

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRIMINALITY: A FOCUS ON ANONYMITY AND VALIDITY AMONG YOUTHS IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Despite the numerous benefits of social media, they are capable of facilitating crime through some inherent features. Hence, this study examined Social Media and Criminality: A Focus on Anonymity and Validity among Youths in Delta State, Nigeria. The study was geographically delimited to Delta Central Senatorial District. Two research hypotheses were tested in the study. The population of the study comprised youths resident in Delta State. In line with this, a sample of four hundred (400) respondents was drawn for the study, using the cluster random sampling technique. The respondents were randomly selected from the different geographical blocs in the Senatorial District. The method of data analysis involved the use of Pearson product-moment correlation statistical tool. The analysis of data revealed that: there is a significant relationship between social media anonymity and youths' involvement in criminal activities and also a relationship exists between the quest for validation on social media and illegal pursuits among youths in Delta State. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the government should organise cyber-training programmes that are targeted at youths in Delta State bordering on how to use social media for legally profitable activities rather than criminal ones and implement cyber security safety awareness programmes to educate youths in Delta State on how to ward off criminal activities targeted towards them on social media, among others.

Keywords: Social Media, Criminality, Anonymity, Validity, Youths.

Introduction

Globally, social media's preponderance is undeniable - cutting across the boundaries of both developed and developing nations. Many people have incorporated social media usage into their daily life. As social media continues to grow rapidly and penetrate different spheres of human endeavour showcased through globalisation, the mode and pattern of information transmission globally are becoming extensively influenced by social media. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) purported that social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, among others have in no small measure revolutionised the way information is disseminated in contemporary society. Ufuophu-Biri and Ojoboh (2017) opined that this is why social media is a powerful tool with the capacity to propel social events to go viral. This is, however, a function of the easy, seamless, and rapid information transmission that is associated with

them (Erubami, 2020). Social media aids in transmitting information ranging from audio, picture, video, audiovisual and document, among others. Despite these functions, the level of censorship of these platforms is grossly weak and limited.

Unfortunately, the lack of censorship and some other security loopholes triggered a new form of criminality, known as cybercrime. It must be stated that the digital revolution is accompanied by both positive and negative consequences, with a strong impact on criminality patterns among the younger population. Over the years, there has been an increase in cybercrime that has now become a preponderance element of the digital age, with youths engaging in various forms of online fraud, hacking, and internet-related criminal activities (Johnson and Smith, 2020). In Nigeria, the deployment of social media in the perpetuation of criminal activities has become preponderant, especially among young people. This is because social media has emerged as a powerful force in shaping the behaviours and attitudes of youths in Nigeria.

Factually, the impact of social media on youth criminality is multifaceted and has several implications for the society at large in Nigeria and globally. This is why the Delta State Ministry of Youth and Social Development (2021) submitted that the pervasive presence of social media platforms, introduced a new dimension to the lives of its youth population. While these platforms have facilitated greater connectivity, communication, and access to information on one hand, on the other hand, they have inadvertently fostered an upsurge in various forms of criminal activities among the youth population of the State (Digital Awareness Foundation, 2020). Hence, Omoni and Eze (2018) opined that social media's influence on youth criminality is observable through several key trends, which borders on anonymity, access to people and ease of communication.

It must be stated that social media platforms have provided a means for individuals and criminal organisations to coordinate and effectively plan illicit activities with reduced chances of being caught. This is because the ease of communication and anonymity offered by social media platforms has made the recruitment and mobilisation of young people for criminal purposes more convenient for criminals. Criminal activities such as cybercrime, drug trafficking, and gang-related violence are common ones within this trend. Also, the exposure to a wide range of content on social media, including explicit images, violent videos, and extremist ideologies, has desensitised some youths and negatively influenced their behaviour (Delta State Cyber Security Task Force, 2020). Such exposure engenders the desensitisation of youths to violence and criminal behaviour, potentially increasing the likelihood of engagement in such illegal acts.

Furthermore, the quest for social media validation and social status in cyberspace has driven some young individuals toward illegal and dangerous pursuits. The pursuit of online recognition or acceptance can push young individuals into engaging in criminal activities, such as fraud, theft, or even drug-related offenses, to maintain a certain lifestyle or image. It must be stated that the impact of social media on criminality among youths in Delta State is a complex and evolving issue that requires a systematic investigation to comprehend. Although social media platforms offer opportunities for information sharing, positive engagement and personal development, they also present significant challenges in terms of increasing the risk

of involvement in criminal activities among youths in Delta State and Nigeria in general (Delta State Government, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The inevitable use of the Internet has reduced the world to a small community and has facilitated the deployment of social media across various spheres of human endeavour. Sadly, the advent of social media has engendered a new trend of criminal activities in Delta State (Delta State Cyber Security Task Force, 2020). Many young Deltans with access to social media platforms now use them as a mechanism to engage in online criminal activities. The most common type of crime committed on social media is fraud (Delta State Ministry of Justice, 2021). Social media fraud generally involves some malicious individuals developing fake social profiles to attract or hunt for other users of the platform (potential victims), chat with them, mislead them, and extort them. This pattern of fraud has become preponderant in contemporary times and many Deltans commonly refer to the perpetrators of this crime as “Yahoo Boys” (Ayanwu, 2021). There are several strategies employed by these criminals to lure their victims and defraud them. These strategies are often called Format or FMT. Sadly, the high unemployment rate in Nigeria has been used as credence for the massive involvement of youths in internet fraud (Obi & Eke, 2021). This has in no small measure dented the image of the country on the global stage. Apart from internet fraud, some individuals use social media to propagate treasonous messages and incite various forms of violence. Worthy of note is the high frequency of these occurrences, birthing concern over the facilitating role of social media in criminal occurrences. Factors like cyberspace anonymity, seamless usage, access to an abundance of potential victims, the quest for social media validation, etc., have been identified as crucial in instigating criminal behaviour on social media (Ibrahim & Okonkwo, 2020). However, there is still a dearth of research on this subject. This is why this study was designed to address that lacuna in knowledge. It is against this background that the researchers investigated “Social Media and Criminality: A Focus on Anonymity and Validity among Youths in Delta State, Nigeria”.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to examine Social Media and Criminality: A Focus on Anonymity and Validity among Youths in Delta State, Nigeria.

In congruence with the foregoing, the specific objectives were to:

1. Ascertain how social media anonymity instigates youths’ involvement in criminal activities; and
2. Explore the impact of the quest for social media validation on illegal pursuits among youths in Delta State.

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested in the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between social media anonymity and youths’ involvement in criminal activities.
2. There is no significant relationship between the quest for social media validation and illegal pursuits among youths in Delta State.

Social Media Anonymity and Youths' Involvement in Criminal Activities

The impact of anonymity on social media and its correlation with youths' engagement in criminal activities is a multifaceted and evolving issue. Anonymity on social media refers to the ability of users to conceal their true identities while engaging with others online. While this anonymity can offer valuable privacy and security benefits, it also presents several challenges and potential negative consequences, particularly when it comes to youth involvement in criminal behaviour. According to Smith (2021), anonymity plays a role in the perpetration of cyber bullying and other forms of online harassment. That is, the involvement of youths in cybercrime was to a large extent facilitated by the utilisation of social media.

The anonymity provided by social media platforms can make it easier for young individuals to engage in cybercriminal activities, such as hacking, online scams, and identity theft (Oyebade & Onyekwena, 2020). By concealing their true identities, these individuals can perpetrate these crimes with reduced fear of being identified or apprehended. Anonymity can embolden some youths to engage in online harassment and bullying. They may create anonymous accounts to target their peers or others with hurtful comments, threats, or offensive content, leading to emotional distress and potentially criminal charges (Safko & Brake, 2009).

Anonymity can facilitate the formation of illicit peer networks, where young people connect with like-minded individuals for criminal activities. These networks can involve drug trafficking, gang recruitment, or the planning of illegal activities with reduced risk of exposure. Anonymity can also contribute to the spread of false information and disinformation. This could include rumors or fake news that incites violence or unrest, leading to criminal acts or disturbances. Anonymity can play a role in the radicalization of youths.

Extremist groups may exploit the anonymity of social media to recruit and radicalize vulnerable individuals, potentially leading to involvement in violent activities. Anonymity may encourage young people to engage in risky behaviors such as sexting, sharing explicit images, or engaging in online relationships. These actions can have legal consequences and privacy concerns. When individuals can hide behind anonymity, they may feel less accountable for their online actions. This reduced sense of responsibility can lead to reckless behavior and an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal activities. This is why Nwankwo (2020) purported that social media have in no small measure shaped criminal behaviour among youths in Nigeria.

The writers observed that anonymity in the internet space is achievable using internet support systems and applications. Some of these applications use Internet Protocol addresses (IP) and virtual private networks (VPN) like Zenmate VPN, NordVPN, IPVanish, and Norton Secure VPN ExpressVPN to change location and website IP. Furthermore, there are applications that enable users to hide other existing applications on a gadget (phones or computers), making it nearly impossible for others to notice. Applications like App Hider, Notepad Vault, Hyde App, Hider-Hide Apps, Dialer Lock, Clock Vault, and HideU: Calculator Lock Fake GPS (Global Positioning System) guarantees the concealment of one's identity by using apps like Fake GPS Location Professional, Fake GPS Location Spoofer, Fake GPS, Download: Fake GPS Location 2022, and GPS Emulator, etc. These can support the social media user by creating positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) of a physical space location in the internet space.

Quest for Social Media Validation and Illegal Pursuits among Youths

The quest for validation and the portrayal of an idealised life on social media is a prevalent phenomenon with profound societal implications in contemporary society. These behaviours can have significant impacts on individuals, relationships, and society as a whole (Thompson, 2018). The quest for validation on social media has become a pervasive and influential aspect of the digital age. It refers to the strong desire of individuals to seek approval, recognition, and affirmation from others through their online presence and activities on social media platforms.

This issue of validation is a topical one in Nigeria and the world over. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to present the case of the popular TikToker, 'Martins Vincent Otse', popularly referred to as 'Very Dark Man', whose leaked nude video was exposed on the internet by 'Gistlover' and got the internet space agog on September 29, 2023. Responding to the public with regards to the event, through its Tiktok handle, the influencer maintained that the public opinion of him doesn't matter as long as he has gained recognition and validation from Davido, whom he believed is the crowned number one Afrobeat artist in Nigeria and the world at large (Stanley, 2023). Ulo (2022) identified cases where youths gained validation on social media from top music stars, especially in cases relating to internet frauds, including drug use, cultism, indecent dressing, and many other forms of anti-social behaviour. People seek validation on social media for a variety of complex and interconnected reasons, and these motivations can vary from person to person.

The researchers observed some common reasons why individuals seek validation on social media include:

- a. **Social Approval:** Humans are inherently social beings, and we naturally seek approval and validation from our peers. Social media provides a platform for individuals to receive immediate feedback and validation in the form of likes, comments, and shares (Smith, 2021).
- b. **Self-Esteem Boost:** Positive feedback and validation on social media can boost an individual's self-esteem and self-worth. When others respond positively to their posts or content, it reinforces their sense of value and importance.
- c. **Comparison and Competition:** Social media fosters a culture of comparison, where individuals often measure their success and worth against that of others. Seeking validation can be a way to compete with or surpass peers in terms of likes, followers, or engagement.
- d. **FOMO (Fear of Missing Out):** The fear of missing out on social events, experiences, or trends can drive individuals to seek validation by showcasing their activities and experiences on social media. This can help them feel included and connected to a broader social network.
- e. **Peer Pressure:** Social pressure to conform to popular trends, opinions, or aesthetics can push individuals to seek validation by aligning their online presence with what is considered socially acceptable or desirable.
- f. **External Affirmation:** Some individuals rely on external validation to affirm their choices, beliefs, or decisions. They may post content seeking validation for their lifestyle, accomplishments, or personal values.
- g. **Attention and Recognition:** Social media provides a platform for individuals to gain attention and recognition, which can be especially appealing to those who may not

receive it as readily in their offline lives. Seeking validation can be a way to feel acknowledged and seen (Abubakar, 2018).

- h. Dopamine Release: The act of receiving likes, comments, or other forms of validation on social media triggers the release of dopamine, a feel-good neurotransmitter in the brain. This reinforces the behavior of seeking validation and can lead to addictive patterns of social media use.
- i. Cultural and Peer Influences: Cultural norms and peer influences can play a significant role in the quest for validation. In a culture that places a high value on external validation, individuals may be more inclined to seek it on social media.
- j. Insecurity and Validation as Coping Mechanism: Individuals dealing with insecurities or personal challenges may use social media validation as a coping mechanism to temporarily boost their self-esteem and distract themselves from their problems.

It is important to note that seeking validation on social media is a complex behaviour influenced by a combination of personal, social, and psychological factors. While validation can have positive effects on self-esteem and well-being when used in moderation, excessive reliance on social media for validation can also have negative consequences, such as feelings of inadequacy, addiction, or anxiety. Achieving a balance between seeking validation online and maintaining healthy self-esteem offline is essential for overall well-being in the digital age (Eze, 2019).

Seeking validation on social media can push youths in Nigeria, into illegal pursuits of wealth through several interconnected mechanisms. Omoni and Eze (2018) argued that the phenomenon of validation-seeking Nigerian youths in the digital age is a strong instigator of illegal pursuits over time. Youths may observe their peers engaging in illegal or questionable activities on social media and might feel pressured, to conform to these behaviours to gain approval and validation from their subcultural circles. If certain illegal activities are glorified or normalised within their social networks, young individuals may become predisposed to participate (Abubakar, 2018).

Unfortunately, social media can create a culture of materialism and conspicuous consumption, where young people feel the need to showcase wealth, possessions, or luxurious lifestyles to gain validation. In pursuit of this validation, some may engage in illegal activities, such as fraud or theft, to afford the appearance of success. This is why Okafor (2019) reported that validation-seeking behaviour on social media propels some youths in Delta State to engage in criminal activities. The desire for validation can lead youths to seek acceptance in online peer groups or communities that encourage illegal pursuits, such as cybercrime, drug trafficking, or gang involvement. These virtual groups may provide a sense of belonging and reinforce criminal behaviours. Sometimes, viral trends and challenges on social media can even involve illegal or risky activities and some youths may be tempted to participate in these trends to gain recognition or validation, even if it means violating the law.

In line with the foregoing, Eze (2019) and Adeleke and Onyekwelu (2019) asserted that the quest for social media validation in no small measure breeds involvement in criminal activities among youths in Nigeria. Some individuals may be enticed by the potential financial gains associated with illegal activities advertised on social media, such as investment schemes

or offers of quick wealth. The promise of financial success can be a powerful motivator, especially for those facing economic challenges in Delta State (Abubakar, 2018). This is how criminality is engendered by the strong desire for social media validation possessed by several youths in Delta State.

Theoretical Framework: Technology Determinism Theory

The study was anchored on Technology Determinism Theory. This theory offers insights into how technological advancements, particularly social media platforms, shape and influence individuals' behaviours, especially criminality. According to Williams (2019), technology determinism theory posits that technology, in this case, social media, plays a pivotal role in shaping human behaviors, social structures, and cultural norms. It suggests that technological advancements have inherent qualities that influence how they are adopted and used, often leading to societal changes and impacts that may be unintended or unforeseen. Social media platforms, driven by their features and algorithms, have transformed how individuals interact and communicate in Delta State. Hence, the inherent features of social media, such as instant communication, widespread reach, and ease of content sharing, have reshaped social interactions among youths and transformed their behavioural patterns (Ibrahim & Okonkwo, 2020).

Technology determinism theory implies that the design and functionalities of social media platforms inadvertently encourage validation and criminal behaviours as most privacy policies are targeted to shield anonymity. Instant feedback mechanisms, such as likes and comments, create a system where individuals are conditioned to seek validation through online engagement and have facilitated new avenues for criminality among youths (Williams, 2019). The ease of communication, anonymity, and the global reach of social media platforms have made it possible for criminal networks to operate online, influencing young individuals to engage in cybercrime, drug trafficking, or cyberbullying. The theory suggests that the widespread utilisation of social media has normalised certain illegal behaviours online, including criminal activities. Young individuals may perceive engaging in illegal pursuits on social media as a part of the norm due to the prevalence and acceptance of such behaviours within their online communities. Thus, the use of social media has negatively affected the behaviour of certain youths in Delta State and made them predisposed to crime.

Methodology

The cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised youths resident in Delta State, Nigeria. According to the TVC (2019), there are about 1.2 million youths in Delta State. It is from this figure that the sample size of 400, age 18-30, comprises of males and females were determined using the Taro Yamane formula (Ulo & Jike, 2022). This study utilised the cluster random sampling technique. This sampling technique was applied through a multi-stage procedure. First, Delta Central Senatorial District was divided into 8 major towns from which 400 respondents were randomly selected. The selection process is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Selection

S/N	LGA	Town	Sample Size
1	Ethiope East LGA	Abraka	50
2	Ethiope West LGA	Oghara	50
3	Okpe LGA	Orerokpe	50
4	Sapele LGA	Amukpe	50
5	Udu LGA	Ovwian	50
6	Ughelli North LGA	Ughelli	50
7	Ughelli South LGA	Umolo	50
8	Uvwie LGA	Ekpan	50
Total			400

Source: Authors

The researchers designed the structured questionnaire, questionnaire titled “Social Media and Criminality: A Focus on Youths in Delta State and used it to collect data from the respondents on the subject matter of the study. The questionnaire contained Sections A and B. Section A contained items to elicit the demographic data of respondents such as age, sex and educational level, among others. Section B contained the substantive issues section with questions bothering on the main concepts and variables measured in the study. To determine the validity of the research instruments, the initial draft of the instrument was subjected to face validity and content validity by two experts in the field of Measurement and Evaluation. The reliability test utilised was the test-re-test reliability and it yielded a reliability coefficient of ≥ 0.88 which implied excellent reliability. The quantitative data gathered through the structured questionnaire were analysed using Pearson product moment correlation on SPSS version 23.

Results

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between social media anonymity and youths’ involvement in criminal activities

Table 2: Correlational Analysis of Hypothesis 1

		Anonymity	Criminal Activities
Anonymity	Pearson Correlation	1	.874**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	392	392
Criminal Activities	Pearson Correlation	.874**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	392	392

SPSS Output (2023)

From the above computation, it can be seen that $r = .874$ and the probability (significance) value based on the 2-tailed test is >0.000 . This shows that there is a positive correlation between social media anonymity and youths’ involvement in criminal activities. It must be stated also that the observed correlation is statistically significant. Therefore, we reject the initially formulated hypothesis and state that there is a significant relationship between social media anonymity and youths’ involvement in criminal activities.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between the quest for social media validation and illegal pursuits among youths in Delta State.

Table 3: Correlational Analysis of Hypothesis 2

		Validation	Illegal Pursuits
Validation	Pearson Correlation	1	.432**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	392	392
Illegal Pursuits	Pearson Correlation	.432**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	392	392

SPSS Output (2023)

From the above computation, it can be seen that the $r = .432$ and the probability (significance) value based on the 2-tailed test is >0.000 . This shows that there is a correlation between quest for social media validation and illegal pursuits among youths. It must be stated also that the observed correlation is statistically significant. Therefore, we reject the initially formulated hypothesis and state that there is a significant relationship between the quest for social validation and illegal pursuits among youths in Delta State.

Discussion of Findings

Firstly, the data analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between social media anonymity and youths’ involvement in criminal activities. This implies that youths feel more comfortable engaging in illegal activities on social media without fear of being identified due to the anonymity they enjoy. This phenomenon further emboldens youths in Delta State to post criminal-related contents, engage in cyberbullying or online harassment, online fraud, scams and identity theft without fear of consequences and with the conviction that they can easily evade law enforcement agencies since they are anonymous. This finding is corroborated by Smith (2021), who found that anonymity plays a role in the perpetration of cyberbullying and other forms of online harassments. Also, the findings align with that of Oyebade and Onyekwena (2020), who submitted that the involvement of youths in cybercrime in Delta State was to a large extent facilitated by the utilisation of social media. Nwankwo (2020) further supports the foregoing with the observation that social media have in no small measure shaped criminal behaviour among youths in Nigeria.

Secondly, the data analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between the quest for social validation and illegal pursuits among youths in Delta State. This implies that the need to feel among and respected by people in the social media community can drive youths to engage in illegal activities. The desire for social media validation can drive youths into illegal acts to gain more attention and approval and portray a more glamorous lifestyle on social media without regard for the legal and ethical consequences of such actions. This is in line with the findings of Omoni and Eze (2018), who argued that the phenomenon of validation-seeking Nigerian youths in the digital age is a strong instigator of illegal pursuits over time. Similarly, Okafor (2019) reported that validation-seeking behaviour on social media propels some youths in Delta State to engage in criminal activities. Lastly, Eze (2019) and Adeleke and Onyekwelu (2019) also found that the quest for social media validation in no small measure breeds involvement in criminal activities among youths.

Conclusion

Despite the numerous benefits of social media, they are capable of facilitating crime through some inherent features. The study revealed that anonymity and quest for validation on social media are strong facilitators of youth criminality in Delta State. The awareness that their identity is unknown can make youths to engage in illegal activities on social media without fear of being identified. In a similar vein, social media anonymity can make youths post criminal-related contents, engage in cyber bullying or online harassment, online fraud, scams and identity theft without fear of consequences and with the belief that it will be very difficult for them to be caught. Furthermore, the need to gain social media validation can make youths involve themselves in illegal activities in society. It is pertinent to submit at this juncture that if this problematic phenomenon lingers on without the initiation of an effective mechanism to curb it, it will pose a fundamental threat to the survival of society.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed based on the research findings:

1. The government should organise cyber-training programmes that are targeted at sensitizing and educating the youths bordering on how to use social media for legally profitable activities rather than criminal ones.
2. The government and other relevant agencies should also implement cyber-security safety awareness programmes to educate youths in Delta State on how to ward off criminal activities targeted towards them on social media and also outline the consequences of engaging in cybercrime for those involved.
3. The law enforcement agency in should set up efficient security mechanisms that will ensure that perpetrators of cybercrime are caught and punished to serve as deterrence to other youths in the State.
4. Parents and guardians should put more effort into monitoring the activities of their children on social media and encourage them to share their experiences on social media.
5. Lastly, the government should provide therapy programmes or mental health support services to youths that are susceptible to social media pressure and cyber bullying to limit their impact on them.

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