique interest such as professional media channels. Besides these, media audience could also be defined from demographic and psychographic attributes: by age, gender, literacy or occupation, and by worldview, ideologies, and exposures.

1.3.Cybercrime and Cyberbullying in Nigeria

Cybercrime is a humongous socio-technological problem that does not only drain the proficiency of a country and its system, but also its resources because of the cost of controlling it. It is even believed that some countries do not have the wherewithal to nip it in the bud as it is ubiquitous and onerous to handle. This is even one of the reasons why there is a growing debate over the issue (Jahankhani and Al-Nemrat 2011), (Eubanks 2017), (Vecino 2018). It then goes to say that cybercrime is a subject that government and corporate private organizations should be concerned of since

it has tremendous impact on economic transactions across local, national and international frontiers, yet, herculean to address. Its import and implications are therefore imperative to understand.

Cybercrimes are computer data and systems offences perpetrated with the aid of and against computer data and systems. It can also be seen as cyberspace induced crimes like intellectual property theft, DDos (Distributed Denial-of-Service) threats, attacks, fraud, and identity theft. It thrives on accessing online private and commercial information without permission for malicious or exploitative reasons (Fahey 2017), (Okoh and Chukwueke 2016).

Crime and criminal activities have been subjective concept in different parts of the country thereby turning the country into a state of legalized lawlessness where the law is entirely emptied of content. (Okpako et al, 2020). The existence of cybercrime implies that there ought to be cybersecurity. If the behavior and activities of cyber criminals in Nigeria does not stem from amoral economic calculations, then there are necessary reasons to assume that such cybercriminal behaviors result from perverse cultural background (Okpako et al, 2020). It is now a concern for government, companies and international organisations to create a supportive atmosphere that ensures cybersecurity internally and externally for the success of collective ideals. To be able to do this, improving cybersecurity capacity, that is, ensuring adequate laws, sound policies, strategies, modeled sociocultural behaviours, knowledge and skills as well as building refined technical standards are called for (Dutton et al., 2019).

Cybercrime is an offense in Nigeria following the provisions of Cybercrime Act of 2015. It is the first legislative effort towards cybersecurity, which provides for a comprehensive, effective, unified legal, institutional and regulatory framework for treating cybercrimes in Nigeria (Cohen 2017). Section (1a & b) of the Cybercrime Act prohibits cyberstalking in order to maintain ethical cyber space for online users. It cautions against using the Internet for anything that is "grossly offensive, pornographic or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character or causes any such message or matter to be sent". It goes further to highlight that any message that is sent through computer network system, known to be "false, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent", is also liable for prosecution under the Act.

While a fine of 7 million or 25 million Naira; imprisonment of one or ten years, dependent on the gravity of the cybercrime, are believed to be among the provisions for any culprit, a problem with the whole system is the Government's authoritarian character in democratic attire but ignores the principles of democracies in branding almost all anti-party/Government online messages as cyberstalking (Adibe et al., 2017).

The word "cyberbullying" was coined in 1999 as an expression bearing two key words, cyber and bullying. Although it has colloquial and official derivatives, it seems not to have a common definition. What is rather common among the submission of scholars is the congruency of its characteristic features, which includes willful, repetitive and electronically induced harm. It involves using cell phones, computers or any other electronic communication technological device to bully someone or people (Schneider et al., 2012), (Smith et al., 2013).

The basic concept of bullying is well enshrined in cyberbullying even if it is believed that there is an exceptional assessment and understanding of cyberbullying given that it can cause greater harm than ordinary bullying. One unique phenomenon is that those who perpetrate cyberbullying are not different from those who do it traditionally; likewise, are the victims of both forms, respectively (Hinduja and Patchin 2010), (Cross et al., 2015).

Descriptively, traditional bullying can be performed in three forms of social, verbal and physical. In social bullying, violent behaviours are undertaken, which would lead to breaking down of social connections. Verbal bullying can be seen through direct mocking, provocation and or teasing in an unfriendly manner. Physical bullying is more violent than the previous ones as it extends to shoving, pinching, punching, hitting or any other aggressive behaviour that tends to inflict physical pain on the victim (Cole et al., 2006), (Hines 2011).

In the course of bullying, three main actors play up, which are the bully, the bullied and the bystander. The bully is the chief actor who commits the uncivil and violent behaviour. He could be involved in some delinquent conducts and become a criminal, where it is not controlled. The bullied is the victim receiving the unkind treatment. The individual could suffer from psychological trauma and possibly act towards committing suicide, if not counseled. The bystanders are those who witness the bullying (Nansel et al., 2001), (Coloroso 2003).

Cyberbullying takes place on digital media platforms; the perpetrator's identity might not be known and the victim may not be unable to escape the cruelty arising from it

(Kowalski 2015). Bullying has the potency to cross beyond school environment, which can also be seen from the fact that cyberbullying could involve repeated negative messages, impersonation, racist harassment, sexual violence, exclusion, trickery, and cyber stalking. It even affects psycho-social behaviours (Alao and Kohol 2020).

Some behaviors that constitute cyberbullying includes *pranking*: feigning anonymous, repeated hang-ups, mocking and threatening phone calls; *identity theft*: claiming another person's identity online and representing the person in negative light to damage the victim's reputation; *divulgation*: rumoring or publishing someone's personal or embarrassing information online without the person's permission; *image sharing*: sharing private unflattering pictures without permission; *sexual imaging*: sharing online images ofa person's sexual nature, especially, underage; *hate site*: Using hate sites to promote social exclusion; and Text/Email: sending threatening message or insult mails to people(www.education.vic.gov.au).

Cyberbullying, though practiced through information and communication technologies (ICTs) like social media, web pages, email and mobile phones, is believed to be of greater adverse effect than traditional bullying, whether in the short or long term. This is so because there could be psychological maladjustment, disorders and symptoms noticed among victims of cyberbullying. It increases depression among people (Kowalski et al., 2014), (Schoeler et al., 2018), (Baezner 2020), (Martinez et al., 2020). Cyberbullying could also be observed when there is hate or bias against race, religion, sexual affection or the physical appearance of a person. In the course of perpetrating the act, the culprit could be doing it for fun or to engage an idle moment (Olasanmi et al.,

2020). This raises the concern if there should be a reorientation among Internet users against cyberbullying. It will take a conscious effort geared towards educating and enlightening the people about the inherent danger in cyberbullying as well as its ill-effects on victims, for its fight to make any impact.

1.4. Media and Development Communication

The presence of digital technology and communications has redefined the media landscape. Media practice is now challenged to brace up towards the demand of a convergent system of communication, where it is possible for virtually all mediums of communication to synchronize into one form, that is, digital media. The new media culture of the society also prescribes another modus operandi for the media, that is, web broadcasting. For instance, it is observed that there is an increase of close surveillance of every individual owing to technical feasibility obtainable in the cyber world such that human privacy is now threatened (Hagen and Lysne 2016).

Given the fact that the society is cyberspace oriented, it is expected that the media would work in that sphere as well. Mediatisation is one of the ways in which this can be actualized. Mediatisation is the process in which media transform the society, culture, social interaction, social institution, and the day to day living of a people and place through communication. This is so because of the symbolic expressions of experience in time and space that defines aspects of social structures and media technology. With mediatization, globalization, commercialization, and individualization, a modern and developed society is possible (Rogers 1962), (Hjarvard 2013), (Hepp 2013), (Krotz 2017).

One of the significant identified roles of the media in the society is the agenda-setting function in which the media is expected to select and frame messagesthat it perceives as most important for public discuss. The media should give attention to perspectives that would lead to development (Fortunato and Martins 2016). Development cuts across the efforts aimed at describing, explaining and optimizing change processes that occur in the lives of people, personally and collectively. There are also arguments that people take non developmental or a developmental stance in positing that before individuals exist or at the earliest period of their life span, events influence their distinctive idiosyncrasies and behaviors (Lerner 2015), (Lerner 2015), (Bjorklund 2015), (Witherinton and Lickliter 2016), (Lerner and Murray 2016). This change process that occurs in the life of an individual denotes development in human sphere. Therefore, development can be human-centric.

Development initiatives are believed to be successful when they focus on concrete, sound, important and achievable goals for the people and the society. And obviously, it is argued that when goals are set without definite plans on how to achieve them, it becomes more of mere ambitious statements (Costello 2020). The domineering concept of development is commonly believed to be economic, given that it relates to development policies and aids as well as measured through the per-capita income of the people. In this context, the growth of economy would mean that there can be social development for the betterment of the welfare of the people (Lepenies 2015).

Development communication implies that the various aspects of transformation-oriented efforts are made known to the people who also take active part in bringing about the changes within their own

environment for their own benefit. It is geared towards ensuring that "communication equals" have a common understanding and share in the decision-making process (Castello and Braun 2006). It is the planned and systematic use of communication in interpersonal, mass media and new media to gather information that are development inclined; processing the information with the active participation of the people and mobilizing them towards positive change. Such communication will be devoid of political cyberbullying perpetrated by politicians and their allies.

1.5. Cyberbullying in Political Communication: Cases

In other to appropriately situate the discourse, it is imperative to highlight some of the cyberbullying observed in some politicians and their supporters in recent past, which came to public knowledge through the dailies.

Table 1: Cyberbullying Political Communication

SN	Paper & Date	Title	Content
1	Sahara Reporters, July 25, 2022	Ekiti PDP factional chairman, Ogunsakin, petitions Nigerian police Inspector-General over alleged defamation, cyberbullying by Fayose's brother	The factional Chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party in Ekiti State, 'Deji Ogunsakin, has petitioned the Inspector General of Police, (IGP) Usman Alkali Baba over alleged criminal intimidation, cyber-bullying and cyber-stalking by Prince Isaac Fayose, the younger brother of former governor of Ekiti State, Dr. Ayodele Fayose.
2	Punch, September 18, 2022	Campaigns: Police threaten prosecution against hate speech, say cyberbullying criminal	As political parties and candidates prepare for the commencement of campaigns, the police have warned politicians and their supporters against engaging in hate speech and cyberbullying. The police threatened to prosecute violators in accordance with relevant laws, adding that they could be charged under the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, Electoral Act or even Terrorism (Prevention) Act, depending on the content of the speeches.
3	BBC News, July 5, 2022, Olivia Ndubuisi &Nduka Orjinmo	Peter Obi: The Labour Party candidate electrifying young Nigerians	Frances Ogbonnaya, a university student in Anambra state when Mr Obi was governor, is surprised by the praises being sung in his name, describing his tenure as unremarkable.

			Some have been accused of cyberbullying and labelling anyone who does not vote for him in next year's election as an enemy of the state.
4	The Nation, September 22, 2022	My receptionist has a better degree than Obi – Omokri	Ex-aide of former president Goodluck Jonathan, Reno Omokri has made a mockery of the Labour Party (LP) presidential candidate, Peter Obi's degree. He tweeted: "Even my receptionist while I was in government has a better degree than Obi. After all this noise on social media, it is only a Second-Class degree in Philosophy that your messiah has? Zenith Bank will not even employ such an educationally challenged character!"
5	Daily Post, August 21, 2022, SeunOpejobi	2023: You're like Satan campaigning against sin – Omokri attacks Peter Obi	According to Omokri: "Peter Obi is the single greatest contributor to consumption in Nigeria. He imports almost everything from A to Z, including beer and alcoholic drinks. Yet, he campaigns on turning Nigeria from consumption to production? It is like Satan campaigning against sin!

The first report highlights the issue of cyberbullying and cyberstalking with the case against Prince Isaac Fayose, who is believed to have committed the crime. In the second, a clear effort is seen that the law enforcement agency for order and safety within the country is performing its official duty in warning citizens to put off whatever form of cyber criminality that they are culpable of. That the warning is from the police implies that any culprit would be arrested and charged. The other excerpts refer to a particular politician who seems to have gained social media attention. In the third report, the language employed is neutral but, in the content, cyberbullying is highlighted as the climax of the actions. The expressions are observable derogatory and name calling connotations, which can affect a credible candidate.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that political cyberbullying exists among politicians, which have found its way into the social media as well as the mainstream media. This actually portends danger because there have been incidents where political supporters took laws into their hands while trying to get jungle justice. The political atmosphere in Nigeria is already tensed and whatever will exacerbate it should be discouraged. Much work then lies in the hands of social actors, especially the media.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted quantitative survey research design to ascertain the awareness level and perception of online media audience on political cyberbullying. The study had 224 samples from social media users in Nigeria. The instrument was designed through Google Form and administered through emails and WhatsApp platforms. The study adopted the four-point Likert scale with Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) as options. **Decision Rule:** To obtain the average weighted mean score will be to calculate the sum of the values for each response and divide by the number of occurrences, which gives the decision rule – i.e. $5+4+3+2+1 \div 5 = 3$. Therefore, the decision rule is 3: any mean from 3 and

above is *positive* and accepted while any mean less than 3, is *negative* and rejected.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

There were 224 respondents used for the study. The data gathered indicates that 62.5% (140) of the respondents were males while 21% (84) were females. And concerning their age levels, it was also found that four (1.78%) were between 15 – 21 years; six (10.7%) were above 46 years; 28 of them (12.5%) were 31 – 45 years; while the last number of respondents were between 22 – 30 years (75%). This implies that the most of the respondents were tertiary school age.

Research Question One: To what extent are online media audiences aware of political cyberbullying in Nigeria?

Table 2: Online Media Audience Awareness of Political Cyberbullying

SN	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	D (3)	SD (2)	U (1)	Total	WM	Decision
1	I have observed repeated negative messages online by a politician against another person.	124 (620)	96 (384)	0	1	3	224 (1009)	4.5	Accepted
2	There is nothing like blackmail in any online political messages by Nigerians.	17 (85)	13 (52)	76 (228)	68 (136)	50	224 (551)	2.46	Rejected
3	Some politicians use different identify than their true person in some online messages that are against opponents.	76 (380)	76 (304)	16 (48)	12 (24)	44	224 (800)	3.57	Accepted
4	Online political messages do not attack opponents based on their origin.	8 (40)	36 (144)	52 (156)	84 (168)	44	224 (552)	2.46	Rejected
5	There are online political messages that are intended to trick the audience.	148 (740)	64 (256)	1 (3)	3 (6)	8	224 (1013)	4.52	Accepted
6	There are no political messages on social media that harass other people.	4 (20)	12 (48)	64 (192)	100 (200)	44	224 (504)	2.25	Rejected
7	There are elements of threats against opposing politicians or parties in some	104 (520)	68 (272)	12 (36)	8 (16)	32	224 (876)	3.91	Accepted

	of the online political messages.								
8	We cannot find any online political message that incites hatred against another person or people.	8 (40)	21 (84)	52 (156)	112 (224)	31	224 (535)	2.39	Rejected
	Average Weighted Mean						730	3.26	**Accepted**

The data in Table 2 highlights the extent to which the audience is aware of political cyberbullying in Nigeria. With an average weighted mean of 3.26, which is positive and accepted, it can be seen that the respondents have an average knowledge of the political cyberbullying. Most unique about this summated response is the fact that the rate at which they observed repeated negative messages by politicians against others is very high and observation of online political message that are intended to trick the audience, respectively (4.5). The prevalence of cyberbullying is such that it is common among college students and even among school children (Johnson et al., 2016), (Mudjiran et al., 2020). These arguments are more convincing when it is proven that online platforms have become means for political communication (Engelstad et al., 2017).

In the Selective Processes Theory, Selective Exposure suggests that online audience attend to messages according to their already-held beliefs and attitudes. Where the audience is biased against cyberbullying, it is expected that they may also discontinue with political cyberbullying when re-exposed to it. In this study, the respondents were aware of political cyberbullying. The consistent nature of the audience' responses are very remarkable in that items phrased in the negative form were also rejected by the respondents to align with their responses to the once written in the positive. This buttresses the fact that they are conscious of their responses, that is, the awareness of the problem.

With an understanding of communication as from four models: communication as information transmission; communication as ritual for the expression of meanings and participation; communication as attention creation and publicity; and communication as reception, which demands encoding and decoding of meanings (McQuail 2010), one would better appreciate the effect effective communication could play on political cyberbullying. In political cyberbullying, information is transmitted; the perpetrators create attention and publicise their objective; and while they encode, the victims and online users decode meanings as transmitted or as perceived. Whatever be the case, it cannot be denied that it will have a level of influence on the people.

It has been predicted that since digital communication will continue to soar, cybercrime will also assume newer dimensions (Hagen and Lysne 2016). One way out to water down cyberbullying would be for the media to be a strong voice in advocating for stakeholders' consideration of young people's social values in Nigerian context. For instance, it has been identified that the Western approach for cyberbullying was not an option for an Asian environment (Mudjiran et al., 2020); in similar vein, only empirical data can disprove if it will not be the same measure for Third world African nations. It then follows that efforts should be

improved upon to appreciate the value system of the growing youth population in

Nigeria as well as meeting their needs, if there will be anything to go by.

Research Question Two: How does online media audience perceive political cyberbullying in Nigeria?

Table 3: Online Media Audience Perception of Cyberbullying

SN	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	D (3)	SD (2)	U (1)	Total	WM	Decision
9	There is nothing wrong for a politician to say negative things against another person online.	8 (40)	36 (144)	36 (108)	116	28	224 (552)	2.46	Rejected
10	Using social media and blogs to threaten other politicians should not be allowed.	154 (770)	51 (204)	12 (36)	7	0	224 (1024)	4.57	Accepted
11	Online Political messages should not be aimed at blackmailing people.	142 (710)	75 (300)	2 (6)	1 (2)	4	(224) 1022	4.56	Accepted
12	When communicating political messages in the Internet, politicians can use any different identity they want.	20 (100)	44 (176)	64 (192)	72 (144)	24	224 (636)	2.84	Rejected
13	Political cyberbullying through web pages, email and mobile phones can influence people's action.	135 (675)	72 (288)	8 (24)	1 (2)	8	224 (997)	4.45	Accepted
14	Political cyberbullying does not have any effect because it is online.	17 (85)	24 (96)	41 (123)	113 (226)	29	224 (559)	2.50	Rejected
Average Weighted Mean							798.3	3.56	**Accepted**

Table 3 shows how the respondents perceive political cyberbullying in Nigeria. The data indicate that the respondents have a high negative perception of political cyberbullying given the 3.56 average weighted mean. They disagree that there is nothing wrong for politicians to use negative expressions or use different

identities online. For these respondents, using social media to threaten rival politicians or to blackmail them, is a 'no, no'. The respondents are not also in doubt of the influence online political cyberbullying could have on people because it can influence actions. This was proven by the high weighted mean of 4.45. These convictions of the respondents have been identified by similar studies.

For instance, it was found out that victims of cyberbullying exhibited anger, fear, embarrassment, and anxiety and that those who committed the crime online also do the same in real life (Olasanmi, et al., 2020). One who is angered, afraid and embarrassed, may not bring out the best in them because of the psychological and emotional effect of the bullying. Again, it is has been found that in some cases, the perpetrators of cyberbullying use anonymous identity (Vaillancourt et al., 2016). When politicians hide their identity, they can cause more harm and almost go scot-free. Furthermore, though online media have been instrumental in increasing political awareness and interaction, it is had also been a means for intimidation, discrediting and maligning political opponents in Nigeria (Olabamiji 2014).

The principle of Selective Perception underscores that people interpret phenomenon to conform to their preexisting ideologies and idiosyncrasies and where the subject does not fall within the purview of the already held worldview, they experience cognitive dissonance. That the respondents see political cyberbullyings as they dodenotes that it is crime that they do not support. The implication of this is that politicians might not be giving a positive account of themselves before an informed online audience if they persist with political cyberbullying.

Building connectedness among people is a means to checkmate cyberbullying, because of its protective mechanisms against nonconformist behaviour problems (Lucas-Molina, et al., 2022). Connectedness has been found as one of the social mechanisms to dissipate cyberbullying among people. When people are connected to each other, they gain social interactions that would help to checkmate developing elements of cyberbullying and curtail its inroads in the heart of victims (Bradshaw et al., 2014), (Kim et al., 2019). Already, social media offers a plethora of cyber connection for people. The mainstream media can cash on it by seeking ways of convergence that will flavour the radio, television and newspaper products. How best can one explain that some persons who find it difficult to listen to radio or watch television news, especially the Gen Z, read media messages of the same mainstream media from social media handles.

Another means to address cyberbullying is an exploration of the role older adults. It is believed that more attention should be drawn towards reminding the older generation of what they owe the society in pruning the younger ones from any form of cyberbullying. And the media can be of help in helping to achieve this through public awareness and mentorship programmes (Olasanmi et al., 2020). There is need for more mentorship programmes on radio and television. What is lacking in many homes and school environments, that have given opportunities for cyberbullying to hold water, can be reclaimed and filled with media programmes.

From the angle of regulation and control, more attention should be given to cybersecurity policy. The media can draw more attention to the various stakeholders; that it is not enough to just make cyberstalking laws and policies, but to also

ensure that it is implemented to the letter. Actions and sanctions toward cyberbullying should not be selective. And just as cybersecurity laws are recording success in foreign countries (Baezner 2020); the same experience can be replicated in Nigeria. With more enlightenment programmes, jingles, and publications, more awareness can be created.

the issue. This study revealed that the online audience is aware of political cyberbullying among politicians in Nigeria. The perception of the audience on political cyberbullying is equally negative because they see it as an anomaly. This is quite important because the people see it as unfavourable to development. Given that the online audience is more of young people who are becoming more enlightened with the progression of time, chances are that political cyberbullying may not benefit its perpetrators in future if at all it does today. Having identified that the online media audience has an average knowledge of political cyberbullying, there is the need for more enlightenment over the issue in order to bring about the desired development in the country. This is where the traditional or mainstream media need to

4. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the media space is free for every individual to express the fundamental right of expression, even on political issues and interest. While online media provide an effective platform for politicians and their accolades to campaign or sell an idea or candidate, it has also been a means for some to commit cybercrime, especially, cyberbullying. The law of Nigeria does not pamper
play more significant roles as espoused in development communication. They can create more awareness of political cyberbullying through their online media platforms like webcasting, websites and social media handles. That the respondents perceive political cyberbullying in the negative is a plus. The media should use its online platforms to advocate for the punishment of cyberbullying perpetrators, especially, since the Cybercrime Act of 2015 provides for penalties. They should set an agenda for law enforcement agencies to implement the law by which the media would be fulfilling its development communication obligation.

References

Abreu, L.D.P., Torrres, R.A.M., Veras, K.C.B.B., Araujo, A.F., Costa, I.G., Oliveira, G.R., (2020). *Web radio: Educational Nursing Care Technology Addressing Cyberbullying Students' Statements*, Rev Bras Enfem,**73** (4), pp. 1-8, May.

Adibe, R., Ike, C.C.& Udeogu, C.U., (2017). *Press Freedom and Nigeria's Cybercrime Act of 2015: An Assessment.* Africa Spectrum, **52** (2), 117-127, Aug.

Alao, S.A. & Kohol, B.N., (2020). *The Influence of Cyber-Impersonation on Psycho-Social Adjustment of Public University Students in North Central*

States of Nigeria, IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME), **10** (1), 34-39, Jan-Feb.

Ayo-Obiremi,.I & Adelabu, O., (2020). *Audience as Consumers: The Emergence of Media Audience as Gods*, International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE), **7**(7),85-91, Jul.

Baezner, M., (2020). *Cybersecurity in Switzerland: Challenges and the Way forward for the Swiss Armed Forces*, Connections: The Quarterly Journal, **19** (1), 63 – 72, Jan. 2020.

Baran, S.J. & Davis, D.K., (2009). *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment and Future*, ed.5, Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Bauman, S., (2019). *Political Cyberbullying: Perpetrators and Targetsof a New Digital Aggression*, Praeger.

Bjorklund, D.F., (2015). *Developing Adaptations*, Developmental Review, **38**, 13-35, Jul.

Bradshaw, C.P., Waasdorp, T.E., Debnam, K.J., Johnson, L.S., (2014). *Measuring School Climate in High School: A Focus on Safety, Engagement, and the Environment.* Journal of School Health, **84** (9), 593 – 604, Sep.

Camacho, S.,Hassanein, C., Head, M., (2014). *Understanding the Factors that Influence the Perceived Severity of Cyber-bullying.* International Conference on HCI in Business, Springer, Cham, pp. 133 – 144,

Castello, R.D. & Braun, P.M., (2006). *Framework on Effective Rural Communication for Development,* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Jan.

CDC – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (2018). *Preventing Bullying,* National Center for InjuryPrevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-factsheet508.pdf.

Cohen, H., (2017). *How We Consume Content Now (And What It Means for Your Marketing)*, Content Marketing. https://heidicohen.com/infographic-how-we-consume-content-now-what-it-means-for-your-marketing/ (21 Aug.).

Cohen, N.S., (2015). *From Pink Slips to Pink Slime: Transforming Media Labour in a Digital Age*, Communication Review, **18** (2), pp. 98-122.

Cole, J.C.M., Cornell, D.G. &Sheras, P. (2006). *Identification of School Bullies by Survey Methods*, Professional School Counselling, **9**, pp. 305 – 313, Apr.

Coloroso, B., (2003). *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander.* Harper Collins, 2003.

Costello, T., (2020). *Agenda 2030: Australia's Disappearing Development Goals*, AQ: Australian Quarterly, **91**(2), 12-21, Apr.

Cross, D., Lester, L., Barnes, A.A., (2015) *Longitudinal Study of the Social and Emotional Predictors and Consequences of Cyber and Traditional Bullying Victimization*, International Journal on Public Health,**60** (2), 207 – 217, Feb.

Cullum, S., (2018). *Audiences. Media Audiences: An Introduction.* https://www.slideshare.net/alevlmedia/media-audiences-an-introduction (26 Sep.).

Dutton, W.H., Creese, S., Shillair, R. & Bada, M., (2019). *Cybersecurity Capacity: Does it Matter?* Journal of Information Policy, **9***, pp. 280 – 306, Dec.

Engelstad, F., Larsen, H., Rogstad, J., Steen-Johnsen, K., Polkowska, D., Dauber-Griffin, A.S. & Leverton, A. eds (2017). *Institutional Change in the Public Sphere: Views on the Nordic Model.* De Gruyter Open.

Eubanks, N., (2017). *TheTrue Cost of Cybercrime for Business*, Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/

2017/07/13/the-true-cost-of-cybercrime-for-business/ (13 Jul.).

Fahey, E., (2017). *The EU's Cybercrime and Cybersecurity Rule-Making: Mapping the Internet and External Dimensions of EU Security*, European Journal of Risk Regulation, **5** (1), pp. 46-60, Jan.

Fortunato, J.A., and Martin, S.E., (2016). *The Intersection of Agenda-Setting, the Media Environment, and Election Campaign Laws*, Journal of Information Policy, **6**, pp. 129 – 153, Jun.

Hagen, J., Lysne, O., (2016). *Protecting the Digitized Society: The Challenge of Balancing Surveillance and Privacy*, The Cyber Defense Review, **1** (1), 75 – 90, Spring, 2016.

Hepp, A., (2013). *Cultures of Mediatization*, Polity, 2013.

Hinduja, S., and Patchin, J.W., (2010). *Bullying, Cyberbullying and Suicide*, Academy for Suicide Research, **14** (3), 206 – 221, Jul.

Hines, H.N., (2011). *Traditional Bullying and Cyber-Bullying: Are the Impacts on Self-Concept the Same?* Specialist in School Psychology, Faculty of the Graduate School, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee.

Hjarvard, S., (2013). *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*, Routledge, 2013.

Hymel, S., Swearer, S.M., (2015). *Four Decades of Research on School Bullying: An Introduction*, American Psychology, https:///doi.org/10.1037/a0038928 **70** (4),. 293 – 299.

Jahankhani, H. & Al-Nemrat, A., (2011). *Cybercrime Profiling and Trend Analysis*, Intelligence Management, Knowledge Driven Frameworks for Combating Terrorism and Organized Crime. Akhgar, B. & Yates, S., eds., Springer, pp. 181-197.

Johnson, L.D., Haralson, A., Batts, S., Brown, E., Collins, C., Buren-Travis, A.V. & Spencer, M., (2016). *Cyberbullying on Social Media among College Students.* Ideas and Research You Can Use: Vistas Online – ACA Knowledge Center. counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas.

Kim, J., Walsh, E., Pike, K., Thompson, E.A., (2019). *Cyberbullying and Victimization and Youth Suicide Risk: The Buffering Effects of School Connectedness*. The Journal of School Nursing, **36** (4), pp. 251 – 257, Jan.

Klapper, J.T., (1960). *The Effects of Mass Media,* Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research.

Koundal, P., and Mishra, R., (2018). *Print and Online Newspapers: An Analysis of the News Content and Consumption Patterns of Readers*, Journal of Indian Institute of Mass Communication, **53** (1), pp. 53 – 71.

Kowalski, R., (2015). *Section II: Overlap between cyberbullying and traditional bullying: Fact or fiction*, Cyberbullying: Current & future research & directions: A white paper submitted to the Institute of Digital Media and Child Development Cyber bullying: Current & future research & directions: A white paper submitted to the Institute of Digital Media and Child Development, Englander, E.K. ed., Institute of Digital Media and Child Development.

Kowalski, R.M., Giumetti, G.W., Schroeder, A.N., Lattanner, M.R., (2014). *Bullying in the Digital Age: A*

Critical Review and Meta-Analysis of Cyberbullying Research among Youth, Psychological Bulletin, **140** (4), 1073-1137, Feb.

Krotz, F., (2017). *Explaining the Mediatisation Approach*, Javnost – The Public, **24** (2), 103 – 118, Mar.

Kuehl, D.T., (2009). *From Cyberspace to Cyberpower: Defining the Problem*, Cyberpower and national security,Kramer, F.D., Starr, S., Wentz, I.Keds., National Defence University Press, p. 38.

Lepenies, P., (2015). *Modeling, Statistics and Political Circumstances*, European Journal of Sociology, **56** (3), 375 – 404, Dec.

Lerner, R.M. (2015). *Preface*, Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science, ed. 7, Overton, W.F. &Molenaar, P.C., eds., Wiley & Sons, pp. xv-xxi, 2015.

Lerner, R.M., (2012). *Development Science: Past, Present, and Future*, International Journal Developmental Science, **6** (1), 29 – 36, Jan.

Lerner, R.M., Murray, E.D., (2016). *Review: Finally! A Developmental Science that Privileges Development*, Human Development, **59** (6), 377-385, Apr.

Livingstone, S., (2016). *Reframing Media Effects in Terms of Children's Rights in the Digital Age*, Journal of Children and Media, **10**(1), pp. 4-12, Jan.

Lucas-Molina, B., Perez-Albeniz, A., Solbes Canales, I., Ortuno-Sierra, J., Fonseca-Pedrero, E., (2022). *Bullying, Cyberbullying and Mental Health: The Role of Student Connectedness as a School Protective Factor*, Psychosocial Intervention, **31** (1), 33 – 41, Jan.

Maho, A. (2016). *Freedom of Expression, Cybercrimes Act, Matters Arising,* Nigerian Pilot,http://nigerianpilot.com/freedom -expression-cybercrimes-act-matters-arising/ (3 April).

Martinez, J., Rodriguez-Hidalgo, A.J., Zych, I., (2020). *Bullying and Cyberbullying in Adolescents from Disadvantaged Areas: Validation of Questionnaires, Prevalence Rates and Relationship of Self-Esteem, Empathy and Social Skills*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, **17** (17), 6199, 1-17, Aug.

McQuail, D., (2010). *McQuail'sMass Communication Theory*, ed. 6, SAGE Publications Ltd.

MedWorks Media, (May 2020). *New Research: Cyberbullying Linked with Depression, Emotional Abuse*, New Release, https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/new-research-cyberbullying-linked-with-depression-emotional-abuse,

Mudjiran, R. T., Gistituati, N.& Ananda A., (2020). *Cyberbullying in the Digital Age: A Common Social Phenomenon*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, **504**, 196 – 200, Jan.

Nansel, T., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R., Ruan, W., Simons-Morton, B. & Scheidt, P., (2001). *Bullying Behaviour among US Youth: Prevalence and Association with Psychosocial Adjustment*. Journal of the American Medical Association, **285** (16), 2094-2100, Apr.

Okoh, J., and Chukwueke, E., (2016). *The Nigerian Cybercrime Act 2015 and its Implications for Financial Institutions and Service Providers*. Financier Worldwide.

www.financierworldwide.com/the-nigerian-cybercrime-act-2015-and-its-implications-for-financial-institutions-and-service-providers#.WXtMYIEaS2w.

Okpako A.E, Oghorodi D & Ako, R.E (2020): The triadic interplay of Culture, Globalization and Cybercrime Trajectory in Nigeria through a Sociological Lens. *Researchjournali's Journal of Computer Science (5) 4.*

Olabamiji, O.M., (2014). *Use and Misuse of the New Media for Political Communication in Nigeria's 4th Republic*. Developing Country Studies, **4**(2), 44-53, Aug.

Olasanmi, O.O., Agbaje, Y.T., Adeyemi, M.O., (2020). *Prevalence and Prevention Strategies of Cyberbullying among Nigerian Students*, Open Journal of Applied Sciences, **10**, pp. 351 – 363.

Omojuwa, J., (2015). *Social Media and 2015 Elections: Beyond APC vs PDP*, NAIJ.com,https://politics.naij.com/388515-social-media-2015-elections-omojuwa-for-naijcom.html (20 Feb.).

Ornebring, H., (2010). *Technology and Journalism as Labour: Historical Perspective*, Journalism, **11** (1), pp. 57 – 74.

Reid, S., (2015). *Nigerians Look to Social Media Amid Information Scarcity Ahead of Election*, Aljazeera America,http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/19/social-media-plays-key-role-in-nigerian-elections.html (19 Mar.).

Rogers, E.M., (1962). *The Diffusion of Innovations*, Free press, 1962.

Schneider, S.K., O'Donnell, L., Stueve, A. & Coulter, R.W.S., (2012).

Cyberbullying, School Bullying, and Psychological Distress: A Regional Census of High School Students, American Journal of Public Health, **102**(1), pp. 171 – 177, Jan.

Schoeler, T., Duncan, L., Cecil, C.M., Ploubidis. G.B., Pingault, J.B., (2018). *Quasi-Experimental Evidence on Short and Long-Term Consequences of Bullying Victimization: A Meta-Analysis*, Psychological Bulletin, **144** (12), 1229 – 1246, Nov.

Smith, P.K., (2019). *Introduction,* Making an Impact on School Bullying: Interventions and Recommendations, Smith, P.K., ed., Routledge, pp. 1 – 22.

Smith, P.K., del Barrio, C. & Tokunaga, R.S., (2013). *Definitions of Bullying and Cyberbullying: How Useful are the Terms*, Principles of Cyberbullying Research: Definitions, Measures and Methodology Bauman, S., Cross, D &Walker, J., eds., Routledge, pp. 26 – 40.

Stevenson, A, (2014). *Why is Audience Important to Media Producers?*Prezi Videos,https://prezi.com/hbgoldu6ospi/why-is-audience-important-to-media-producers/ (14 Jan.).

Tworek, H., (2017). *Political Communications in the 'Fake News' Era: Six Lessons for Europe,* Policy Brief, 001, (1-10), Transatlantic Academy, Feb.

Vaillancourt, T., Faris, R. & Mishna, F., (2016). *Cyberbullying in Children and Youth: Implications for Health and Clinical Practice*. The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry I, **62**(6), pp. 368-373, Dec.

Vecino, J.K.P., (2018). *United by Necessity; Conditions for Institutional Cooperation against Cybercrime*, The

Cyber Defense Review (Special edition), pp.123-144.

Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Cyberbullying*,https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/cyberbullyingcampaign.aspx?Redirect=1 (1 Dec. 2022).

VON – Voice of Nigeria, *Election Campaigns: Governor OkowaCautions   Against   Cyber Bullying*,https://von.gov.ng/election-campaigns-governor-okowa-cautions-against-cyber-bullying/,   (15 September 2022).

Webster, J., (2014). *The Marketplace of Attention*, ed.1, MIT Press, 2014.

Whitaker, R., Ramsey, J. & Smith, R., (2012). *Media   Writing: Print, Broadcast and Public Relations*, ed. 4, Routledge.

Witherington, D.C., and Lickliter, R., (2016). *Integrating Development and Evolution in Psychological Science: Evolutionary   Developmental Psychology, Developmental Systems, and Explanatory Pluralism.* Human Development, **59**, 200-234, Jan.

Zhao, T., (2018). *Analysis of the Concept of Audience in the Digital Age*. Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR), **300***, 132-137, Jan.