



Online Newspapers and the Comment Sections: Perception and Use

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Development in online communication within the last decade which coincided with the advent of web2.0 technologies has enabled user generated content online. This development saw the evolve of print newspapers to it online version. The comment platform is the space attached beneath an online newspaper where readers register their views on the news content. This place of deliberation which serves to gauge public opinion on the affairs of the nation can be muddled with users view of the content of new stories, the news media and its comment section. Research has shown that readers of online newspapers use the comment section for various purposes. This work focused on online Nigerian newspaper and its readers, Thus, it examined users' perception of Nigerian news sites and its online comment section as well as investigating the various uses of the comment section by Nigerian online media users. It hinged on the Uses and Gratification theory. Online survey method was adopted to distribute five hundred copies of online questionnaires with a return rate of 406 copies. Data was collected and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings revealed that most readers of Nigerian news sites perceive news content as biased and that affiliation of news site to a particular zone affects readers view of the news stories. In addition, it discovered that the comment section of online Nigerian news site is used mostly for sharing ideas

Keywords: Online newspaper; comment section; perception and use.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Development in online communication within the last decade which coincided with the advent of web2.0 technologies has enabled user generated content online and has influenced deliberative democracy, journalism and public opinion. This development has further drawn the attention of scholars from different fields of social sciences. The print media is one area that has been transformed with the emergence of internet technologies and as such became increasingly the focus of these scholarly discourses. Among the emerging developments is the transition of the print media to an electronic version, which has also produced the online comment section. These comment sections as argued could be seen as a digital version of letters to the editor which was previously dominant in the print version of newspapers. Online newspapers today allow users to comment on news stories through the comment section [1] This avenue provides readers the opportunity to contribute and deliberate on news contents. Commenting on online news stories is seen as the most widely form of online engagement. Through a democratic theory perspective, discourses emanating from the comment section can be considered as a positive improvement which promotes freedom of speech [2]

Though prior studies have revealed that comments from readers are mostly prejudiced [3] researches have begun to explore in the areas of online users' perception of media, the effects of the comments and the uses of the comment sections [4] Additionally, the overall portrayal of a news story can be reinforced by the readers' comments, mostly when the news story tilts towards negativity such as crises. In cases like this, the judgment is regularly unfair, reason being that negative news as research has shown, have greater impact on an individual's information analysis [5] Furthermore, perception and contributions of users can also be influenced by the status (highly educated or not educated) of other commenters. Thus, it is perceived that comments from the high-status users are more convincing than their counterparts [6] There is scarcity of studies in Nigeria investigating the perception of Nigerian news site, its comments section as well as their uses. Therefore, the objectives of this present study are;

a) To examine users' perception of news sites and its online comment section.

b) To determine the various uses of the comment section by Nigerian online media users.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 New Site and Comment Section; Perception and Use

Perception is personal manifestation of how one views the world that is coloured by many social cultural elements. Markus and Kitayama [7] proposed that people have varied perceptions of self and others and these variations can be observed when comparing two separate cultures or when two cultures converge. Perception is involved in media use through the use of sensory and cognitive method to analyse and interpret information. The media expose people to the knowledge of the world around them. Through this exposure, views and opinions about the world are shaped including also, peoples view towards the media. Attitude toward the media varies, it can be generalized or aimed towards a specified topic carried by the media. The work of Kohring and Matthes [8] identified three basic types of perception towards the media which are: *trust in the media*, *perceived hostility of the media* and *perceived influence of the media*. Works of various scholars have proven that audience perception of an online media is vital as it directly or indirectly affect a lot of social and political behaviours in its comment section. These three perceptions all relate to the way users react and perceive news stories from online media thus its connected to their views, behaviours and comments originating in the comment section of such news site. They lead to audience motivation, power and can cause changes in behaviour and attitude. The works of [9,10,11]; discovered that perception of comments can be influenced by age, conflict avoidance, personality traits and partisan identity. In addition to these variables, Muddiman and Stroud [12] also proposed that characteristics of an individual or the context of news stories affects the perceptions of comments generated by deliberations from commenters.

The earliest studies conducted toward understanding user participation in online media was mainly based on taking inventory of recent interactive features available for user participation, like the studies of Neuberger and Nuernbergk [13] From the works of Roth [14] 0;

Salonen and Karjaluoto [15]; Saldaña and Rosenberg [16], it is shown that in the study of some news media website news production, only the last stage of news interpretation is left for user participation. This means that what users can do is to react to professionally produced content via the comment sections. But, in terms of what individuals use the media for, surveys have shown that users have little trouble verbalizing their needs when using the internet [17,18,19] Several studies have been carried out to understand the role of users from the users' perspective. One of the significant questions asked in this area is to find out the extent to which people are interested in contributing at all. Some survey researches carried out on this issue discovered that in general, there is small interest in an active input to journalistic content or association with other media users [20,21] They went further to explain that the kind of interest users engage in do not instantly show their enthusiasm for such participation and the meaning they ascribe to their act. Making a comment on a news article for instance can be determined by the commenters displeasure for a particular policy in a news reports, while on the other hand, another commenter will be more disturbed with the method the journalists are evaluating it.

Katz et al. [22] argued that available media choice competes to satisfy individual needs. Thus, there exists competition not only between the internet and other traditional media, but among each option in the internet itself as well. History has shown that new media often create new satisfactions and new motivations among various audiences [23] Thus, these new dimensions of users' motivations and satisfactions need to be identified and satisfied. Although motivations for internet use may vary among individuals, situations, and media vehicles, most studies on the uses of the media explore them based on some or all of the following dimensions: relaxation, companionship, habit, passing time, entertainment, social interaction, information/surveillance, arousal, and escape.

3. REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Examining how and why students use a university computer bulletin board, Rafeali [24] in his study found that users seldom skip the factual or informative messages, which indicates their strong interest in messages of this type. Khatri [25] also suggested that the most

important reason why people use the Internet is to gather various kinds of information. Lin [26] found similar results when she examined online services adoption. She found that online services are perceived primarily as information-laden media, and that audiences who need to create more outlets for information reception are the ones most likely to adopt online services.

Internet use is also linked to a series of instrumental as well as entertainment-oriented gratifications. Some scholars ranked diversion/entertainment as more important than exchanging information in triggering media use [27,28]. Rafeali [24] (1988) found that the primary motivation of online news media users are recreation, entertainment, and diversion, followed by learning what others think about controversial issues by communicating with people who matter in a community. This view is accordance with the study of Ferguson and Perse [29] which found four main motivations for Internet use: entertainment, passing time, relaxation/escape and social information. Entertainment content appears to satisfy users' needs for escapism, hedonistic pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment, or emotional release McQuail [30]. Examining the Internet as a source of political information, Johnson and Kaye [31] found that people use the web primarily for surveillance and voter guidance and secondarily for entertainment, social utility and excitement.

Friemel and Dötsch [32] investigated in his research to discover whether online reader comments offer a representative outlook of news media and how the perceived public opinion is affected. Through an online survey of users of eight Swiss online newspapers, the findings revealed that due to the fact that those who read comments are different from those who write the comments - in contrast to their age, political exposure, gender- the comment section is seen not to be representative. It showed that those commenting more are likely male who are middle aged with a political viewpoint that is further right than the readers. This bias emanating from the claim that those who write are politically further correct than those reading leads to a twisted public opinion. Nevertheless, the view published in the comment section is taken as the opinion of the news site's users and the bias is lost to both the writers and readers. In a corresponding research, Ajiboye [33], conducted a research that analysed the discursive strategies employed by users on comment forum and how news stories influence

views. He examined 201 users comment attached to news stories on the social and political problems in Nigeria. The result showed that readers are social actors that make up a cyber-discursive community to affect social attitudes and views. The readers disseminate knowledge based on social status quo or political context. The researcher discerned three ideological approaches which is the fact that readers, seen as social actor use hyperbole culminating into generalization and polarization.

Milioni et al. [34] carried out a research to discover whether user generated content via the comment section develops or alters media agenda and contest opinion displayed by the news media. The popular belief on the significance of the mass media is that professional journalists and editors have the vital knowledge needed to select stories that make the news, thus emphasizing their role as 'gatekeepers'. The authors therefore, content analyzed users' comments posted beneath 174 news articles on three Greek online newspapers and 5 news portal's websites. The study findings revealed that low rate of users' engagement in raising new issues and providing new information in the comment section. Additionally, it showed that only few commenters use the spaces to convey information. Conversely, the study found out that in most threaded comments, commenters countered journalist's point of view while expressing their disagreement. This result confirms the assumption of Schultz [35] which claimed that online discussion spaces will be related to the content of the media site.

4. USES AND GRATIFICATION THEORY

Uses and gratification theory (UGT) is a people-centred method that concentrates on what people do with media, in contrast to what media does to people. The basic groundwork of this theory was conducted within the United Kingdom's 1964 election by Jay Blumer and Denis McQuail in [30]. This theory aims to comprehend the reasons individuals search for the media and their uses of this media. This theory sees the consumers of media contents as active not passive as was previously the case. In the mass communication activity, this theory ascribes the work of correlating need satisfaction and the choice of the media solely on consumers Severin and Tankard [36]. Consumers in this theory purposively search for media to satisfy specific needs like fun, social engagement,

information gathering, debates and discourses [22]. The basic questions this theory asks are thus a.) why do people use the media? b.) what do they use it for? The uses and gratifications have always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass medium, such as newspapers, radio and television, and now the internet, which receives the significance via this approach [37]. The uses and gratifications theory has been widely used, and also is better suited, for studies of online use. In the online environment, users are even more actively engaged communication participants, compared to other traditional media. The theory also suggests that people consciously choose the medium that could satisfy their needs and that audiences are able to recognize their reasons for making media choices [22].

5. METHODOLOGY

This research involves the study of online behavior and uses, thus the adoption of online survey which directly targeted online users. The sampling frame consist of civil servants drawn from the twenty-four (24) ministries and departments in the Federal Civil Service Secretariat, Minna Branch. The civil service workers were adopted for this study as they are considered appropriate and enlightened adults who are more likely to be conversant with the internet, news site and political sphere of the nation [38] (Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Zickular & Madden, 2012). The Table 1 shows the ministries/departments and the number of civil servants in each.

A study sample of 500 respondents were drawn from the total population of 1,234 civil servants from each ministry in the Federal secretariat. This sample size was determined using Comrey and Lee [39] sample size technique which provided the following scales of sample adequacy. Sample size range from 50 (Very poor) to >1000 (Excellent).

5.1 Sampling Procedure

List-based probability sampling method involving simple random sampling was deployed. The sampling was conducted in stages. Thus:

Stage 1: list of civil servants' and their accompanied email addresses were obtained from the nominal row of each ministry.

Table 1. Sampling frame of respondents

Ministries/Departments	No of Civil Servants	Ministries/ Departments	No of civil Servants
Min. of Trade and Investment	47	Code of Conduct	36
Public Compliant Commission	32	Nat. Population Commission	39
Min. of Labor & Employment	122	Nomadic Education	58
Education Research Department	62	Legal Aid Counsel	41
Min. of Agriculture	54	NAFDAC	31
Federal Pay Office	46	National Museum	28
Ministry of Works	48	Mass Literacy	41
Ministry of Housing	51	Nig. Prisons Service	54
Min. of Education	65	National Sports commission	45
National Bureau of Statistics	38	National Boundary Commission	48
Federal Fire Service	68	Ministry of Health	65
Min. of Environment	47	National Teachers Institute	
Total	1,234		

Stage 2: The respondents (civil servants) used were selected from each nominal row by assigning a random number to each entry using excels simple random number function.

Stage 3: Once the respondents have been assigned a random number, the list was sorted out by the random number that generated a subset of 20 respondents from each ministry, (except for the Ministry of labor and Employment which got 40 respondents due to its lager number of civil servants) totaling 500 respondents. This random selection from each of the ministry ensures that each respondent had an equal chance of participating.

Stage 4: The selected subset or respondents were sent an 'invitation to participate' letter with an online survey questionnaire on surveymonkey.com through their email addresses.

5.2 Data Collection

Online questionnaire which served as the instrument for data collection and administered by 'Survey Monkey' - a service provider hosting the questionnaire, included a brief description and purpose of research, a consent page and pre-coded items. The respondents were directed to click on a provided link which directed them to the online questionnaire page. The pre-coded items looked into the issues raised by the research objectives. The question items were in three parts, the first section included respondent's demographic information like, age,

gender, academic qualification, occupation. The second section examined the users' perception of online newspaper and its comment section. The third section examined the uses of the online newspaper and its comment section. The questions were a combination of open-ended, close ended question items and multiple-choice question. The details of these online survey were entered into SPSS for analysis.

6. RESULTS

6.1 Data Presentation

Fig. 1 and Table 2 represents gender distribution, age range distribution and academic qualification of the respondents. On *gender distribution*, it shows that the greater percentage of the respondents are male and stands at 66% while the females make up the rest of the population at 34%. This. On the *age range* distribution, the data depicts respondents with the lowest age range of 25years and below at 11%. The greater majority of the respondents were within the age range of 35years and above, followed by 36% of respondents within the age range of 26 to 35years. The last of the demographic variable is the *academic qualification* of the respondents. Degree/HND and above as seen from the figure stands at 71% which makes up the highest number of the respondents, followed by Diploma and NCE holders at 20%. These statistics shows that the males within this region of the country are mostly in the civil service than the females and that their level of education is quite commendable.

Table 2. Demography of respondents

Gender	Male	266	66%
	Female	140	34%
Age Range	Age below 25	45	11%
	Age 26 to 35	145	36%
	Age 35 and above	216	53%
Education	FSLC	35	9%
	Diploma/NCE	83	20%
	Degree/HND and above	288	71%

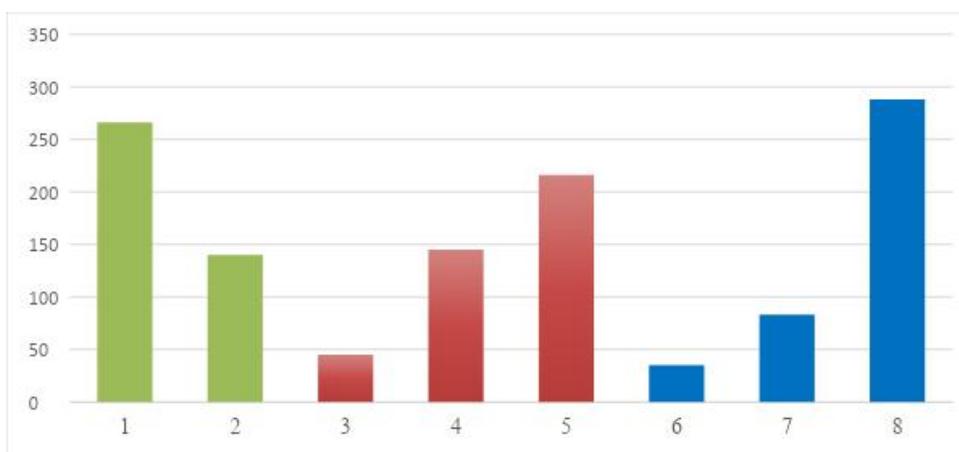


Fig. 1. Demography of respondents

Table 3. Internet access, experience and knowledge

What is the average time spent online in a day	1-4 hours	192	47%
How long ago did you start visiting news site?	8-12 hours	95	23%
	> 12 hours	29	7%
	Less than 2 hours	90	22%
	Last 1 year	64	16%
	5 years and more	282	70%
	Last three years	53	13%

This table show internet usage, use of news site and status profile of respondents. Since this research deals with the use of news sites and it comment section, it became paramount to assess the use of internet and the time spent on it. The first question in this variable aimed at finding out how much time respondents dedicate in a day in the use of the internet. The largest number of respondents representing 47% of the population stated that their use of the internet daily is within 1-4hours.This is followed by respondents that spend 8- 12 hours on the

internet with 23%. The least number of respondents making up 7% of the population spends more than 12 hours on the internet. On the area of using and visiting a news site, 282 respondents making up 70% of the respondents showed that they started visiting and using news sites more than five years ago. Those with three years' experience make up 13% of the population. These statistics adds up to the fact that the respondents are knowledgeable in the use of the internet, thus the adoption of these civil servants for the purpose of this survey.

This question item in trying to find out the factors that leads to acerbity in the comment section of online Nigerian newspapers asked the respondents to identify their reaction when they read news stories that do not resonate with their view. Respondents who make up of 50% of the population stated that they are indifferent to whichever way the news is reported. This is followed by a close gap of 48% respondents whose attitude to opposing news story is calm opposition. Only a minority of 2% indicated that their response to opposing news story results to hateful opposition. Respondents in the second question item were asked what their perception of online news stories are. The data showed that the majority of the respondents comprising 70% of the population believe that news reportage is biased while the rest of the population making up 33% of the respondents believe that news report is balanced. The respondents were asked in the second question item what their attitude in the comment section is, a majority of 42% stated that their attitude is very civil. This is followed by 110 of the respondents whose attitude are civil. Respondents whose attitude are uncivil and very uncivil make up 6% and 4% of the population

respectively. 21% of the respondents are moderate. The level of indifference among the respondents is very significant, this might be as a result of their perception of news stories which many of them believed are biased.

This section looks at the issue of news site brand, affiliation to a particular news site and its influence on an individual's perception of comments from a news story. Question item 1 sought out to find out if respondents view media reports as hostile of which a majority of the respondents constituting 72% of the population said No. Respondents were asked if the brand of a news site affects their view of the comments section of a news story, 74% said Yes while 26% said No. On the aspect of affiliation to news site affecting an individual's comments saw a majority of the respondents comprising 78% of the population stating that affiliation affects their comments. Nigeria is made up of six geo political regions dominated by specific ethnic groups. The statistics from this table revealed that a news site domiciled from a particular is termed to be biased in its news reportage by users from another region.

Table 4. Reaction and views and attitude

	Calm Opposition	195	48%
Reaction to Opposing News Story	Hateful opposition	10	2%
	Indifference	201	50%
Perception of News Story	News stories are balanced	122	33%
	News stories are biased	284	70%
Respondents attitude in the comment section	Very Uncivil	15	4%
	Uncivil	24	6%
	Moderate	85	21%
	Civil	110	27%
	Very Civil	172	42%

Table 5. Perception on news site affiliation and news reportage

Do you view the media as hostile in news representation?	Yes	114	0.28
	No	292	0.72
Does the brand name of the news site affect your view of the comment section?	It does	302	0.74
	It does not	104	0.26
Do you think affiliation of news site to a particular geopolitical zone affect readers' comments in the comment section?	Yes	318	0.78
	No	88	0.22

Table 6. Views on news sites' comment section

	Frequency	%
Comment sections are useful	273	67%
Comment sections are not useful	133	33%
Comment sections should not be moderated	354	87%
Comment sections should be moderated	52	13%

The questions in this section are targeted at determining respondents view of the comment section. The issues centers on moderating the comment section and finding out if the comment section is useful. Those who believe that the comment section is useful are of a larger majority. 87% of the population which represents majority of the respondents agreed that the comment section should be moderated. In contrast to Mckenzie (2017) findings which revealed that reputation and legal concerns led to the shutting down of News24 comment section, majority of the respondents in this study believed that the comment sections are used but should be moderated.

This question item aimed to find out the various use of the comment section by the respondents. The options are; to share ideas, to correct misinformation, to gather information, to entertainment, for relaxation, and to take part in

a debate. Most of the respondents representing 30% of the population believes their use of the comment section was mostly to share ideas. This shows that the comment section, like the public square is mainly a place of deliberation. The findings emanating from the research carried out by Erijevce (2014) showed that the comment section was mostly used for guidance, convenience, information seeking and entertainment, this study though it agreed with most of Erjavec's [40] result, showed that majority of Nigerian users of the comment section use it majorly for sharing of ideas.

The data in this chart shows that most respondents comprising 346 of the population use the comment section as social forum and the majority are of the opinion that affiliation of news site to a geopolitical zone has no effect on their use of the comment platform.

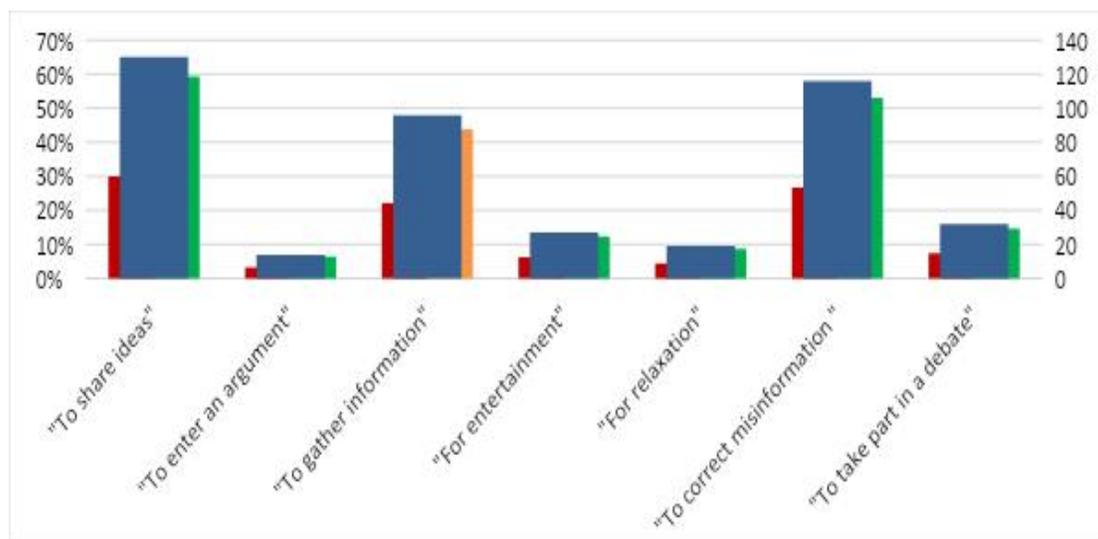


Fig. 2. Uses of the comment section

Table 7. Affiliation and social function of commenting

		Frequency	%
Do you use the comment section as a medium for socializing?	Yes	70	17%
	No	336	83%
Does affiliation of news site to geographical zone affect your use of the comment section?	It does	110	27%
	It does not	296	73%

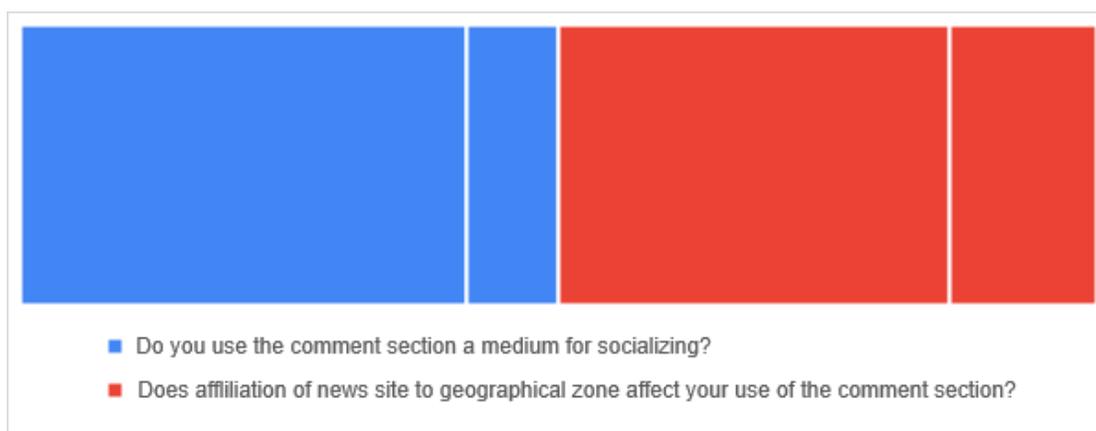


Fig. 3. Affiliation and social function of commenting

7. CONCLUSION

The study specifically looked at the perception and uses of online Nigerian news site and its comment section. It revealed that the comment section of online Nigerian newspapers is useful but should be moderated. More so, it discovered that news site affiliation to a geopolitical zone, its brand name affects readers perception of news content thus resulting in bias. From the analysis of the responses, the study showed that the comment section is used for several purposes such as sharing ideas, correcting misinformation, gathering information, entertainment, relaxation, taking part in a debate. The comment section according to majority of the respondents is used as a social outlet.

Erjavec [40] found a similar result in his work which dwelt on discovering the reasons why people read hate speech in online comment. Basing his work on the Uses and Gratification theory, as it is in this present research, he found out that the need for guidance, convenience, information seeking, entertainment or social

utility were motivations for reading speech. Comments sections are avenues created by news sites to help inspire civil interactions emerging from the contents of a news story. This implies that contents have to be objective in order to produce a balanced discourse from the readers. Majority of the respondents in this research believe news reportage is biased and affiliation of news sites affects news content. Thus, it is recommended that measures be established to ensure contents and news stories from news site are viewed as objective.

DISCLAIMER

The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly use products in our area of research and country. There is absolutely no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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