

Audience Perception of Social Media Messages on Security Challenges in the South East, Nigeria: Implication for Audience Gate Keeping

Gloria Eberechukwu Nwodu, Chinwe Beatrice Ezeoke , Nonye Benedeth Ezeaka

Abstract— Despite the benefits and pitfalls of social media in national security and its adoption in communicating diverse security messages in a volatile environment, there is a lack of studies that measured or identified users' perceptions of social media messages on security challenges. The study bridges this gap in literature, it used Four Index Perception Evaluation Scale (FIPES): hatred-support perception dimension, propaganda-disinformation perception dimension, conversationality-tone perception dimension, and believability dimension, to investigate the situation. Four objectives that guided the study are framed in relation to each of the four index perception evaluation dimensions. Survey research design was used in the study; population comprises two categories of social media users. A sample size of 310 respondents was used and determined by Cochran approach. A web-based questionnaire worded in five-point Likert was used to collect data; while data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Decision making was done using mean score of Five-point Likert scale. Findings show that audience perceived social media messages on southeast insecurity to portray hatred or support for either of the two principal actors (IPOB & Federal Government of Nigeria) in the imbrioglio.

Index Terms— Gatekeeping, Security, Social media, and South East.

I. INTRODUCTION

Security situation in Nigeria, particularly southeastern states has deteriorated. The spate of arson attacks on police stations and killings of security operatives by unknown gun men (UGM) is on the increase in the South East. The Federal Government (FGN) accuses the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) of being behind these attacks in the region. This accusation and unguarded utterances of citizens have resulted in multiplicity of voices either in support of FGN or against IPOB and its security wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN). These multiplicity of voices tend to be louder in the media space, particularly the social media, which gives users multi-access to information and the ability to be 'producers' of information, and audience gatekeepers, also engage each other in open conversation (Mateji,2015; Achor and Nnabuko,2019).

Similarly, social media conversation/discourse facilitates

citizens' involvement in public discourses and gives them platform for one-way self-expression, interactive debate and to frame political issues that routinely appear in public domain (Castells, 2012; Ahemd, Cho and Judka, 2019). Under this circumstance, the citizen-generated content makes known an important issue such as insecurity faster than the mainstream media (Shirky, 2011). This changing media ecology has made "social media to emerge as an alternative information source" for almost every issue or event. Citizens now have assumed dual role in information production process. They are now producers and receivers of information and this has depleted the traditional gatekeeping role of the media (Achor and Nnabuko, 2019). The importance of social media as an alternative source for information and public sentiments appear to be more pronounced especially in times of social conflicts and political turmoil (Handy and Gomaa, 2012; Meraz and Papacharisi, 2013).

Today, the insecurity challenges in the South East Nigeria dominate discussions in the social media. However, two dominant factors: ethnicity and bias tend to define the trend of conversation on the situation. The former evokes sentiments that reinforce allegiance to ethnic identity on one hand, and sheer or perceived prejudice towards an ethnic nationality on the other hand. The scenario plays out in the posts created and shared by people who are sympathetic to Biafra or the cause IPOB/ESN is championing. This group of social media users loath any post that portrays IPOB and its secessionist's agenda in bad light or gives credence to FG's alleged high-handedness in tackling insecurity in the region (Otutuaju, 2021). They tend to antagonize individuals or groups that share dissenting views or appear to be driven by sheer prejudice and hatred. The latter, perceived bias and lack of professionalism exhibited by Police in their investigations of crimes by unknown gun men (UGM) and hasty conclusion in accusing IPOB to be responsible for the insecurity situation in region.

Arising from these scenarios are media portrayals of the South East insecurity – as usurpation of legitimacy of government (by armed groups and agitators for self-determination) and state-sponsored political conspiracy. These media portrayals and discordant tones of conversation influence audience (citizen) frame and perception of the social media messages on security challenges. As a means to construct reality, within the context of this study, "frames are a cognitive device for ordinary citizens to make sense of their everyday experiences as well as to organize and express their thoughts" (Goffman 1974 cited in Ahemd et al, 2019, p.3).

Gloria Eberechukwu Nwodu, lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbaram, Anambra State Nigeria

Chinwe Beatrice Ezeoke PhD, lecturer at the Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra State Nigeria
Nonye Benedeth Ezeaka PhD, lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbaram, Anambra State Nigeria

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Perception is defined here as the processing interpreting, selecting and organizing of information (message). Through the lens of citizen-frame of social media content, this study empirically investigates audience perceptions of social media messages on security challenges in the South East region. This audience perception study focuses on different interpretations of social media posts (messages) shared or posted by individuals, government agencies and functionaries on insecurity in the South East. There is a legion of perception studies on social media consumption/use in different fields of endeavor, but none has focused attention on the third persons' perceptions of social media messages on insecurity situation in Nigeria using the four-index perception evaluation scale (FIPES) or dimensions (hatred-support dimension, propaganda-disinformation dimension, conversationality-tone dimension, and believability-deceptiveness dimension). The FIPES is an acronym distilled from the operationalisation of the characteristics (participation, commonalty, connectedness, conversationality, and openness) of major social media platforms and the third-person (TPP) online comment or third person comment framework in online post/conversation (Cheng, Muno,&Moritze, 2015).

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of the study is to evaluate audience perceptions of social media messages about security challenges in the southeast region of Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. ascertain if audience perception of social media messages on South East insecurity is that anchored on hatred-support for IPOB/ESN.
2. determine if the audience perceives social media messages about insecurity in the South East as deceptive propaganda.
3. find out if audience perception of the social media conversation on security is toxic.
4. ascertain if audience perceives the social media messages as unbelievable. These objectives were tuned into questions to frame the research questions

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

SOCIAL MEDIA, AUDIENCE TYPOLOGY, AND MESSAGE FRAMING IN SOCIAL MEDIA

The emergence of social media as the 21st Century social and mass communication tools has greatly influenced the diffusion of information and social interactions. Although, social media have enjoyed wider discussions in almost all spheres of human endeavour or disciplines, there is no commonly functionally and theoretically accepted definitions of what social media are within communication studies (Carr and Hayes, 2015, Lee, Sha, Dozier and Sargeant , 2015; Kent , 2015; Achor 2017). However, three scholarly definitional perspectives can be found in communication and social interaction literature (Achor and Nnabuko, 2019). The first definitional perspective conceptualized social media as interactive platforms or space where people gather online to share information and converse. This perspective further describes social media as a means of interactions among

people in which they create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and network (Ahlqvist, Black, Holoner and Helmonen, 2008). The second perspective refers to social media as “technology-based sites that encourage person –to-person and machine- to-person information sharing and production. This perspective further explores the web 2.0, which is the underlying communication architecture of social-mediated communication enabled by mobile and web-based technologies. (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Mobile and web-based technologies, “creates highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated content” (Achor and Nnabuko, 2017, p.9).

The third definitional perspective conceptualizes social media from the point of promoting organization-public relationship and platforms for supporting collaborations, facilitating, knowledge management, strengthening social connections and fostering awareness of connection activities (Smith, 2015; Achors&Nnabuko, 2019). Given the three definitional perspectives, a working or operational definition can be derived: social media are platforms and applications on the internet that allow people, individuals, organizations and their publics, etc assemble online to converse, exchange information, opinions and share knowledge through open interactions, collaborations, and harnessing collective intelligence (Achor and Nnabuko, 2019). Having /conceptualized social media, it is necessary to identify and explain the typologies. As communication technologies or computer-mediated platforms, social media come in different forms such as magazines, internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, social networks, podcast, photographs or picture , video and social book marking (Kaplan andHaenein, 2010; Achor, Nwachukwu, and Nkwocha, 2015). The social media platforms that are greatly used in Nigeria include facebook, twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, Google plus, You Tube and blogs (Achor 2017. Chukwuere and Onyebukwa, 2018). Other forms of social media technologies exist; the ones mentioned above are mostly used by ordinary citizens who take interest in discussing issues affecting them or of national and global importance. These platforms offer them the mechanism to bypass the routine practice of news making in traditional media, which involves gate keeping and framing (Herimid et al, 2012).

The audience within the social media domain and within the confines of the paper could be described as the social media users. The social media users can be categorized into four types namely professionals, sharers, creators and bonders (Herimida, 2015). Professional users are those that use social media to advance their businesses or professions; sharers include those who share post or news items created or posted by others in their various social media platforms. The creators are those that create content or messages worth sharing. The content created could be on topical national and global issues that are not censored. Bonders include people, friends and close relations and acquaintances that use social media (facebook, whatsapp) to routinely share message of love, hope and socialization, and for bonding and dialogue (Herimida,2015). The line of distinction among the four classifications is blurred.

According to Network Gatekeeping (Sheomaker and Vos, 2009; Achor and Nnabuko 2019), social media users are classified under four typologies: institution users, everyday individuals, professional communicators, and networked individual users. These social media actors or users mediate, converse, chat with one another, tweet, retweet, share information and comment on post by others. They mediate the multi-directional flow of information as supported by redefined gatekeeping model (Achor and Nnabuko, 2019, p. 18 Barzilia-Nahon, 2008).

The social media platforms offer its users (everyday people/individual, networked individual, professionals; shares, contents creators etc) the mechanism to be 'producer' of information-producers and receivers of information. This is a unique advantage of social media. One of the consequences of the new and increasingly popular ways of routine communication and interaction via various social media platforms is that citizens can by-pass the routine practice of news making in traditional media, which involves gate keeping and framing (Hermida et al, 2012). According to Ahemd, et al, (2019) "The changes driven by ongoing development in the virtual communities have thus blurred the line between the media as producers and the audience as a receiver" (P.4). In recognition of this view, Neuman et al (2014) offers a more integrative perspective that describes traditional media function as official, prescriptive source while social media is the reactionary and preemptive public feedback.

The message dynamic in the social media makes information production, transmission and receiving quite unique compared to those of the mainstream media. Content created and posted in the social media platform can be reproduced, edited, and shared by third party. Both the initial poster and third party (sharer) plays the role of audience gatekeeper. They individually assume three important gatekeeping roles: the role of originator, the transmitter, and the influencer (katz, lazardfeld and Roper, 2006, Achor 2017).

As the originator, the person initiates an idea, encode it in form of tweet, video, chat and post (transmitted in their social media handle (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc). They also influence the flow of the messages (tweet, chat or post) by sharing them to groups and friends, who at the same time reshare in their handles. In the process of sharing or forwarding of messages, the content could be amplified and edited. These actions and the trio roles of originator, transmitter and influencer confer on the social media user the new role of audience gatekeeping. The social media user performs the audience gate keeping role by selecting what to post, how to post it and when to posts it in the social media platforms.

The messages in the context of this study are media content (e.g Facebook post, chat, videos, tweets, etc) about insecurity in the south east created and shared in the various social media handles. The issue of unknown gunmen, killings of security operatives and burning of police stations and INEC offices are generating heated debate in the social media. Citizens are engaging in conversations about these and other issues. The language of comments, post and curated news from some mainstream media appears to take sides.

Aspersions are being hauled to posters and commenters while ethnic profiling seems to dominate certain security discussions. Both the original posters and content creators always deploy languages and discourse that appear to be sheer falsehood, pernicious propaganda and demeaning.

Citizens or social media users frame and interpret the messages based on what they are promoting and thus greatly influence audience perception. Social media dynamics in framing social conflicts and security threats/challenges give the citizens or users unrestricted opportunity to reflect their everyday experiences on the trend of conversation or post. Through their conversation and comment, audiences or users of social media bring out the issue salience and discourse valence of an issue (Ahemd, et al 2019). Salience on the issue here refers to the attention given to social media posts e.g. various posts about insecurity situation in the South East). Valence in social media post denotes that "social conflicts is an important dimension of content framing given that conflict or violence-related events are often discussed with a positive and /or negative tone (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003).

AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES

Audience in the context of social-mediated and computer-mediated studies or domain include the social media users or audience members (Chan-Olmsted et al, 2013; Stavrositu, 2014; Edgerly, Mourao, and Thorson, 2019) that participate in online conversation (Lee, 2012; Achor, 2017). In spite of this generic classification, the network gate keeping researchers have made a distinction between two types of social media users, elite and non-elite users (Hermida, 2015). The elite social media user occurs when an individual's idea and opinions are crowdsourcing to prominence or the user holds some power outside of the internet, while non-elite users are largely unnoticed by the rest of a site's users (Hermida, 2015). Within the refined network gatekeeping, four typologies of social media users can be identified: institutions, professional communicators, everyday individuals, and networked individuals (Shoemaker, Vos, 2009, Barzilia-Nahon, 2008). These typologies can be members of the generic and elite and non-elite users. The audience perception of social media messages centers on varying psychological interpretations of the types of social media content shared and the tone of social media content used by social media users in conversing or discussing any topic or issue (Lee, 2012; Chen and Ng, 2016). In this paper, we are concerned with audience perception of social media messages on the rising insecurity in the southeast region of Nigeria.

The spate of insecurity in the region in the recent times is alarming. In spite of the herders-farmer clashes, armed Fulani killings of innocent farmers, kidnapping, etc the social media is awash with news of unknown gunmen attacking police stations and killing of security operatives, and burning of INEC offices in all the five states of the region. These arsons and killings have continued unabated, especially in Imo State, which is now the epicentre of Nigerian-Army-IPOB/ESN debacle (TVC Breakfast News 8 June, 2021; Arise Morning News, 2021 June). Accusations and counter

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accusations trail these activities; the Federal Government accuses the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra of being behind the activities of the unknown gunmen and burning of critical infrastructure, especially INEC offices. On the other hand, IPOB denies having a hand in the attacks but suspects that Government or other external forces could have a hand in this imbroglio.

This scenario has made social media users to engage in conversations, posting comments and sharing news items curated contents from mainstream media about the situation. So, the perception of the audience or social media users will hinge on the type of content shared and tone of conversations used in engaging in the conversation and commentaries. "It is important to state here that, "social networking link individuals together as a part of a voluntary group" (Barsky and Purdon, 2006). Individuals join group social media conversation because they share common interest, causes, attributes and activities. This group interaction enables users to exchange information and opinions based on what is trending; their tone of conversation influence the opinion of other similar groups or their significant others.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The audience theory underpins this study. It was propounded by Shoemaker and Vos (2009) as a way to fill in the gap or failure of the traditional gatekeeping theory to recognize the audience or the gated on whom gatekeeping is exercised. "In the traditional theories of gatekeeping, the audience were excluded from the conceptualization" (Achor and Nnabuko, 2019:18), this exclusion was addressed by Shoemaker and Vos (2009) by relying on Barzilia-Nahon (2008) refined gatekeeping concept which provided in-depth explanation of the gated or message recipients as found in the traditional gatekeeping literature. Audience gatekeeping being an off-shoot of network gatekeeping does not see the gated or message receiver as the last stop of information processing rather they intervene in the gatekeeping process depending on their level of political power, ability of information production, relationship with traditional gate keepers and their ability to find and choose from alternative sources of information (Barzilia-Nahon, 2008; Shoemaker et al, 2014).

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) explained that audience in the typical traditional gatekeeping models in media studies have roles that were neglected. The unassigned role of audiences is now addressed by a mechanism of audience's gatekeeping theory/model which has given audience members the power to provide information to each other through the Internet and its associated platforms. The audience members or gated community shares and determines the importance of news (or the news agenda) thereby breaking the traditional news room routine of setting agenda in the public domain. Social media platforms enable audience members to participate in the dialogue, interacting directly with institutions and new makers.

The audience becomes a part in the gatekeeping process by participating in social media conversation that features various forms of insecurity in the Southeast and indeed Nigeria. Further, the user-to-user communication that

re-circulates information is considered an important part of the step of the gatekeeping process (Kwon et al, 2012). The Network Gatekeeping adds that every social media user is a gatekeeper with the authority to decide which information they will share (Diakopoulos & Zubiaga, 2014). Social media allows all audience members to filter information by sharing and promoting only certain pieces of information (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013).

More importantly, the implication of this paper is that the digital media interactive potential increases the pathways individuals use to transform the flow of information. Social media users choose, frame any information they want to share without recourse to ethical values of public information production and dissemination. This may endanger security situation in the country. Social media users both in support or against IPOB/ESN, cash in on the vulnerability of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to dish out inciting messages and comments that escalates the security situation in the Southeast region. Because, the audience has been empowered by the network mechanism, the being the producers, gatekeepers and recipients of information in the digital domain, they post content that ordinarily would be filtered or censored in the traditional media. Within the network gatekeeping, two distinct types of social media users: elite and non-elite users can be identified. The idea of an elite social media user occurs when an individual's ideas and opinions are crowdsourced to prominence or the user holds some power outside of just the Internet, while non-elite users are largely unnoticed by the rest of a site's users (Hermida, 2015; Coddinton & Holton, 2014). A need for power outside the Internet is not necessary for an individual or their message to rise to prominence within a networked society".

V. REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Perception studies within the mainstream media domain are legion. A number of these studies focused on audience perception of media reportage of elections, politics, social violence, and political turmoil. However, minimal studies have explored audience perception of social media content. Some scholars have called for continuous monitoring of how social media interactions occur or developed. Calls have also been made to continuously analyse how the social media works, and measure their potentialities in terms of negative or positive contributions to the growth of the state and the wellbeing of its citizens (Sydeny Morning Herald, 2012, July). These calls were made with the aim of monitoring, reporting and neutralising potential offensive use of social media by enemies who may be out to sabotage national security (Mohammed, 2021)

Cuman (2011) explored the role of Internet and social media in international relations within focus of Arab revolution. The study documented the analysis on the extent social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and weblogs facilitated uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. The study found out that the usage and growth of social media in the Arab region played a great role in mass mobilization of protestors, empowerment, shaping of opinions and

influencing change” (Cuman,2011,p.10) other studies focused on social media and national security

(Ghonim, 2012) for example a number of studies has been documented especial on social dynamics of unrest and movements, driving on a directed ideological end (Sidney and Charles, 2009).

There are number of studies that focus perception. A study by Chan-Olmsted, Cho, and Lee (2013) examined the user perceptions of characteristics of six main groups of social media. The social media examined include blogs, micro-blogs, social network, wikis, forum, and content communication using five dimensions: participation commonality, connectedness, conversationality and openness. It also assessed user profile of demographics and usage in such perceptions. Findings showed that social media applications are perceived differently and social media usage patterns, gender and age affect these perceptions (Chan-Olmsted, Cho, and Lee, 2013).

A five year longitudinal trend study by Tsay-Vogel, Sannhan and Signorielli (2018) examined the effect of Facebook user on privacy perceptions and self-disclosure behavior. At the global level findings “support the socializing role of Facebook in cultivating more relaxed privacy attitudes” (P12). It also indicates increasing self-disclosure in both offline and online contexts. Longitudinal trends indicate increase in risk perception for heavy users but stayed stable, for light users. A related study by Clementon(2019) explored truth-default by posing a question: Are deceitful politicians impervious to scrutiny? It used 294 voters to examine truth -default towards politician after exposure to a campaign interview. It anchored its findings on truth-default theory (TDT), which “holds that people tend to passively believe others without consciously considering whether they are being told the truth. Cheng (2018) investigated how the presence of social media metrics shape perceived media influence oneself and other (TPP). The findings indicate that “social media metric affect how people estimate media influence on self and others” (p.1832).Findings also indicate that social media metrics function as cues for message recipients. Adapting these findings to the present study, it is conceivable to assume that social media metrics affect not only how social media users perceive their content and how they perceive the influence of content on the increasing insecurity in the southeast.

Similarly, Clementson (2019) study on “how web comments affect perceptions of political interviews and journalistic control” established a remarkable fact. This fact is that “people are often exposed to polarized viewpoints in web comment sections” (Clementson, 2019, p. 815).This lends credence to the polarized online space in Nigeria, which has given opportunity for toxic conversation on the rising insecurity in the South East. In the same vein, many of the comments or post, suggests a perceived lack of objectivity and fairness. This has implication for information management in the era of audience gate keeping.

The online or digital media space inadvertently encourages expression of opinion without filtering content, language and style of delivery or engagement. Another important finding of the study is that people will echo the sentiments expressed by

anonymous strangers and will share opinions and attitudes about issues in accordance with comments expressed by strangers”

Chukwuere and Onyebukwa (2018) studied the impacts of Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp as social media tools on security challenges confronting the northern and south-eastern parts of Nigeria. The study reported that “Nigeria security climate is very poor; it also found that social media is not a threat to Nigeria national security, however, respondents are uncertain whether Facebook , Twitter and Whatsapp had increased insecurity in the northern and south-eastern parts of Nigeria and many more. A similar study by Wogu and Ugwu (2019) investigated audience perception of media reporting of separatist and sectarian agitations in Nigeria. It gave insight into factors fueling agitations by separatists. These include political imbalance, perceived injustices against the south-easterners, and failure of federal government to reintegrate Igbos in the scheme of governance. A sample of 384 respondents was used to assess the study’s objectives. The study found out that a greater percentage of the respondents had high frequency of exposure to media reports on secession agitations. It also showed that the media of exposure were radio, TV and newspapers. A significant relationship between exposure to media reports on secession and public perception was reported.

VI. FOUR INDEX PERCEPTION EVALUATION SCALE (FIPES)

Pervious perception studies on media content relied more on psychoanalytic and other perceptual dimensions that define information receivers’ objective assessment and the third-person’s view on social media post (Chung, 2018). Given the fluid nature of social media, the FIPES framework was distilled from a combination of Chan-Olmsted, Cho, Lee, 2013) social media characteristics perception index and other dimensions of media frames and third-person (TPP) online comment (Cheng, Munro, & Moritz, 2015; Chen, & Ng, 2016; Chung, 2018). The Chan-Olmsted, et al social media characteristics include participation, commonality, connectedness, conversationality, and openness. The TPP framework posits that people who believe media message have a greater effect on changing the attitude of others compared with themselves /and or perceive civil online comments as more persuasive than uncivil comments (Chen, & Ng, 2016).

The Four Index Perception Evaluation Scale (FIPES) include hatred-support dimension, propaganda-disinformation dimension, conversationality-tone dimension, and believability-perception dimension. These four dimension or evaluation scale share certain commonalities when operationalized in a given situation or related contexts. For example, when today’s youth engage in uncivilized conversation on religion and politics or ethnicity and crime, there is the tendency that the structure and language of discourse will promote toxicity and hateful materials online. However, few studies that have either separately discussed (Salminen et al, 2020; Harriman, Shortland, Su and Cote,

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2020; Wachs, 2018) or collectively analysed the nature of conversations and typologies of message/ content posted online (Baaken, 2017; Costello, 2017) failed to give a clear-cut conceptualization of each of the components of the FIPES as distilled from a combination of several frameworks.

To avoid definitional or explanation dilemma, each component of FIPES will be explained and where any of them shares conceptual linkage, efforts will be made to clear the fog and put them in their proper perspectives. The hatred-support dimension denotes comments, emojis that either promote/portray hatred for a source of social media message/abusive language from a third party commenter or positively support/ extols a source for content posted. The existence, typology and function of hateful content on social media and other online platforms has been extensively discussed by scholars (Salminen et al, 2020) . Studies (Kwak, An, Salminen, Jung and Jansen, 2018; Monda, Silva, Benevenuto, 2017; Garimella, De, Morales, Gionis and Mathioudakis, 2017) have shown that exposure to hateful content online might reinforce discriminatory views and could lead to developing defensive and hyper-vigilant attitudes” (Salminen et al, 2020). Harriman, Shortland, Su and Cote (2020) opined that youth are exploiting the phenomenon of universal access to the internet to disseminate their propaganda and hateful materials in the online space.

The propaganda-disinformation dimension postulates that due to the unrestricted participation in the social media domain and openness of various social media platforms, users tend abuse them by posting content that promote pernicious propaganda, misinformation and disinformation. Propaganda thrives in lies, misinformation, inflammatory language, and other negative communication to achieve an objective related to a cause, goal or political agenda. Pernicious or negative propaganda promotes half truth and builds a following (Achor and Moguluwa, 2012). It has been observed that those who use social media platforms to champion causes and campaign against bad governance post content or use comments that promote half-truth and total distortion of facts. One popular propaganda form used by both government and civil groups are name calling and use of coercion to obtain compliance from target audience. The Arab Spring and other revolutionary campaigns across the globe have proven the above notions (Kwon, Agrawal&Rao, 2012). Those who thrive in propaganda, use different manipulative techniques to sway people’s opinions on contentious issues. Techniques such as loaded words, vague terms, snob appeal, bandwagon, transfer, unreliable testimonial, and name calling. The act of name-calling is a simple and effective means of loaded words usage, which a many political group has used to disparage opposition, quell dissent and scapegoat groups of people (Achor& Moguluwa,2012). The transfer technique is used by online posters to conjure up either positive or negative images, connect them to an unrelated concept or item, and try to move the public to take action. Transfer technique can be employed as a means to convince the public to take an action, lest they suffer a disagreeable fate.

The conversationality-tone dimension denotes tone/language of conversation used by poster and commenter

or third person’s comment in the social media domain. Irrespective of who the posters or source of message are, the language of conversation is expected to be civil and respectful. But many times, the tone or language of posters and third persons who comment on peoples post is toxic and hateful. “Toxic” message is defined as one that is ‘rude’, disrespectful or unreasonable”. This description is expanded in this paper to include uncivil and unreasonable messages that ignites hate speech, personal attack and unhealthy argument. Online toxicity can be defined as “hateful communication that is likely to cause an individual user leave a discussion” Wulczyn,Thain, Dixon and Machina (2017,p.221). It can manifest itself in various ways, including cyber bullying(Hosseini, Mattson, Rafiq, Han ,LvQ and Mishra, 2015), trolling(Hardaker, 2010); while the creation of online firestorms is defined as “rapid discharges of large quantities of negative, often highly emotional posts in the social media environment ”(Hauser, Hautz, Hutter and Fuller, 2017, p. 286), where participants attack other groups or organizations. Online toxicity, in very many situations, can result in violent actions in the physical world and is advised to be treated as a matter with serious social gravity (Patton, Eschmann, Elsaesser and Bocanegra, 2016). Toxicity in social media post or content can be also be described as hostile or something that promotes hostility. Hostility was defined as comments “intentionally designed to attack someone or something and, in doing so, incite anger or exasperation through the use of name-calling, character assassination, offensive language, profanity, and/or insulting language” (Ksiazek ,2018, p. 854).

The believability-deceptiveness dimension creates doubt in the minds of the online conversation participants either as third person’s commenter or the original source of post on particular issue. This has to do with the source credibility and the message credibility (Budzowski, 2019; Metzger, Flanagan, Eyal, Lemus, &McCann, 2003, Appelman&Sundar 2016; Martens, Agular, Gomez-Herrera & Muller-Langer, 2018). The concept of credibility is measure of perceived quality as determined by people given their exposure or interpretation of several variables. In generic term, credibility measurement could be biased depending on established criteria used. (Budzowski, 2019).Two distinct concepts of credibility can be identified in the mainstream communication and persuasion literature: source credibility and message credibility (Martens, Agular, Gomez-Herrera & Muller-Langer, 2018;Appelman&Sundar 2016.). Message credibility commonly indicates how well the recipients approve the message, while source credibility is a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message. It can further be explained as those characteristics of a message that influence its believability; Copeland, Gunawan&Bies-Hernandez (2011) add that, message credibility represents the impressions and judgments the receiver has in relation to a message.

SOUTH EAST REGION AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

The South East region of Nigeria is predominantly inhabited by Igbos. The region is located between latitudes 4

and 7 degrees north of the equator and between longitudes 7 and 9 degrees east. The region has five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. It shares boundaries with Kogi and Benue states in the north axis, Cross River and Akwalbom in the western axis, Rivers and Delta states in the southern axis. The South-East people are known for their hard work, industry, entrepreneurial skills and wealth creation. The region is known for its peaceful nature, bolstering business environment, and hospitality. Recently, the region has been enmeshed in rising insecurity challenges that have almost pitched her people against the Federal government and the security agencies. Below is a presentation of insecurity challenges in the region as documented by scholars.

A number of studies have highlighted forms and characteristics of insecurity in the South East region of Nigeria (Onitfade et al, 2013, Imhonopi. &Urim, 2012; Chukwuere and Onyebukwa 2019; Ezemenaka&Prouza, 2016; Ibeanu, Orji &Iwuamadi, 2016; Johnson and Olaniyan, 2017). Security challenges in the southeast range from killings of farmers and raping of women by armed Fulani herders, farmer-herder clashes, kidnapping for ransom, cultism and cult rivalry to armed robbery. Others include renewed agitation for a Biafran state by MASSOB and IPOB, the ongoing face-off between Eastern Security Network (ESN) and the combined force of military and police. The secession issue has been in the front burner of political discourse and factors fanning its embers are traceable: First, there is perceived feelings of the agitators that southeast region is politically marginalized, total collapse of federal roads and infrastructure. Second, the region seems to be relegated to the background in the scheme of affaires in the Nigerian-state.

The failure of the Nigerian government to implement the 3R policy of reconstruction, reintegration, and rebuilding of the South East states after the civil Nigeria-Biafra civil war (Ibeanu, et al, 2016) also seem to be one of the reasons for this ill-feeling. The proscription of IPOB and labeling it a terrorist organization by the Federal Government has escalated violence in the region by the separatist group. Before the proscription, there have been series of clashes between IPOB members and Nigerian Armed Forces resulting in the death of IPOB members. Recently, there have been series of attacks on police stations, killing of security operative and burning of the offices of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) offices and other critical national infrastructure in the region by the unidentified, unknown gun men. The federal government has continued to accuse the IPOB/ESN for being responsible for the killing and arsons across the eastern states. The security forces have been arresting innocent youth and killed some extra judicially. Federal government stance on the use of force to tackling the situation has generated debate in the social media with social media metrics generating third persons comments (TPC).The types of content shared and tone of conversation used need to do examined.

VII. METHODOLOGY

Survey research design was adopted since the nature of study demands the opinions or perceptions of the social media users on messages on security challenges in the South East region. Survey research design is also appropriate for this study because it helped to evaluate all the factors that underpin social media content and other issues that give rise to insecurity in the region. The social media users used in the study fall within the classification of network or refined network gatekeeping (Sheomaker and Vos, 2009; Shoemaker and Resse, 2014), and Achor and Nnabuko's Mixed-flow model of quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching (2017). These models or frameworks identified four types of social media users that operate within the digital media domain. They include institutions, professional communicators, everyday individuals and networked individuals. Since, there is every tendency for every user in the classifications to be a networked individual or work in an institution; only two typologies are used in the study: everyday individuals and professional communicators. The choice also conforms to Network Gatekeeping typology of social media users, namely elite and non-elite users (Hermida, 2015; Achor and Nnabuko, 2017). The perception study centered on the individual interpretations of social media content, posts shared by users (IPOB, presidency/president and third persons users) and the tone of conversation used in conversing or sharing messages about insecurity in the South East, Nigeria. A sample size of 310 was chosen through the use Cochran sample size determination approach. The sample was drawn from Telegram group, called Impactful Communicators (comprising of public relations practitioners, journalists and academics), this group represents professional communicators and a Facebook group called Life Table (comprising budding writers, lovers of literature and storytelling) representing the everyday individuals.

INSTRUMENT AND DATA COLLECTION METHOD

A web-based questionnaire was developed and worded in five-point Likert scale of strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree. The main questions that address the perception dimensions were based on the Four Index Perception Evaluation Scale (FIPES): hatred-support dimension, propaganda-disinformation dimension, conversationality-tone dimension, and believability-deceptiveness dimension. The FIPES framework supports Chan-Olmsted et al (2013) social media characteristics perception. The questionnaire was posted in the two groups' social media platforms for easy access and completion. Members were pleaded with to participate in the survey after explaining the purpose of the study. They were given two weeks to study and respond to the questionnaire; and return via a personal WhatsApp handle and email address of the researcher.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF INSTRUMENT

A content validity of the instrument was carried out by experts in communication studies while the reliability analysis of the variables yielded Cronbach Alpha value of 0.862, which is within the threshold of a valid, reliable and

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accepted measure. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, tables, percentages, mean and standard deviation, etc.)

DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Analysis of demographic data showed that more than half of the respondents (204 or 68%) were male, while 106 or 34.2% were female. Ethnic nationality distribution of the respondents showed that 93 or 30% belong to Yoruba speaking ethnic group, 97 or 31% are from Igbo ethnic nationality, 50(16%) are Hausa/Fulani ethnic group, while the remainder of 70 (22.5%) are from other minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Educational qualification shows that two thirds 207 or (68%) of the respondents are degree holders or its equivalent, 51(16.4%) hold a second degree while 52(16.7%) hold PhD.

The mean = $15/5 = 3$. For the purpose of decision making 3 and above is accepted as agree while value below 3 is

rejected. For further analysis and decision making, the five-point Likert scale was used as shown thus:

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Undecided	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5
Total	15

A cut off point is determined by finding the mean of the nominal value assigned to options using the formula below:

$$\text{Mean } X = \frac{\sum f}{n}$$

Where: X = mean, \sum = summation sign, n = number of items, f = frequency

TABLE I: AUDIENCE/USER PERCEPTION BASED ON HATRED-SUPPORT DIMENSION

Perception Index statement based on hatred-support	Mean	SD	N=310	Decision
IPOB/ESN tweets and post on Facebook about Southeast insecurity promotes hatred for Buhari-led administration	3.60	1.6037	N=310	Accepted
Presidency tweet about insecurity in southeast evokes hatred rather than sincerity in tackling the situation in the region	3.1	1.7233	N=310	Accepted
President's tweet on southeast insecurity evokes civil war memories/emotions rather than reason for tackling it.	3.1	2.0988	N=310	Accepted
Curated messages by some mainstream media takes sides rather than condemnations media	2.72	2.0049	N=310	Rejected
Third person's post and conversation on southeast insecurity appears to take sides rather than condemnation.	3.20	2.0049	N=310	Accepted

Note: mean calculation is based on 5-point Likert scale. **Decision criterion:** Acceptance threshold\cut-off point is 3.0 and above while mean score below 3.0 is rejected

Table 1 captures analysis on audience perception index of hatred-support. The analysis shows that all the perception index statements had mean scores above the cut-off point for decision making. Only one statement posted a low mean score of 2.72. Hence, audience interpreted or perceived that social media messages on the security challenges in the South East were made in support of government stance or hatred for IPOB.

TABLE II: AUDIENCE/USER PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON INSECURITY IN THE SOUTH-EAST BASED ON PROPAGANDA-DISINFORMATION INDEX

Perception statement based on propaganda-disinformation index	Mean	STD	n=310	Decision
IPOB posts and comments are a distortion of facts about southeast security challenges	2.60	1.8976	N=310	Rejected
Ordinary citizens posts or comments promote misinformation and disinformation rather than facts	3.2	1.9125	n=310	Accepted
FCT/Presidency's tweets and facebook post distorts facts to weep up sentiments	3.18	2.0371	n=310	Accepted
Facts about insecurity in SE are distorted to promote ethnic views and divisions	3.26	1.9519	n=310	Accepted
Total mean value	=	3.06		

Table 2 indicates the perception of social media users based on message perception index of propaganda. Of the four statements measured, only number one was rejected because of its mean value of (2.60) which is lower than 3.0 mean threshold for accepting a decision. Others items posted mean values of (3.2, 3.18, and 3.26) which are greater than threshold mean value for decision making. The total mean value of 3.06 is also above the cut off point or 3.0 for accepting a decision. This indicates that the respondents perceived the social media messages about insecurity in the South East as being enmeshed in propaganda and disinformation.

TABLE III: AUDIENCE/USER PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON INSECURITY IN THE SOUTH-EAST BASED ON TONE OF CONVERSATION

Perception statement based on tone of conversation dimension	Mean	STD	N=310	Decision
Government's messages on SE insecurity evokes threats, & fear rather than engaging comments.	3.37	1.9026	N=310	Accepted
Facebook comments and post about SE insecurity challenges evoke provocation, violence and inciting tendencies.	3.40	1.8875	N=310	Accepted
Most of the tweets/post and commentaries lack empathy and sympathy for the region and victims of the crisis.	3.0	1.9289 9	n-310	Accepted

Source: SPSS analysis. **Note:** Mean values are gotten using 5-point Likert scale. Total mean=3.25 Total mean is the summation of all the mean values for each of the item or statement divided by number of statement.

Table 3 captures the descriptive statistics of the social media audience perception index of tone of conversation. All the items/statements that measured this perception index posted mean values (3.37, 3.40 and 3.0) which are greater or equal to 3.0 mean thresholds for decision making. The total means score had a greater value, therefore, it is posited that audience perception of the tone of conversation on the insecurity in the South East is toxic.

TABLE IV: AUDIENCE/USER PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON INSECURITY IN THE SOUTH EAST BASED ON BELIEVABILITY INDEX

Perception statement based on believability-deceptiveness index/dimension	Mean (m)	STD	n=310	Decision
Third-person's comments (TPC) on SE security challenges depicts objectivity-believability problem.	3.42	2.027 3	N=310	Accepted
IPOB's continuous denial messages on series of arsons and killings of security operatives creates believability dilemma.	3.1	1.928 7	N=310	Accepted
Some of the Third person's arson's comments (TPC) in response to either IPOB's or FG posts on Facebook are biased.	3.57	3.79	N=310	Accepted
Some of the IPOB and Third persons comments are deceptive.	3.26	1.931 3	N=310	Accepted

Source: SPSS analysis. **Note:** Mean values are gotten using 5-point Likert scale. Total mean=3.25 Total mean is the summation of all the mean values for each of the item or statement divided by number of statement.

Table 4 captures descriptive data on audience message perception based on the believability perception index or dimension. As shown in the Table 4, all the three perception statements has higher mean scores (M=3.1, M=3.57) which are above threshold mean value of 3.0. The decision is that all the items or perception statements are accepted indicating that audience perception of social media messages are prone to believability dilemma.

Third-person's comment (TPC) (M=3.42, SD=2.0777) rising insecurity depicts objectivity-believability problem. Also worrisome is IPOB's continuous denial messages on culpability of the series of arsons and killings of security operatives. Audience perceived this denial message (M=3.1, SD=1.9287) as that which creates believability dilemma. Further, Third person's comments (TPC) in response (M=3.57, SD=1.9469) to either IPOB's or FG's post on Facebook are perceived to be biased

VIII. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS/FINDINGS

This study was guided by Four-index perception evaluation scale (FIPES) or dimensions formulated by the researcher and distilled from Chan-Omlsted et al (2013) study on user perceptions of social media characteristics and third-person's comment (TPC) framework on social media domain. The FIPES include hatred-support perception dimension, propaganda-disinformation dimension/Index, conversationality-tone perception index and believability perception index. Four research questions were drawn to address each of the FIPES or dimensions. Each of the

perception dimensions yielded higher mean score and standard deviation (Hatred-support perception index: M = 3.14, SD = 3.0717; propaganda-disinformation perception: M = 3.06, SD = 2.8282; conversationality-tone dimension: M = 3.25, SD = 2.3914; and believability dimension: M = 3.33, SD= 2.8026) that supports the overall argument of the paper. Five perception statements that addressed the hatred-support dimension yielded higher mean scores with corresponding standard deviations. First statement yielded M = 3.60, SD= 1.6037 indicating that audience perceived IPOB/ESN tweets and posts (comment) in Facebook about South East insecurity as a promotion of hatred or support for Buhari-led government. The second statement gives a mean of (M = 3.1, SD = 1.7233). This suggests that audience perceived presidency's tweet about southeast to evoke hatred rather than sincerity in tackling the situation.

The third statement yielded (M = 3.1, SD = 2.0988) suggesting that the audience perceived president's tweet to evokes civil war memories/emotions rather than genuinely promote reasons for tackling the security challenges in the region. This perception is widely supported by avalanche of negative comments that trailed the tweet coupled with its deletion from Twitter and Facebook platforms. The fourth statement posted a lower mean score (M = 2.72, SD = 2.0049) which is below a cutoff point for an acceptable decision. Hence, audience perception showed that curated messages posted by mainstream media do not take sides rather condemned the spate of insecurity in the region. This lends credence to a wide spread opinion that the source of one's

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news media have a systematic effect on one's perception of issues (Charron&Annoni, 2020; Lee and Shin, 2014). It also supports the communication hypothesis that say that "medium is the message" and the credibility of message source allay the fear of believability and doubt of authenticity of a message. In as much as some news media post news items in the social media, research has shown that Third persons comments (TPC) may not necessarily paint a perfect picture of the messages posted (Chen & Ng, 2016; Chenge, Muno and Moritze , 2015). The Fifth hatred-support perception statement posted a mean score of 3.20 and SD = 2.0049. The mean score falls within the threshold of acceptable decision.

This implies that audience perceived post and conversation on Southeast insecurity situation as taking sides rather than condemnation. This finding supports the argument that in the social media studies that "people are often exposed to polarized viewpoints in web comment section" (Clementson, 2019, P. 815).

The tendency for social media to spread distorted and false information was evaluated in the study using the propaganda deceptive -disinformation perception index. Of the four perception statements that addressed the research question 2, only one yielded a low mean of 2.60, all the rest had high mean (M = 3., 3.18, and 3.26). The first statement shows that IPOB posts and comments are not a distortion of facts about the South East insecurity challenges (M= 2.60, SD = 1.89976). Third person's comments is perceived to promote mis(dis)information than facts (M = 3.2, SD = 1.9125). The third statement indicates that FG/ president's (M = 3.18, SD = 2.0371) tweets and Facebook post distorts facts and are geared to weep up sentiment. The fourth statement indicates that the audience perceived that facts about the South East insecurity are distorted to promote ethnic views and divisions. The implication of this current scholarship in perception studies is that social media users tend to follow the band wagon without scrutinizing the veracity of messages. This situation promotes fake news. The finding supports the cultivation theory, which holds that, "the more time that audiences spend consuming media (Social media, etc), the more likely their perceptions of the world will align with what the media depict" (Tsay-Vogel, Shanahan and Signorielli (2018, p. 4). It also lend credence to truth-default theory (TDT), which holds that people tend to passively believe others without consciously considering whether they are being told the truth (Clementson 2018).

A lot of information is being dished out in online space about the insecurity situation in the South East which citizens are making out time to verify, rather they tend to 'swallow hook line sink'. The user-generated content tends to fuel the trend. The user generated content encourages inquiry and decision making, this has given social media commentators and influencers the opportunity to critique contents and perhaps join in the conversation. Experience has shown that, this advantage has not been properly utilized in such a way to engender truthful lines of enquiry to help users make informed decision on what to believe or comment on.

The third component of the four index perception

evaluation scale, FIPES, evaluates the audience perceptions of the tone of conversation of both the key supported actors in the South East security challenges and third person's comments in the social media. Table 3 captures the conversationality-tone perception index that addressed research question 3. Three perception evaluative statements give more insights into the tonality of social media conversation on insecurity issue. The first perception statement had a mean score of M=3.37, SD = 1.9026 indicating that audiences perceived the tone of government's messages to evoke threats and fear rather than engaging comments. Similarly, the second perception statement yielded a high mean (M = 3.40; SD =1.8873); this shows that Facebook comments and post about insecurity in the South East are perceived to evoke provocations, violence and inciting tendencies. Many of the tweets (M = 3.0, SD = 1.01289) and re-tweets lack empathy and sympathy for the region and some victims of the crisis. From the above descriptions, it shows that audience perceived the tone of social media conversation and post by third persons, IPOB, government functionaries to be toxic. This finding supports the views of Hauser, Hautz, Hutter and Fuller (2017) description of online toxicity, and the expression of Salminen, et al (2020) on toxicity in social media. Hauser et al (2017) posits that online toxicity can be conceptualized as rapid discharge of large quantities of negative, often highly emotional posts in the social media environment. In sum, online toxicity could be described as hateful communication that is likely to cause an individual user or group leave a discussion (Salminen et al, 2020). "The anonymity of social media and resulting lack of accountability exacerbate toxic online behavior".

Table 4 reveals the audience perception based on the believability index/dimension. The believability-perception index denotes or measures believability of social media posts by people, or its rejection based on their deceptiveness. All the four statements that address this dimension posted high mean (M = 3.42, SD 2.0273) (M = 3.1, SD = 1.9287), (M = 3.57, SD = 1.9467), and (M = 3.26, SD = 1.9519).

When social media post are perceived to lack credibility because of its source and deceptive content, it gives room for uncivilized talk and insinuations. The South East insecurity situation has not been properly managed by both the presidency, leaders of South East regions. This situation has given third persons opportunity to be dish out dis/misinformation, thereby creating the dilemma of what or not to believe concerning the security situation in southeast region. While civil discourse has been found to be fundamental to a democratic society, toxicity dominates much of the social media conversations or post on South East insecurity challenges. While inclusivity, accessibility and low barrier to entry have increased individual's and citizens' participation and associated public debate on matters of social importance, toxic discussions show the cost of having low barriers or supervision for online participation. Because everyone can participate, also people with toxic views are participating" Salminen et al, 2020 p. 301).

IX. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR AUDIENCE GATEKEEPING

There are implications of findings for audience gatekeeping and management of uncensored information in the social media. Online media landscape and ecology give multi-access to users, allowing them to participate in open and oftentimes toxic conversation on any topic of their interest. When toxicity is allowed to pervade online communication, people may get hurt physically and emotionally. There have been negative comments emanating from the two main actors in the South East security debacle; and third person's comments (TPC) have not helped matters either. Because social media audiences or users are themselves audience gatekeepers, negative messages and dis/misinformation are disseminated.

In an ethnic-polarized society like Nigeria, social media tools have been used to propagate ethnic views and sentiments rather than sincere reasons for tackling security challenges in the entire country. Social media users are not regulated by state's institutional regulatory bodies because of its operating tools and mechanism. This lack of institutional control has negatively impacted on the national security. The audiences that have assumed gatekeeping roles promotes the dark part or side of social media, which Barccarella, Wagner, Kietzman and McCarthy (2018) decried in their study. Though, social media has been used in positive ways to promote citizens views about governance, economy and security, lately, it has been abused. In online communications and socially-mediated conversations, participants promote social bonding and respect, but should shun hate speech and subversion of truth. Social media users should bear in mind that, "the anonymity of social media and resulting lack of accountability exacerbate toxic online behavior".

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Gloria Eberechukwu Nwodu holds her first and second degrees in Mass Communication and currently doing her PhD in Mass Communication. She is a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbaram, Anambra State Nigeria.

Gloria Nwodu is a growing scholar who has published widely both in local and international journals, her area of research interest is International, Development and Health Communication.

Chinwe Beatrice Ezeokeis a lecturer at the Department of Mass Communication, NnamdiAzikiwe University, AwkaAnambra State Nigeria.

She holds a PhD in Mass Communication. Ezeoke, C. B. has published both in local and international journals and she is interested in Research, International, Development and Health Communication

Dr. Nonye Benedeth Ezeaka holds her first degree in Mass Communication. She obtains her M.Sc and Ph.D degrees in Mass Communication from ChukwuemekaOdumegwuOjukwu University Igbariam (formerly Anambra State University).

She is currently a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication ChukwuemekaOdumegwuOjukwu University Igbariam, Anambra State Nigeria. Dr. Ezeaka is widely published and her works have been abstracted in Goggle Scholar, Research gate etc. Her research interest is in Development/Health Communication. She is a member of several professional bodies, and a prolific writer and