

Assessment of Students' Attitudes Towards Ethical Contents in Social Media Communication in Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study evaluates students' attitudes towards the ethical quality of the content of social media communications of universities in Nigeria. The study adopts a cross-sectional research design. With a sample size of 393 respondents, using Taro Yamane formula and convenience sampling technique, a fully structured questionnaire was used for collection of data. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test at a 95% level of confidence on SPSS version 25. The results showed that 53.8% of the students do not follow ethical contents in social media communication of universities in Nigeria., 70.9% regularly comment on, while 59.9% react to posts on the university's social media accounts. The attitude of the students regarding the ethical quality of contents in the social media accounts handle of their universities was generally poor. The study recommended that awareness should be created on ethical social media use to raise the quality of the ethical contents of the social media.*

Keywords: Social média, attitude, ethical content, communication, platforms

INTRODUCTION

Social Media platforms refer to internet powered applications that enable users to participate in a digital social environment that involves other users who are also enabled to actively participate in

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the same environment. Manning (2014) describes social media as “the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation.” Social Media platforms are among the most popular and widely used resources on the web in recent times. A report by Forbes estimated that about 4.9 billion people utilize social media platforms across the world with the numbers expected to increase to over 5 billion users by the year 2027 (Wong, 2023). There are several social media platforms in use today, the most popular platforms among them include Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, among others. These platforms which are mainly accessed through internet-enabled mobile devices allow users to create content that other individuals may interact with, directly message other users of the platforms or interact in groups or chat-rooms that contain several other users.

The popularity of social media platforms around the world has established them as invaluable tools that can meet the unique needs of various categories of users. These needs that social media platforms can meet include marketing and brand promotion, information dissemination, creation of awareness regarding trending or important matters, and electioneering. In the field of public relations which is mainly concerned with helping organizations to build and maintain a positive image, reputation, and relationship with various stakeholders, social media helps public relations practitioners to interact with these stakeholders and positively enhance the image of the organizations that they represent on social media platforms (Igben & Dorka, 2024). Social media platforms in the United States have been estimated to generate multiple billions of dollars in revenue annually (Raffoul et al., 2023), in addition to the vast amounts of data that are generated daily on these platforms through users’ interactions. For these reasons, it is important that stakeholders in the industry abide by a set of ethical standards that will protect the users of these applications/platforms as the amount of profit which may be obtained through the utility of social media platforms makes them prime targets for scammers, impersonators, data hackers and other unethical practices.

Ethics in social media usage has been the subject of several research in recent times (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020; Dhiman, 2023; Kvalnes, 2019). Kvalnes (2019) asserted that “Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media have radically changed the ways in which organizations, groups, and individuals spread, share, and discuss ideas and information. They provide platforms for expressing opinions very rapidly to a wide audience, without interference from an editor or a group of editors”. These often means that the information which is shared on these social media platforms and made available to a wide audience may be inauthentic, intended to libel or cause hate and may breach ethical principles that should guide everyday inter-human interactions. This is why censoring and review of social media contents to ensure that they adhere to ethical principles is important. Students, as the primary target of university social media messages play a major role in ensuring that universities’ social media contents adhere to ethical standards. This is why the current study aims to access the attitudes of students towards ethical content in Nigerian universities social media communications.

Statement of problem

The ethical dilemmas faced by of public relations personnel in Government-owned institutions such as public universities have been highlighted in previous research (Bowen, 2011). As such, it is important that their activities are critically vetted by the publics they serve which are primarily students in the case of Universities. Despite the increasing use of social media by tertiary institutions to communicate and engage with students, there is limited active participation by students in ensuring the ethical quality of content shared on these platforms. Adenekan and Lala (2020) even pointed out that most students do not interact with their university's social media channels. This may inevitably lead to low levels of and an overall poor attitude toward vetting content for ethical adherence. This lack of engagement poses challenges for promoting ethical standards and maintaining the credibility of university social media communications. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a culture of responsibility and trust among students, particularly at the undergraduate level

The aim of the study is to assess student attitudes towards evaluating the ethical quality of social media content in Nigerian university communications. The specific objectives are to;

1. Identify the extent to which students engage the social media accounts/handles of their institution.
2. Evaluate students' attitude towards their role in vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle.
3. Evaluate students' attitude towards vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle.
4. Evaluate the relationship between students' demographics and their attitude towards vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social media accounts

The research questions are as follows;

1. What is the extent to which students engage the social media accounts/handles of their institution?
2. What are the students' attitude towards their role in vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle?
3. What are the students' attitude towards vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle?
4. What is the relationship between students' demographics and their attitude towards vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle?

Delimitation of the study

LITERATURE REVIEW

The extent to which students engage the social media accounts/handles of their institution.

Despite having a large student population, the social media handles of most Nigerian universities suffer from a paucity of engagements with their posts (Asadu & Ayuwo, 2018). These universities usually have a relatively young population which is very active on multiple social media platforms or use social media platforms regularly, at times to the detriment of their academics (Adenekan &

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Lala, 2022). several researchers have investigated social media usage among Nigeria's university students.

A study titled "Social media use by undergraduate students of education in Nigeria: a survey" was carried out. (Wickramanayake & Muhammad,2018). The purpose of the study was to examine the opinions, practices, and challenges regarding the use of social media in academic processes. Two hundred and forty-two participants comprising teachers and students was sampled using a stratified sampling technique. The sample population was gotten from three tertiary level institutions in Gombe State of Nigeria. A questionnaire was used for data collection and data analysis was done using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The findings showed that there was high extent to which students used social media for various purposes such as education, entertainment, and communication; they mostly accessed social media through their phones. The study recommended that power supply should become more stable within tertiary institutions as the instability in power supply was a major challenge to students intending to access social media for educational purposes.

Ezeah et al. (2013) conducted a study which was titled "Social Media Use among Students of Universities in South-East Nigeria." The study investigated how students in several universities within the south-Eastern region of Nigeria utilize social media. The researchers utilized a questionnaire-based survey research design to gather data from a sample population of 300 participants in several departments in the three tertiary institutions selected for the study. The researchers distributed a total of 300 copies of questionnaire of which only 289 were adequately filled and returned for analysis on SPSS. The data showed that 89% of the students were active users of social media platforms. They used it for watching movies, pornographic materials, and for discussion of national, economic and/or religious matters. The students generally disagreed that it was a means to communicate with their leaders on national issues. Students also used social media to the detriment of their academics by using it during classes, or spending study time on social media. The study recommended the enactment of a social media use act, sanction for erring users of social media platforms, and regulation of phone usage during classes to help students regulate the amount of time spent on social media.

Asadu & Ayuwo (2018) carried out a study which was titled "Assessment of the Relationship between Southern Nigerian Universities and Students on Facebook". The study which was published in the "World Journal of Research and Review (WJRR)" aimed at evaluating the relationship between Nigerian universities and their students by measuring the rate of interaction between students and the management on their Facebook posts. The researchers utilized a content analysis research design and carried out the study across 13 government owned tertiary institutions in the southern region of Nigeria, selecting at least one institution from each of the three geopolitical zones in the region. The study showed that there was a poor amount of interaction between the management of the institution and their students on the institution's social media handles despite the fact that students often comment on the institutions' Facebook posts. The study

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recommended that the PR department of the institutions should create more engaging content that will drive students to interact more intensively with their posts.

Students' attitude towards their role in vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle.

Students are the primary beneficiaries of the university's system, this includes the material, infrastructural and mental resources that are made available at the institutions. As such, it is important that they perceive themselves to be stakeholders in the university community and take the initiative to contribute to the overall improvement and proper functioning of the institutions. Vetting of the ethical quality of the university's messages on social media and making appropriate corrections is one of those ways in which this can be achieved. Yuan et al. (2021) typified in their study how having the right attitude regarding social media can positively affect its utilization by students.

Yuan et al. (2021) carried out a study which was titled "Analyzing User Attitudes Toward Intention to Use Social Media for Learning." The study's aim was to identify the influences that affected attitude towards learning with social media among university students in Malaysia. The study utilized a survey research design for the study, the questionnaire was distributed via a google form as face-to-face contact was prohibited during the COVID-19 pandemic which coincided with when the study held. The questionnaire was distributed to 270 participants using social media platforms, analysis was carried out using descriptive statistical and partial least squares method for test of hypothesis. The results of data analysis showed that "social media literacy, perceived ease of use, perceived behavioural control, and perceived risk has significant positive influence on users' attitude to use of social media, while ICT facility and perceived usefulness has no significant impact on attitude." Attitude towards social media also had a significant effect on the propensity to use social media for learning purposes. The study recommended that the same research be carried out among academics.

Students' attitude towards vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle.

The use of social media has to be accompanied by a proper application of ethics especially in the academia (Adenekan & Lala, 2022). This is because of the popularity of some unethical behaviours such as cyberbullying and intellectual theft/plagiarism of other people's creation that is rife on social media platforms especially among school age children. Thus, students must be taught and expected to imbibe a positive attitude towards ensuring that only ethical and helpful contents are popularized on social media. significant research has gone into the subject of ethical use of social media among Nigerian undergraduates.

Ahmad (2012) carried out a study titled "Attitudinal Disposition of Nigerian University Students toward Social Networking Sites." The specific objectives of the study were to (i) determine students' attitude towards social media usage in Northern Nigerian universities (ii) the influence

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of gender and ethnicity on the attitudes of students towards social networking sites. The researchers utilized a quantitative and descriptive survey research design and a random sampling method to recruit 200 participants from six universities located across the three geopolitical zones in Northern Nigeria. The results showed that the students generally had a positive attitude towards social networking sites and attitude towards social networking sites varied by department/faculty although it had no significant relationship with time. The researcher pointed out that the study was limited by its small sample size, lack of confirmatory factor analysis for the scales and finances.

Adenekan & Lala (2022) carried out a study which was titled “Ethical Behaviour and the Use of Social Media by Undergraduates, University of Ibadan” The study’s main goal was to examine how undergraduates’ ethical behaviour influenced their use of social media in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. This goal was achieved by determining the students’ purpose and frequency of social media usage, ethical behaviour exhibited when using social media, and how social media usage affects plagiarism and cyberbullying levels among the students. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and recruited a total of 213 students across six faculties at the university for the study using a multi-stage random sampling technique. Data was collected using a questionnaire and was analyzed on SPSS version 21. The findings revealed that social media was mostly used for group assignments (97.5%) and getting information regarding the scheduling of classes (98.1%). WhatsApp and Facebook were the most used social media platforms among the students. In terms of ethical behaviours exhibited by the students, referencing literature and respecting people’s privacy were some of the ethical behaviours exhibited by the students when using social networking sites. Overall, most of the students exhibited a good level of ethical behaviours on social media. No significant relationship was observed between ethical behaviour and use of social media. The researchers recommended the use of mild punishment to discourage students from engaging in unethical behaviour when using social media. They also recommended an improvement in power and network stability within tertiary institutions.

Ijeh et al. (2024) in a study titled “Digital Media and Research Integrity in Communication Research in Nigeria,” aimed at identifying the ethical issues, data collection methods, and ethical dilemmas researchers interested in communication research faced in Nigeria. Utilizing a descriptive research design and a snowball sampling method for selection of participants, the researchers collected data from a sample population of 400 postgraduate students at institutions of advanced learning in Delta state of Nigeria of which only 392 were accepted as correctly filed and analyzed. The data revealed that most of the researchers use social media networks for data collection. The researchers faced ethical difficulties which includes but are not limited to misinformation and data privacy issues. The research identified several ethical concerns that influence the use of social media platforms in communications research, they added that drawing upon ethically acceptable practices in research will enable communications research to maintain relevance and applicability in the society.

Theoretical framework

Utilitarianism and deontology are two popular theories that guide researchers on matters of ethics. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill have been identified as the major proponents of utilitarianism. The theory of utilitarianism is rooted in the belief that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good for all parties affected by the action (Julia Driver, 2022). Utilitarianism suggests that the best action is the one that maximizes overall happiness or minimizes harm. In public relations, utilitarianism can guide decision-making by focusing on the greater good for the institution and the public. This theory, which is consequentialist in nature, has been criticized by several researchers due to its treatment of individuals as a means to achieving the selfish goal of happiness (Tamunosiki, 2021).

The theory of deontology was developed by Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries AD. The theory emphasizes a rule-based approach to handling ethical issues (Misselbrook, 2013). The theory was based on the inherent ability of humans to think and recognize universal/moral laws and thus encouraged them to apply those laws to their actions. This would mean that individuals should treat others as they would expect to be treated if in their stead. The theory advocates the need to treat humanity as an end in itself and not merely as a means to the end. Immanuel Kant also emphasized the importance of treating people as independent moral agents with their own goals and needs and should thus, not be treated as means to an end (Barrow & Khandhar, 2024). When applied to the practice of public relations, PR practitioners are expected to act in accordance with the moral law in all situations and to treat the general public as they would expect to be treated if in their shoes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design, as it was considered to be the most suitable study design for collection of data on the opinion of the students. The study population includes all undergraduate and postgraduate students of Delta State University Abraka. Therefore, non-students and staff of the institution are excluded. The institution has a population of approximately 22,000 students (Delta State University, 2020). A minimum sample size of approximately 393 respondents for the study was calculated using Taro Yamane formula as suggested by Adam (2020). The study employed a convenience sampling technique as it is suitable in situations where the researcher is constrained by time (Jager et al., 2017).

A fully structured questionnaire comprising four sections labelled A to D was used for data collection. Section A measured the demographic characteristics of the respondents, section B will measure the extent to which students engage the social media accounts/handles of their institution while sections C and D measured the attitude of the respondents towards vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social media accounts/handle respectively. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test at a 95% level of confidence on SPSS version 25

*Data presentation and analysis***Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents**

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
16-20 years	54	13.8
21-25 years	167	42.6
26 years and above	71	18.1
Total	392	100.0
Gender		
Male	206	52.6
Female	186	47.4
Total	392	100.0
Type of Degree		
Undergraduate	283	72.2
Postgraduate	109	27.8
Total	392	100.0

Source: Fieldwork

Table 1. above shows the demographic characteristics of the students who participated in this study. Out of the 392 respondents, (42.6%) of the participants were between the ages of 21 and 25 years; 52.6% were male and 47.4% were females; most (72.2%) of the students were undergoing undergraduate degree.

Table 2: Students engagement of university's social media accounts/handles.

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I follow any of the institution's social media handle/accounts.		
Yes	181	46.2
No	211	53.8
Total	392	100.0
I regularly comment on any of the institution's social media handle/accounts		
Yes	114	29.1
No	278	70.9
Total	392	100.0
I react to posts on any of the institution's social media handle/accounts		
Yes	157	40.1
No	235	59.9
Total	392	100.0

Source: Fieldwork

Table 2 above shows that 53.8% of students do not follow the institution’s social media handle/accounts. Only 29.1% and 40.1% of the respondents regularly comment or react respectively to posts on the institution’s social media accounts.

Table 3: Students attitude towards their role in vetting the ethical quality of contents on the universities’ social medial accounts/handle.

s/n	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD
1	It is my duty to inform the public of any misinformation on my institutions’ social media handle	19 (4.8%)	67 (17.1%)	103 (26.3%)	124 (31.6%)	79 (20.2%)	2.54	0.324
2	It is important for me to know if my university's social media content aligns with ethical guidelines.	4 (1.0%)	63 (16.1%)	85 (21.7%)	201 (51.3%)	39 (9.9%)	2.47	0.877
3	I am willing to report content I perceive as unethical on my university's social media accounts.	107 (27.3%)	199 (50.8%)	53 (13.5%)	22 (5.6%)	11 (2.8%)	3.94	0.450
4	It is my responsibility to protect the general public from misinformation	16 (4.1%)	55 (14.0%)	110 (28.1%)	147 (37.5%)	64 (16.3%)	2.52	0.221

Source: Fieldwork

Table 3 above shows that 31.6% of the respondents disagreed while 20% strongly disagreed that it is their duty to inform the public on misinformation found on the university’s social media channels, 51.3% disagreed that it is important for them to know if university’s media content is ethical, and 37.5% disagreed that it is their responsibility to protect the general public from misinformation. Of the total number of respondents, 50.7% are willing to report or comment on content they perceive as unethical on the university's social media accounts

Table 4: Students attitude towards their role in vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities’ social media accounts/handle.

s/n	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD
1	I actively check the content on my university’s social media for adherence to ethical standards.	29 (7.4%)	77 (19.6%)	157 (40.1%)	94 (24.0%)	35 (8.9%)	2.93	0.524
2	Vetting the ethical content of my university’s social media posts is part of my social media habits.	35 (8.9%)	83 (21.2%)	141 (36.0%)	97 (24.7%)	36 (9.2%)	2.96	0.677
3	I warn the public of any misleading content on my university’s social media account.	24 (6.1%)	59 (15.1%)	93 (23.7%)	167 (42.6%)	49 (12.5%)	2.60	0.430
4	I will call out racial or unfair content on my university’s social media account/handle	13 (3.3%)	31 (7.9%)	112 (28.6%)	183 (46.7%)	53 (13.5%)	2.41	0.341

Source: Fieldwork

As shown in Table 4, above shows that 40.1% of the respondents were neutral, 19.6% disagreed, and 7.4% strongly disagreed on whether they actively check their university’s social media content for adherence to ethical standards. Similarly, for vetting the ethical content as part of their social media habits, 36.0% of students were neutral, while 21.2% agreed and 8.9% strongly agreed. Out of the total number of respondents, 42.6% of respondents disagreed while 13.5% strongly disagreed on whether they warn the public on any misleading content on their university’s social media account. On calling out racial or unfair content, 46.7% of the respondents disagreed, while 13.5% strongly disagreed.

FINDINGS

Findings show that 53.8% of the respondents do not follow the social media content of the university communication. But 70.9% do regularly comment on the university’s social media content while 59.9% react to the university posts. It was discovered that 50.8% agreed while 27.3% strongly agreed that they are willing to report content they found to have failed to comply with expected ethical standard. However, the perception of the students regarding their role in vetting

the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle was generally poor. Most of the students do not have an attitude of vetting the ethical quality of contents on their universities' social medial accounts/handle.

CONCLUSION

The review of literature and findings from this study reveal that social media is not being properly maximized by students in tertiary institutions for more academic related causes. Majority of the students in the study do not actively engage the social media handles of their institution and so do not contribute significantly to ensuring they comply to ethical principles.

Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations based on the findings made above:

- Awareness among students on ethical social media use in the universities should be created to enable them to critically evaluate the ethical quality of contents they encounter.
- Reward engagement with university's social media handles should be encouraged. This may involve giving some form of incentives for high engagement of the university's social media platforms to encourage more interaction with them consistently.
- Postgraduate peer influence programmes that proactively leverage on the postgraduate students mentoring of the undergraduates on the ethical responsibility of every social media user should be initiated.

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