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# Nigerian Communication Scholars' Perception of Social Media Hate Speech Regulation in a Culturally Diverse Nation-State

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## Abstract

The Internet and digital media technologies have opened a wide range of communication avenues and expanded the public sphere. Notable among these avenues which offer an alternative communication model are social media, with attendant merits of interactivity, increased participation in public discourse, open-source information dissemination, easy content generation and distribution, disintermediation, instantaneous transmission, low cost of usage and narrowness of information boundaries. Conversely, hate speech is one of the attendant ills of the social media, with far-reaching consequences on victims' rights and societal well-being. Due to its damaging effects, social media hate speech has generated controversies which have attracted legal and administrative regulations. The diversity in the socio-cultural composition of Nigeria makes what constitutes social media hate speech, the multiplicity of its effects and its regulation more controversial. Meanwhile, media education is crucial to shaping communication policies and giving direction to regulations. This study considered media scholars as crucial stakeholders in determining the direction of hate speech regulation. The study adopted descriptive survey research design and administered self-structured online questionnaire on 106 scholars drawn from 46 higher institutions offering communication-related courses in Southwest Nigeria. The study revealed that communication scholars had a high level of knowledge about the prevalence of social media hate speech and its regulations. They perceived political reasons and suppression of expression as the motivations for government regulation of social media hate speech in Nigeria. Results also showed that Nigeria's cultural diversity posed no challenge to social media hate speech regulation, and regulation had no implications on her unity. The study recommended government sincerity, sound legal framework, sites'

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operators' self-regulation and ethical re-orientation as measures to effectively regulate social media hate speech.

**Keyword:** communication scholars, hate speech, hate speech regulation, cultural diversity

## Introduction

The increasing penetration of the Internet, its wide range of applications and digital technological devices have in no small measure expanded the public sphere globally. Described by Wessler and [Freudenthaler \(2018\)](#) as ‘the social space in which different opinions are expressed, problems of general concern are discussed and collective solutions are developed communicatively’, the public sphere continues to expand as the digital media gain more popularity, its devices more usage and its applications more relevance to human communication needs. Social network is one popular Internet application that has contributed immensely to the expansion of the public sphere. Otherwise called social media, social network sites are different digital communication platforms that offer participation, conversation, sharing, collaboration and linkage through the use of special techniques that are Internet-based ([Dominick, 2011](#)). Social media offer an alternative unmediated communication model to that of the mainstream media by engendering citizens’ participation in public discourse, seamless conversation on issues of concern among peers, sharing of contents for surveillance, opinion building through feedbacks and comments, all forms of collaboration for various aspects of development and linkage at interpersonal and group levels that facilitates group identities for various purposes ([Dominick, 2011](#)). Social media have grown exponentially and revolutionized human communicative interactions globally. They have also modified social norms and values by turning content sharing and distribution into vital social desire ([Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017](#)). [McQuail \(2010\)](#) observes the uniqueness associated with digital media usage to include interactivity, disintermediation, opportunity of vertical and horizontal communication models, great speed of transmission, low usage cost and absence of information boundaries. These unique characteristics offer social media users boundless communication opportunities through which frontiers of human interactions have been expanded.

Notwithstanding the huge benefits of social media, the absence of professional guidelines, institutional mediation and regulatory frameworks in their usage opens them to a number of issues that are inherently problematic. Oriola (2014) enumerates some of the limitations of social media to include low contents quality due to absence of filtering mechanisms, information decentralization due to multiplicity of platforms, easy contents manipulation through digital devices, information overload, low level of content decency and accuracy, security threat and sharing of offensive contents. The pitfalls associated with social media usage have generated immense debate about the need for regulation. Hate speech is one of the areas of infraction on human rights associated with social media usage, which has generated concerns for regulation.

Hate speech, according to Waltman and Ashely (2017) is any expression that attacks, insults or offends a person or group on the basis of their social attributes. It is any expression of hatred or hostility that attacks the victim's race, religion, gender, ethnic origin, health status, cultural leaning, social orientation or disability. Hate speech could be detrimental to the mental, psychological and social well-being of the victims by denigrating human dignity, promoting discrimination and fostering discord, which can lead to violence and crime (Nielson, 2017). Ogbuoshi et al. (2019) contend that hate speech spreads like wildfire when expressed through social media, becomes more harmful to the victims and exerts destructive consequences to humanity. Waltman and Ashely (2017) posit that social media hate speech leads to political instability when social, political and cultural differences are manipulated for political benefits. In essence, the public sphere which the social media has transformed through improved communicative interactions can be negatively affected through expressions of hate.

In spite of its negative effects and the debate it has generated in contemporary times, regulating social media hate speech has become challenging. This is because arriving at a universally acceptable definition of hate speech has become difficult due to its elastic nature, implications on free speech and varied applicability in different cultural settings (Oriola, 2022). The challenge in social media hate speech regulation lies in the controversies it has generated especially in a democratic and multi-cultural society such as Nigeria. It should be noted that Nigeria is a growing democracy which comprises over 250 ethnic groups, each with distinct

cultural and linguistic compositions. The interpretation of an expression as hate speech in one socio-cultural setting may not be so considered in another. Thus, the cultural diversity of the Nigerian society makes the regulation of social media hate speech more controversial.

Meanwhile, media literacy - the ability of an individual to decipher and critically consider media content - is a guide to media usage in the contemporary world of information multiplicity. McNulty (2021) asserts that media literacy is an educational tool through which new ideas, cultures and perspectives about media can be learnt. He observes that media education shapes media usage and regulation, just as regulation has implications for usage and the nature of public sphere prevailing in a society. Media educators in higher institutions of learning provide training for industries, policy makers and society. As key stakeholders, communication scholars should be knowledgeable in the requirements and implications of regulating hate speech on social media. Also, their views can be useful in shaping regulatory policies in this regard. Therefore, this study examined the perception of communication scholars about social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria, taking into consideration the controversies generated due to the country's cultural diversity.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

Media regulation has been criticized by media practitioners, scholars and social crusaders to be detrimental to freedom of expression as a fundamental human right and democratic ideal (Dominick, 2011; McQuail, 2010). Critics such as McNulty (2021) allude to the enormous influence of the media, especially in a democracy, as the motivation for regulating the media. Given that social media offer boundless alternatives that have expanded the communication landscape, their regulation has far-reaching effects on the public sphere. Regulation of social media could limit social interactions and connections, lead to isolation, hamper diversity of opinions, discourage citizens' participation in public discourse, limit free speech and disallow alternative communication model to elitist mainstream media. On the other hand, proponents such as Nielson (2017) argue for social media regulation considering the negative consequences of their usage such as the spread of hate speech. Due to their relative power of anonymity, social networks provide fertile grounds for hate expressions which, according to Nielsen (2017), result in depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, crime and violence. In spite of the argument for regulation due to its

attendant ills, the cultural diversity of Nigeria could pose challenges to setting legal boundaries for social media hate expressions. This is because the country comprises over 250 ethnic groups, making the definition of hate speech controversial among her culturally diverse groups. This study examined the perception of communication scholars, who are key stakeholders in distributing knowledge and shaping policies, about social media hate speech regulation within the cultural multiplicity of the Nigerian nation-state.

### **Research Objectives**

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To determine the level of knowledge of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria among communication scholars.
2. To assess the perception of communication scholars about government's motivation for social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria.
3. To analyse the opinions of communication scholars about the direction of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria.
4. To examine the opinions of communication scholars about the implications of the direction of social media hate speech regulation on the cultural diversity of the Nigerian nation-state.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of knowledge of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria among communication scholars?
2. What is the perception of communication scholars about government's motivation for social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria?
3. What are the opinions of communication scholars about the direction of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria?
4. What are the opinions of communication scholars about the implications of the direction of social media hate speech regulation on the cultural diversity of the Nigerian nation-state?

## Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the public sphere theory propounded by the Jürgen Habermas in his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in German in 1962 and later made popular by its translation into English in 1989. Wessler and Freudenthaler (2018) trace the etymology of public sphere to the German *öffentlichkeit*, ('the public' or 'publicness') referring to an aggregate of participants in communication or the attribute of being visible or subjected to public scrutiny. The authors describe public sphere as the central space for public discourse where issues of general concern are discussed, opinions expressed, problems identified and solutions proffered through communicative interactions. In his critical discourse, Habermas (1989) observes the extinction of the public sphere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the rebirth of affirmative publicity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In response to what he considers as massification and atomization of the public by the media, Habermas asserts that public sphere gives impetus to fundamental rights to freedom of expression, assembly, association and publication of opinions without undue control.

The theory holds that public communication can be considered from the descriptive and normative perspectives (Habermas, 1989). From the descriptive perspective, public sphere can be understood from the nature, scope and pervasiveness of human communicative interactions aided by technology from the era of enlightenment to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Gripsrud et al., 2010). The invention and penetration of the Internet and digital technologies have provided leverage to citizens to find alternative avenues to participate in public affairs. Social networks are examples of such prominent avenues, propelled by technological advancements, which have widened the public sphere. Flichy (2010) contend that the Internet enables amateur citizens to contribute to issues of interest, form and challenge opinions and influence a stream of actions through professionally unmediated digital platforms. Citizens have thus gained social recognition that is significant to varied fields, especially politics. The normative perspective to the public sphere stipulates the ideal nature of public communication, considers policies and conditions to regulate it towards the attainment of some goals and prescribes measures to assess extant communicative interactions (Habermas, 1989; Wessler & Freudenthaler, 2018). The normative perspective to public sphere relates to the regulation of hate speech on social media. As hate speech debate gains higher

momentum, the global popularity of social media makes its effects far-reaching on victims and the society, thereby justifying legal and administrative efforts at regulating such expressions. The cultural diversity of the Nigerian society could have contributed to the controversy on social media hate speech regulation, which also has implications on freedom of expression. Against the normative perspective to the public sphere theory, this study examined the perception of communication scholars about social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria.

### Literature Review

The prevalence of hate speech on the digital media, its effects and the nature of regulatory controls it has attracted have generated empirical research attention in recent times. This underscores the significance of the menace not only to social crusade but also to the global research community. Koncavar (2013) asserted that hate speech as a contemporary phenomenon has existed in the mainstream media but the presence of institutional and professional regulations limits its spread. The author observes that social media create the public sphere that enhances interactivity on the one hand and provides a fertile ground for the regeneration and prevalence of hate speech on the other. Hate speech serves ideological functions and its real meaning is not universally recognized, making it difficult to find solutions to the problems it generates in democratic settings (Koncavar, 2013).

In their study that examined the moral and legal effects of hate speech on the society and the journalism profession, Alkali et al. (2017) established the prevalence of hate on social media platforms in Nigeria. They reported that respondents in the quantitative survey aspects of the study understood that hate speech and foul language have legal consequences to journalism and society but they lacked the knowledge of the extant legal provisions to check them. The researchers also established that the respondents perceived hate speech and foul language to have serious consequences on morality, victims' rights and societal well-being. Findings of the qualitative aspect of the study revealed that there were adequate extant legal provisions in Nigeria to check the spread of hate speech and foul language on the digital media. The hate speech regulations in Nigeria include Section 95 of the 2010 Electoral Amendment Act; the Political Party Code of Conduct of 2013, both of which criminalize hate expressions during electioneering campaigns; and the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015, which criminalizes various misconducts including hate speech on the digital



media; and the Hate Speech Bill of 2019. According to Alkali et al. (2017), poor ethical standards, lack of awareness of professional dictates of journalism and poor enforcement of relevant extant laws as challenges of regulating social media hate speech in Nigeria.

Gelashvili (2018) observed that social media hate speech could hardly go unnoticed and could target any individual regardless of their location, social status or identity. Its damaging consequences - marginalization, social labeling, stereotyping and dehumanization – justify the debate for regulatory strategies, the adequacy of which Gelashvili examined on the protection of individuals and groups. The researcher reported that decisive regulation of social media hate speech was not performed by governments who were duty-bound to protect and fulfil human rights, but by social media platforms which are private organizations with limited opportunities to regulate expressions. Gelashvili (2018) adduced states' lack of political will to legislate and enforce such legislation against hate speech, social media infrastructure complications, complexity in defining hate speech due to cultural diversity and the disparity between international human rights law and states' legislation as some of the factors responsible for weak social media hate speech regulation. The views of Gelashvili (2018) connect with those of Alkali et al. (2017), pointing to common challenges of hate speech regulations in different climes.

Ayansola and Oamen (2017) asserted that social network sites offer fertile grounds for the spread of hate speech among political gladiators in Nigeria in their struggle for political power. In their study, excerpts of social media hate expressions from politically exposed persons were analysed and results showed that hate expression from political actors in Nigeria were legitimized through marketing. They reported that hate speech, which had negative consequences on the Nigerian political process, was marketed by political gladiators as a cultural product through innovation, validation and diffusion. A study by Olufunke (2019) also revealed that hate speech was widespread in the Nigerian society and that it had potentially disruptive effects on the progress and development of the country. The author reported that hate speech had tenets that were inimical to human dignity and tolerance, and its consequences on victims include distress and seclusion from public debate. Whether on digital platforms as observed by Ayansola and Oamen (2017) or on other platforms, the ills of hate speech noted by Olufunke (2019) are the same.

Oriola (2022) assessed the regulatory efforts of government in Nigeria to check the spread of hate speech. He identified the extant Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015, the impending Independent National Commission on the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill sponsored by Senator Muhammed Musa Sanni in 2019 in the Senate and the Reviewed (6<sup>th</sup> Edition) National Broadcasting Code of 2020 as regulatory frameworks against hate speech in Nigeria. He reported that the legal frameworks for regulating hate expressions in Nigeria was lopsided and replete with ambiguity due to multiplicity of laws. He identified the absence of clear-cut constitutional provision as the challenge of regulation and recommended constitutional foundation-laying for hate speech legislation to gain legitimacy, revamping of the judicial system, ethical revolution among citizens and social responsibility in media practice. It is noteworthy that the recommendations by Oriola (2022) will assist in addressing the challenges associated with hate regulation in Nigeria, as espoused by other scholars.

In a study that examined undergraduates' perception of social media regulation in Nigeria, Abdullateef (2021) reported that majority of respondents attested to the exponential growth of social media, the attendant prevalence of hate speech and misinformation, and identified Twitter as the most harmful social network site. Out of the study sample, 56 per cent did not support government regulation of such sites while 46 per cent supported it. The study established that government regulation will increase users' interests in accessing social network sites and suggested unrestricted access to information, users' self-regulation, enforcement of extant laws and good governance as alternatives to government regulation of social media. In spite of the possibility of increasing public interest in social media usage reported in Abdullateef (2021), there is still need for regulation to check abuse as observed by Alkali (2017), Ayansola and Oamen (2017), Olufunke (2019) and Oriola (2022).

No doubt, the role of social media in spreading hate speech has come under intense scrutiny among civil society groups. In response, social network sites have instituted measures to check the menace. Siripurapu and Merrow (2021) stated that social network sites are now complying with the laws of their countries of operation by restricting speech. On regulation of hate speech and harmful contents in the first half of 2020, social media platforms blocked millions of harmful contents: Facebook removed 32 million contents; YouTube removed 955,000 hateful conducts and 601,000

abusive and harassing contents (Siripurapu & Merrow [2021](#)). On the side of governments, Siripurapu and Merrow ([2021](#)) reported that in Germany, the law required that social networks remove illegal content, including hate speech, or be heavily fined; in the USA, government promoted liability protection and self-regulation; in India, government used Internet shutdown and removal of content; in Kenya, government provided that harmful contents were removed; in Brazil, there was an impending legislation to regulate social media; in Australia, there was a law that required social media platforms to quickly pull down illegal contents or face huge fines; in Russia, online media were strictly monitored by government agencies; in Saudi Arabia, social media were extensively censored; in China, social media were censored by law and Western platforms were banned; in Ethiopia the law required that hate speech and fake news contents were removed within a day and government cuts off access to erring platforms. In Nigeria, there are the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015 and the Reviewed (6<sup>th</sup> Edition) National Broadcasting Code of 2020 which forbids expression of hatred on digital and broadcast media respectively. Also, the 2022 Electoral Amendment Act and Political Party Code of Conduct of 2013 criminalize the expressions of hate during election campaigns. In view of the foregoing, this study examined the perception of communication scholars about social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. It used self-structured online questionnaire designed on Google forms to obtain data from communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria – one of the six geopolitical zones in the country. The online survey was conducted in March and April, 2022. The population of the study comprised 46 approved/accredited institutions (universities, polytechnics and monotechnics) offering communication, media studies or related courses in Southwest Nigeria as obtained from [nigeriascholar.com](http://nigeriascholar.com). Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted to select a sample of 18 institutions from the population. At the first stage, the institutions were stratified into universities and polytechnics/monotechnics. At the second stage, the Krejcie and Morgan ([1970](#)) formula was applied to select 18 institutions as sample for the study thus:

$$\frac{X^2 * N * P * (1-P)}{n}$$

$$n = (ME^2 * (N-1) + (X^2 * P * (1-P)))$$

Where  $n$  = sample size

$\chi^2$  = Chi-square for the specified confidence level at 1 degree of freedom

$N$  = Population size

$P$  = Population proportion

$ME$  = Design Margin of Error

$$= \frac{1.96^2 \times 46 \times 0.5(1-0.5)}{0.03^2(46-1) + 1.96^2 \times 0.5(1-0.5)}$$

$$= 18.098$$

$$= 18.098$$

At the third stage, the proportional distribution formula was applied to select sample from each stratum thus:

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Selected Institutions in Southwest Nigeria Offering Communication-Related Courses*

S/N	Institution Category	Pop.	% Distribution	Sampled Departments
1	Federal Universities	4	8.8	1
2	State Universities	6	13	2
3	Private Universities	28	60.8	11
4	Federal Polytechnics/Monotechnics	2	4.3	1
5	State Polytechnics/Monotechnics	4	8.8	2
6	Private Polytechnics/Monotechnics	2	4.3	1
Total		46	100	18

**Note.** Total no. Of institutions = 46; sample institutions = 18; staff population across the sample institutions = 191; study sample = 106

At the last stage, the study sample was selected purposively based on respondents' status as communication scholars and their responses to the Google forms. A total of 191 communication scholars in the selected

institutions/departments accounted for the actual study population while 106 responses from the selected institutions/departments formed the actual sample of the study. The research instrument was administered through the deployment of the Google form link on WhatsApp groups and individual email of the scholars.

## Results

**Table 2**  
*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	74	69.8
Female	32	30.2
Total	106	100
Institution		
University	78	73.6
Polytechnic	15	14.2
Monotechnic	13	12.3
Total	106	100
Employment Status		
Academic Staff	100	94.3
Technical Staff	6	5.7
Total	106	100
Department		
Communication related	106	100
Non-communication related	-	-
Total	106	100
Highest Qualification		
Ph.D.	55	51.9
P.G.D./Master's degree	43	40.6
Bachelor's degree	8	7.5
Total	106	100

Demographic characteristics of the study respondents show that male respondents constituted the majority ( $n=74$ , 69.8 per cent) while female constituted the minority ( $n=32$ , 30.2 per cent). Communication scholars in the employment of universities were in the majority ( $n=78$ , 73.6 per cent), followed by those in polytechnics ( $n=15$ , 14.2) while those in monotechnics

were in the minority ( $n=13$ , 12.3 per cent). This is a true reflection of the Nigerian education system because there are more universities than polytechnics and monotechnics. By nature of employment, the vast majority of the study respondents were academic staff ( $n=100$ , 94.3 per cent) while about five percent were technical staff in the communication departments. As planned, all respondents were teachers/scholars in communication departments of their respective institutions. Technical staff were considered as communication scholars because they offer instructions and practical studio training to students. In terms of academic qualification, about 52 per cent were holders of doctorate ( $n=55$ ), 43 (40.6 per cent) were holders of either Postgraduate Diploma or Master's degree while the minority were holders of bachelor's degree ( $n=8$ , 7.5 per cent). By their profession, nature of employment, department of engagement and qualification, the study respondents were qualified to respond to the subject-matter of this study

Research Question 1: What is the level of knowledge of social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria among communication scholars?

**Table 3**

*Level of Knowledge of Social Media Hate Speech Regulations in Nigeria among Communication Scholars*

Items/Parameters	Known <i>f</i> (%)	Not known <i>f</i> (%)	I don't know <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Std. Dev.
Knowledge of prevalence of Hate Speech in Nigeria	99 (93.4)	3 (2.8)	4 (3.8)	106 (100)	2.89	0.41
Existence of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria	77 (72.6)	16 (15.1)	13 (12.3)	106 (100)	2.60	0.70
Knowledge of recent legislative efforts to further regulate social media hate speech in Nigeria	80 (75.5)	19 (17.9)	7 (6.6)	106 (100)	2.69	0.59
Knowledge of the purpose of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria	81 (76.4)	17 (16)	8 (7.5)	106 (100)	2.69	0.61
Knowledge of the content of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria	57 (53.8)	36 (34)	13 (12.3)	106 (100)	2.41	0.70
Average					2.66	

**Note.** \*\*\*Decision Rule if mean is  $\leq 1.49$  = Indifferent; 1.5 to 2.49 = Not known; 2.5 to 3 = Known

Findings of this study show that generally, communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria had the knowledge of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria (Av.  $\bar{x}$  =2.66). Specifically, they claimed knowledge of all parameters listed to measure their level of knowledge. Majority knew about the prevalence of hate speech ( $n=99$ , 93.4 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.89$ ,  $SD=0.41$ ); existent of social media hate speech regulation ( $n=77$ , 72.6 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.6$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ); recent legislative efforts to further regulate social media hate speech ( $n=80$ , 75.5 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.69$ ,  $SD=0.59$ ); and the purpose of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria ( $n=81$ , 76.4 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.69$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ). It should be noted that when compared to other parameters, a lesser percentage of communication scholars knew the content of social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria ( $n=57$ , 53.8 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.41$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ) though they outnumbered those who did not know ( $n=36$ , 34 per cent) and those who were indifferent ( $n=13$ , 12.3 per cent). These imply that knowledge of extant and impending social media hate speech regulations as well as their purpose was high but knowledge of the content of such regulations was just above average among communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria.

Research Question 2: What is the perception of communication scholars about government's motivation for social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria?

**Table 4**

*Perception of Communication Scholars about Government's Motivation for Social Media Hate Speech Regulation in Nigeria*

Items/Parameters	Agreed $f$ (%)	Disagreed $f$ (%)	I don't know $f$ (%)	Total $f$ (%)	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Std. Dev.
Government regulates social media hate speech for political reasons.	84 (79.2)	18 (17)	4 (3.8)	106 (100)	2.75	0.51
Government regulates social media hate speech to protect individual/group rights	50 (47.2)	48 (45.3)	8 (7.5)	106 (100)	2.40	0.63
Government regulates social media hate speech to sanitise the digital space	47 (44.3)	50 (47.2)	9 (8.5)	106 (100)	2.36	0.63

Items/Parameters	Agreed <i>f</i> (%)	Disagreed <i>f</i> (%)	I don't know <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Std. Dev.
Government regulates social media hate speech for ethnocentric reasons	46 (43.4)	49 (46.2)	11 (10.4)	106 (100)	2.33	0.66
Government regulates social media hate speech for socio-economic reasons.	21 (19.8)	77 (72.6)	8 (7.5)	106 (100)	2.12	0.51
Average					2.39	

**Note.** \*\*\*Decision Rule if mean is  $\leq 1.49$  = Indifferent; 1.5 to 2.49 = Disagreed; 2.5 to 3 = Agreed

Results of the test of perception of communication scholars show that generally, they disagreed with most of the test parameters of perception (Av.  $\bar{x}$ =2.39). Specifically, communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria perceived that government regulates social media hate speech for political reasons ( $n=84$ , 79.2 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.75$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ). Conversely, they did not perceive that government regulates social media hate speech to protect individual/group rights ( $\bar{x}=2.4$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ) as those who disagreed and were indifferent ( $n=56$ , 52.8 per cent) outnumbered those who agreed ( $n=50$ , 47.2 per cent) with the parameter. Also, communication scholars did not perceive that government was motivated to regulate social media hate speech in order to sanitize the digital space ( $n=2.63$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ) as those who disagreed with this position were higher in number ( $n=50$ , 47.2 per cent) than those who agreed ( $n=47$ , 44.3 per cent). Similarly, they did not perceive that government regulates social media hate speech for ethnocentric ( $\bar{x}=2.33$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ) and socio-economic reasons ( $\bar{x}=2.12$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ). By implication, communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria perceived political reasons as the motivation for government regulation of social media hate speech in Nigeria.

Research Question 3: What are the opinions of communication scholars about the direction of social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria?



**Table 5***Opinions of Communication Scholars about the Direction of Social Media Hate Speech Regulation in Nigeria*

Item/Parameters	True <i>f</i> (%)	False <i>f</i> (%)	I		Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Std. Dev.
			don't know <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)		
Social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria are political tools in the hands of ruling governments	89 (84)	10 (9.4)	7 (6.6)	106 (100)	2.77	0.56
Social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria are measures to limit free expression in Nigeria.	82 (77.4)	14 (13.2)	10 (9.4)	106 (100)	2.68	0.64
Social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria favour certain ethnic section(s) of the country against others	43 (40.6)	47 (44.3)	16 (15.5)	106 (100)	2.25	0.70
Social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria are designed to favour certain religion(s) against other(s)	23 (21.7)	64 (60.4)	19 (17.9)	106 (100)	2.04	0.63
Social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria are favourable to one gender against the other.	13 (12.3)	76 (71.7)	17 (16)	106 (100)	1.96	0.53
Average					2.34	

**Note.** \*\*\*Decision Rule if mean is  $\leq 1.49$  = Indifferent; 1.5 to 2.49 = False; 2.5 to 3 = True

Findings regarding scholars' opinions about the direction of social media hate speech regulation show that they generally considered the test parameters as false (Av.  $\bar{x}$ =2.34). Specifically, they considered as true the opinions that social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria are political tools in the hands of ruling governments ( $n=89$ , 84 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.77$ ,  $SD=0.56$ ); and such regulations are measures to limit free expression in Nigeria ( $n=82$ , 77.4 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.68$ ,  $SD=0.64$ ). However, they considered as falsehood parameters that state that social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria favour certain ethnic section(s) of the country against others ( $n=47$ , 44.3 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.25$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ); are designed to favour certain religion(s) against other(s) ( $n=64$ , 60.4 per cent,  $\bar{x}=2.04$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ); and are favourable to one gender against the other ( $n=76$ , 71.7 per cent,  $\bar{x}=1.96$ ,  $SD=0.53$ ). The foregoing implies that communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria were of the opinions that social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria are not designed for ethnic, religious and gender favouritism, but

are tools that successive ruling governments use for political gains and to suppress expression.

Research Question 4: What are the opinions of communication scholars about the implications of the direction of social media hate speech regulations on the cultural diversity of the Nigerian nation-state?

**Table 6**

*Opinions of Communication Scholars about the Implications of the Direction of Social Media Hate Speech Regulations on the Cultural Diversity of the Nigerian Nation-State*

Item/Parameters	True f(%)	False f(%)	I		Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Std. Dev.
			don't know f(%)	Total f(%)		
Extant social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria can be harmful to her unity.	53 (50)	39 (36.8)	14 (13.2)	106 (100)	2.37	0.71
Impending social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria can be inimical to her unity.	56 (52.8)	36 (34)	14 (13.2)	106 (100)	2.39	0.71
The cultural diversity of Nigeria makes social media hate speech regulation inevitable	47 (44.3)	47 (44.3)	12 (11.3)	106 (100)	2.33	0.67
Language multiplicity of the people of Nigeria makes application of social media hate speech regulation difficult.	46 (43.3)	50 (47.2)	10 (9.4)	106 (100)	2.34	0.64
High level of illiteracy militates against social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria	61 (57.5)	38 (27.4)	16 (15.1)	106 (100)	2.42	0.74
Average					2.37	

**Note.** \*\*\*Decision Rule if mean is  $\leq 1.49$  = Indifferent; 1.5 to 2.49 = False; 2.5 to 3 = True

Opinions of communication scholars about the implications of the direction of social media hate speech regulations on the cultural diversity of Nigeria was examined. Findings revealed that they generally considered all the test parameters to be false (Av.  $\bar{x}$ =2.37). Results about the test of each parameter also show that respondents considered to be false, statements that extant social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria can be harmful to her unity ( $\bar{x}$ =2.37,  $SD$ =0.71); impending social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria can be inimical to her unity ( $\bar{x}$ =2.39,  $SD$ =0.71); the cultural

diversity of Nigeria makes social media hate speech regulation inevitable ( $\bar{x}=2.33$ ,  $SD=0.67$ ); language multiplicity of the people of Nigeria makes application of social media hate speech regulation difficult ( $\bar{x}=2.34$ ,  $SD=0.64$ ); and high level of illiteracy militates against social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria ( $\bar{x}=2.42$ ,  $SD=0.74$ ). The implication of these is that communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria were of the opinion that social media hate speech regulations are not harmful to national integration, while language multiplicity and high level of illiteracy do not militate against their implementation. It is instructive to note that communication scholars opined that the cultural diversity of the Nigerian nation-state was not a factor that made social media regulation inevitable. Thus in the perception of communication scholars, Nigeria's cultural diversity poses no challenge to social media hate speech regulation, and regulation does not have implications on her unity.

## Discussion

This study set four research objectives and corresponding questions in order to examine the perception of communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria about social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria. Findings showed that there was a high level of knowledge among the scholars about the prevalence of social media hate speech, extant and impending social media hate speech regulations as well as their purpose. The knowledge of the content of such regulations was however a little above average among the scholars. Findings also showed that communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria perceived political reasons and suppression of expression as the motivations for government regulation of social media hate speech in Nigeria. Furthermore, the study found out that communication scholars in Southwest Nigeria were of the opinion that social media hate speech regulations in Nigeria are political tools that successive ruling governments use to suppress expression. Results also showed that Nigeria's cultural diversity poses no challenge to social media hate speech regulation, and regulation does not have implications on her diversity and unity. It should be noted that one limitation of this study is that it considered the perception of communication scholars in one out of the six geo-political regions of Nigeria.

The study has confirmed previous research findings about hate speech on social media. Koncavar (2013) reported that social media platforms have provided avenues for the spread of hate speech like never before. Alkali et

al. (2017) established the prevalence of hate speech and foul language on social media platforms in Nigeria. In the study by Ayansola and Oamen (2017), it was reported that hate expressions were legitimised through marketing by political actors in Nigeria. Also, Gelashvili (2018) observed that social media hate speech could hardly go unnoticed and could target any individual regardless of their location, social status or identity. The author enumerated the damaging consequences of hate speech to include marginalization, social labeling, stereotyping and dehumanization, therefore justifying the debate for regulatory strategies. The need for the regulation of expression in order to prevent hate speech has been re-established in this study as communication scholars considered the imperatives of regulation in spite of the cultural diversity of Nigeria. They were of the opinions that regulation of social media hate speech does not negatively affect Nigeria's unity and that language multiplicity and cultural diversity will not affect its implementation. This shows that despite differences in culture and language among the numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria, social media hate speech regulation is required. They were of the opinions that social media hate speech regulation is neither harmful nor antithetical to Nigeria's cultural diversity. In line with the imperative of regulation, Oriola (2022) has earlier reported that the legal frameworks for regulating hate expressions in Nigeria was lopsided, replete with ambiguity due to multiplicity of laws and without clear-cut constitutional foundation. This implies that the challenge of regulating hate speech on social media is not the cultural diversity of the Nigerian state but ambiguity in legal frameworks and absence of a constitutional foundation.

## Conclusion

The damaging consequences of hate speech and the far-reaching effects of its spread on social media justify regulation. This is because the public sphere that the digital space creates and promotes could be damaged and individual, group and societal wellbeing could be negatively affected if hate speech is allowed to grow unchecked on social network sites. In line with previous empirical evidence, this study has established the need for social media hate speech regulation on the premise that hate expressions are prevalent on Nigeria's digital space. However, the major factors militating against social media hate speech regulation in Nigeria are the political undertones and citizens' distrust of leadership, which are apparent in public allegation of government's quest to suppress expression. Communication

scholars in Southwest Nigeria perceived social media hate speech regulations as political tools and measures of suppressing free expression. They also considered Nigeria's cultural diversity to be non-consequential to hate speech regulations, just as regulations will not be inimical to her diversity and national integration.

### Recommendations

This study recommends sincere and objective will, devoid of ethnic and political undertones at the level of government in Nigeria in order to regulate social media hate speech. Leadership needs to demonstrate a high level of sincerity for such regulation to be effective, otherwise the campaign against hate speech on the digital space will be futile due to public mistrust. Regardless of cultural diversity, social media hate speech can be regulated using both legal and administrative frameworks. The legal framework should be devoid of ethnic and political undertones and derived from a clear-cut constitutional foundation that is not designed to suppress free expression. Administratively, the Nigerian government should issue codes of operations that will guide social network operators in the country to institute strict regulations such as pulling down of offensive contents, blocking of offenders and checking of facts in order to uphold human rights. There is a need for considerable re-orientation of the citizenry in Nigeria towards imbibing values that are congruent with respect to human dignity and societal order, not only in their social media usage habits but also in their daily private and public conducts.

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