

Sensationalism as an Ethical Issue in Citizen Journalism among Undergraduates of Select Universities in Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The increasing penetration of the internet and new media technologies has created more avenues for the participation of people, formerly known as media audiences, in the news production process through a practice termed citizen journalism. News about events, people and places break on-the-go as reported by individuals with smartphones, internet connection and social media accounts. However, citizen journalism has promoted sensationalism because sharing of emotion-provoking content is fast becoming a popular culture on social media, thereby posing ethical challenges that call for regulation. This study investigated sensationalism as an ethical issue in citizen journalism among undergraduates in selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. It was anchored in social responsibility media theory. The population of this study comprised 53,749 full-time undergraduates of Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta; Tai Solarin University

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of Education, Ijagun; and Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo all in Ogun State, Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was adopted to select 381 respondents studied using a self-structured questionnaire. Results revealed that a majority of the undergraduates participated in citizen journalism; they mostly shared entertainment content; they were motivated by entertainment, appeal, and controversies in sharing sensational content; but they perceived sensationalism to be ethically wrong. The study recommended media literacy and fact-checking as antidotes to sensationalism in digital media.

Keywords: Sensationalism, Citizen, Journalism, Ethics, Technology

Word count: 205

Introduction

The Internet and new media technologies have revolutionised the human communication landscape by creating unique avenues for the participation of ordinary people in journalism practice. Today, media audiences are actively involved in the process of news gathering and dissemination in society. This form of journalism, termed citizen journalism, is described by Rosen (2006) as the practice whereby people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools, they have in their possession to inform one another. Citizen journalism evolved because of internet penetration and the adoption of new media technologies across the world. It is a type of journalism that has enabled media audiences, who previously existed as consumers of media content, to actively involve themselves in the process of news gathering and dissemination in the society. According to Banda (2010), citizen journalism is news of the people, by the people and for the people. The rise of citizen journalism in Nigeria, aided by the penetration of the internet and adoption of digital devices, has enhanced the rationale for the highly discussed, marketplace of ideas and justified freedom of speech in a democracy.

Before this digital era in Nigeria, traditional mass media (newspapers, radio, and television) monopolised information dissemination, with attendant ethical issues such as ownership influence, brown envelope syndrome, political interests, moonlighting and Afghanistanism affecting the performance of the surveillance function by the traditional media and their

practitioners. Citizen journalists face no such limitations as they do not require formal training or license to operate and are also not responsible to anyone. Today, news breaks on-the-go, no matter who is involved and where, so long there is an individual at the newsbeat who has a smartphone, internet connection and a social media account. Despite its merits, citizen journalism is characterised by ethical issues such as focus on speed over accuracy, limited access to authoritative news sources, poor production quality, the possibility of content manipulation, preference for entertainment and sensationalism (Ojomo and Oriola, 2016).

Sensationalism is a much-discussed aspect of journalism, and it is an ethical issue that was previously associated with mainstream media. Simply defined as the prioritisation of exciting or shocking stories at the expense of accuracy, sensationalism is a documented ethical issue in mainstream journalism. The phenomenon has equally snowballed into an issue of ethical concern in citizen journalism. Due to the absence of gatekeeping in citizen journalism, sharing of content that entices, arouses, and generally provokes emotional responses in readers without recourse to accuracy and social responsibility as ethical and normative requirements is commonplace. In Nigeria, content with misleading headlines, highly opinionated reporting, obscene/gory pictures, and exaggerations, among others dominates social media platforms, which provide avenues for citizen journalism. Sharing of such sensational content comes with concerns of ethical breaches in journalism as well as the spread of fake news and hate speech. According to the Africa Youth Charter, most individuals who engage in, embrace and profit from citizen journalism are youths – people between ages 18-35. They constitute the technology savvy group.

Stemming from the premise, this study aimed to examine how well citizen journalism is practiced; the prevalence of sensational content-sharing; the motivating factors for sharing sensational contents; and the perception of sensationalism among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria.

Research Problem

Sensationalism is an ethical infraction in journalism. It sacrifices truth, accuracy, fairness, public decency and public interest for

emotions, excitement and entertainment. The production and/or sharing of sensational content is a common occurrence on digital media, particularly social media, through which people previously known as media audience participate in news gathering and reporting. Citizen journalism is practiced with no formal training or organisational and regulatory guidelines required and is open to all and sundry. This has led to the dissemination of fake news and hate speech which spreads like wildfire on the digital space. Inaccurate and hateful sensational content often leads to misguided public attitudes and actions, depression of victims, disaffection between/among groups, crime, and violence. Ultimately, such tendencies could obliterate the nobility associated with journalism in the estimation of members of the public who may not discern the integrity of information sources.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the extent of participation in citizen journalism among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria;
2. To ascertain the prevalence of sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria;
3. To determine the motivations for sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria;
4. To examine the perception of undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria about the ethical implications of sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria participate in citizen journalism?
2. What is the prevalence of sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria?
3. What are the motivations for sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism among

undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria?

4. What is the perception of undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria about the ethical implications of sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism?

Review of Literature

Citizen journalism is a model of journalism that allows a wide range of participants - formerly known as the audience to perform random acts of journalism (Lasica, 2003; Rosen, 2006). Kperogi (2011) characterises citizen journalism as the “publish, don’t filter” model of journalism. The implication of this characterisation is that it is a type of journalism where news content is purely user-generated and free from the traditional media gatekeeping (“filter”) hurdle. In citizen journalism, people create and share content on virtual platforms such as social media, websites, e-newspapers, and blogs rather than wait to be fed by the traditional media outlets (Dare, 2011). Ultimately, there is role switch between the media consumer and media content producers, i.e., ordinary citizens (not trained journalists) now play active roles in the process of collecting, analysing, and reporting news and information. Flew (2005) notes that three factors are critical to the rise of citizen journalism: open-source publishing; capacity for collaborative control of content; and the availability of democratic, web-enabled forms of content distribution.

A transnational multimedia news outlet called ‘*The Indymedia News*’ is often credited as one of the pioneers of the citizen journalism model. The news outlet pioneered a dialogic/democratic approach where news reports sent in by the public are left intact and used as news content (Kperogi, 2011). The evolution of citizen journalism in Nigeria is traceable to the penetration of the internet, computers, smartphones, and new media applications into the Nigerian environment. Through the instrumentality of the internet, emerging web sites and applications that aggregate views and facilitated dissemination of information and imputation of commentary have opened a new frontier of possibilities in the way news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Ultimately, this new era brings limitless possibilities for ordinary people to be active players in the news gathering, reporting, and dissemination process.

Today in Nigeria, new dissemination is no longer the exclusive preserve of the traditional media of communication but there are established citizen online news sites such as Odili.net, The Nigerian Village Square, Nairaland, Africa.net, Sahara Reporters, Naija Community, and Naijapals.com (Dare, 2011). Besides from these citizen online news sites, citizens also actively use their blogs and social media accounts such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to publish news in the forms of videos, photographs, and/or text as well as share opinions to draw the attention of the global public to what is going in Nigeria. On Instagram, there are Nigerians such as @Linkalkejiblogofficial, @Adeolafayehun, @Mufasatundeednut @GistLovers @Instablog9ja @Gossipmillnaija who may not be classified as professional journalists but share news stories for the consumption of the public and have grown to have a large followership and influence. Another distinct dimension of citizen journalism is Live Vlogging, otherwise known as Video blogging. Live Vlogging means going live when there is something great or unusual happening in an area (Sociology Group, 2021). Regardless of the platform through which they practice, citizen journalists are majorly youths. Hence, continuous inquiry into the extent and nature of youth participation in citizen journalism across different locations in Nigeria is a constant.

Citizen journalism may purely be accidental in some cases as events witnesses are fortunate to be at the beat. All that witnesses do is record and post/stream happenings through their smartphones and social media accounts. A good example of this was the 17-year-old Darnella Frazier who was on a walk with her young cousin when she witnessed the assault on George Floyd by a police officer in the US (News ABC, 2021). Darnella turned on her video, recorded and posted the video on her Facebook page. This video attracted millions of viewership and was ultimately used as testimony in court during the trial of the police officer. Other instances of global scale events enabled by citizen journalism include the Arab Spring, The Indonesian Tsunami of 2004, the London bombing of 2007, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, and the military takeover of power in Egypt in 2013 (Okoro, Christian, and Chijioke, 2013) and the Nigerian EndSARS in 2020. The above listed instances perfectly capture the 'publish don't filter' cliché synonymous with citizen journalism. However, while the events listed may have justifiable reasons, there could also be unethical reasons why citizen journalists put up contents just to drive traffic. The motive in this case is to sell, rather than tell the full story. This

intensionraises an ethical concern that opens up the need to identify the motivations behind youths' participation in citizen journalism.

Sensationalism is the publication of inaccurate information that provokes an emotional reaction (Levin, 2000). It is a type of news story presentation that intentionally provokes public interest and excitement at the expense of accuracy. It involves blowing the content or context out of proportion to produce strong feelings of unusualness, shock, and excitement by using bold eye-grIPPING headlines and various escapades to report the news events. Hadzialic (2019) contends that the goal of sensationalism is to deviate people's attention from the very essential questions and problems of common life. This implies that sensational stories receive higher coverage than unsensational stories not because they are newsworthy or serve the greater good but because they are exciting. Characteristics of sensationalism listed by Iyorkyaa, Iorkosu and Vaungwa (2020) include misleading headlines, opinionated (rather than true) reporting, exaggeration, bias, dramatic appeal, and lavish use of photographs. These traits are identifiable in some of the content of citizen journalism platforms in Nigeria.

Sensationalism played out in the Nigerian social media space between July and September 2021 owing to the exaggerated coverage of marriages/relationships that failed (or had serious issues) at the expense of marriages that were successful. Citizen journalists' (reportorial) searchlight beamed on Nigerian music celebrities, Nollywood actors, on-air personalities, and reality TV stars. They published trending cases that revolved round divorces, accusations of infidelity, called-off wedding(s), and DNA/paternity issues among others. The afore listed gained many tractions in the social media space and it somehow played down the idea that marriages have worked and are working for the younger generation. A recent example is Obi Cubana's burial of his mother in Oba, Imo State, South-East Nigeria) in July 2021. People who attended the event and those who did not sensationalised the event in their timelines, newsfeeds, blogs, and pages with the use of unusual headlines, images, and footage without recourse to accuracy and the ethical demands of fact-checking.

Ethics has its root in the Greek word 'ethos', meaning distinct character, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution. It is a branch of philosophy that studies conduct

adjudged to be right or wrong. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2021) defines the concept as the discipline dealing with what is good and bad, and with moral duty/obligation. Every profession has its own ethical codes, which guide how practitioners of such trade go about their operations, journalism inclusive. Truth is the cornerstone of journalism which every journalist should strive diligently to uphold (The Nigerian Press Council, 2021). Journalists are expected to seek and regard the interest of the public; hence, it is morally imperative for every journalist, across every available news platform to observe the highest professional and ethical standards. The two foremost bodies regulating the practice of journalism in Nigeria are the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC). The NPC is the statutory body that regulates ethical standards in the Nigerian press. Using the provisions of the NPC and NUJ, the guiding ethical codes for journalism practice in Nigeria include accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the nation. This study focuses on sensationalism as a breach of ethics manifest in the practice of citizen journalism in Nigeria bordering on accuracy, fairness, and social responsibility as ethical principles. Ethically, social responsibility demands that Nigerian journalist should promote universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, peace, and international understanding. Accuracy and fairness require that:

1. The public has a right to know. Factual, accurate balance and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence.
2. A journalist should refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information. Where such information has been inadvertently published, prompt correction should be made. A journalist must hold the right to reply as a cardinal rule of practice.
3. In the course of his duties, a journalist should strive to separate facts from conjecture and comment (NPC, 2021:1).

Sensationalism sacrifices the ethical principles of accuracy, fairness, and social responsibility for the quest for speed, excitement, and emotions among citizen journalists in Nigeria. Sadly, it has eaten into the fabric of the Nigerian digital space to an extent where the public now almost craves, and readily shares sensational content, especially those that portray scandals, sex appeals, controversies, accidents, and corruption at the expense of accurate, balanced, and fair reports. The situation portends

danger, not only to the journalism profession which is meant to hold public conscience but to the larger interest of the public. Thus, this study examined the prevalence of, and motivation for sensationalism as well as the perception of citizen journalists about the implication of the ethical breach. This study adopted the empirical/quantitative method of inquiry to ensure exactness in the measurement of the variables of concern namely, participation in citizen journalism, prevalence of sensationalism, motivation for sharing sensational content and perception of the implication of sharing sensational content among undergraduates in selected universities in Ogun State, Southwest Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in the social responsibility theory of the press. Social responsibility is a normative media theory propounded in 1956 by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (Apuke, 2017). The theory is a derivative of libertarianism, which recognizes the freedom of the press in a democratic society, but places the demand of responsibility on the press in carrying out its fundamental duties. Also, the theory prescribes that the press should accept any obligation from professional regulators. As listed by McQuail (2010), the tenets of the social responsibility theory are: the media have obligations to society because media ownership is a public trust; news from the media should be free but self-regulated; the media should adhere to certain stipulated codes/ethics to guide its practices; in some circumstances, the government could intervene to defend the public interest. The theory advocates freedom of the press/media but attaches duties and obligations to the freedom. It also considers media ownership as public trust because journalism is a profession that holds public conscience. In place of government regulation, the theory calls for self-regulation. Thus, in the spirit of social responsibility, journalists should engage in self-censorship. Adherence to ethical codes is crucial to (journalistic) practice. These principles apply to citizen journalism as it does to mainstream journalism.

This study adopts the social responsibility theory after thorough literature perusal to identify the appropriate theory. The theory is relevant because it preserves the principles of responsibility and accountability in the practice of journalism. Citizen journalists owe the society sacred obligations that are well entrenched in the ethics

of the profession. Ethical dictates such as objectivity, fairness and willingness to accept the obligation of social accountability are crucial to journalism and citizen journalists should uphold such principles. When participants are socially responsible, citizen journalism will fulfil the tenets of the social responsibility theory as it will continue to enjoy freedom of operations in a democratic society such as Nigeria. It is pertinent for citizen journalists to note that duties and obligations to the society are conditions attached to freedom in a socially responsible media environment.

Methodology

This study was conducted using the descriptive survey research design which entails the selection of a portion of the population and a description of facts and characteristics of the population. This design is relevant to this study because, as argued by Ogundare (2013), descriptive surveys are applicable to studies that are aimed at obtaining information that describes the relationship between variables of concern. He further asserts that results obtained from descriptive survey sample can be generalized to the population from which the sample was drawn. The population of the study comprised 53,749 full-time undergraduates of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (19,037); Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun (24,712); and Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo (10,000), all in Ogun State, Nigeria. The figures were obtained from the current registry records of the institutions. A multistage sampling technique was adopted in selecting a sample for the study. In the first stage, random sampling technique was adopted to select one each from the three categories of universities in Ogun State based on ownership thus: Federal University of Agriculture (Federal Government-owned), Tai Solarin University of Education (State Government-owned) and Babcock University (private-owned). In the second stage, a sample size of 381 respondents was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula.

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

A proportional distribution technique was then applied at the third stage to select a sample from each university thus: Federal University of Agriculture (133), Tai Solarin University of Education (175), and Babcock University (73). Respondents were chosen from the universities randomly. A self-designed structured questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument

administered to the respondents on their main campuses during the hours of academic activities.

Findings

Table 1. *Respondents' Demographic Characteristics*

University	Frequency	Percent
FUNAAB (Federal)	133	34.9
TASUED (State)	175	45.9
BU (Private)	73	19.2
Total	381	100
Level of study		
100 Level	43	11.3
200 Level	101	26.5
300 Level	98	25.7
400 Level	100	26.3
500 Level	20	5.2
600 Level	19	5.0
Total	381	100
Age Range		
16yrs-20yrs	66	17.3
21yrs-25yrs	275	72.2
26yrs-30yrs	40	10.5
Above 30yrs	Nil	Nil
Total	381	100
Gender		
Male	197	51.7
Female	184	48.3
Total	381	100

Note: Field Survey, 2021

The distribution of respondents by universities was in accordance with the sampling plan thus: 175(45.9%) from TASUED, 133(34.9%) from FUNAAB and 73(19.2%) from BU. By level of study, over a quarter of the respondents were in their second (26.5%), third (25.7%) and fourth (26.3%) year of study respectively while the minority were in their sixth year (5%). Most of the respondents (n=275, 72.2%) were between the ages 21 years and 25 years, while those between 26 years and 30 years accounted for the minority (n=40, 10.5%). By gender, there were more male respondents (51.7%) than females 48.3%.

RQ 1: To what extent do undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria participate in citizen journalism?

Table 2. *Undergraduates’ Participation in Citizen Journalism*

Digital Device Ownership	Frequency	Percent
I Own	373	97.9
I do not Own	6	
1.6		
Indifferent	2	0.5
Total	381	100
Social Media Account Ownership		
I Own	373	97.9
I do not Own	6	
1.6		
Indifferent	2	0.5
Total	381	100
Frequency of Social Media Usage		
Very Often	211	56.3
Often	133	35.4
Occasionally	31	8.3
Total	375	100
Newsworthy Content Sharing		
I Share	340	90.7
I do not Share	24	
6.4		
Indifferent	11	2.9
Total	375	100
Frequency of Newsworthy Content Sharing		
Very Often	65	17.3
Often	111	29.6
Occasionally	183	48.8

Never	16	4.3
Total	375	100

Note: Field Survey, 2021

Results showed that a vast majority (n=373, 97.9%) of undergraduates in the selected universities owned at least one digital device and social media accounts. This placed them in positions to participate in citizen journalism. Of this number, 211 respondents (56.3%) used their social media accounts very often while another 133 (35.4%) used them often, making a cumulative 91.7% of those on social media. The majority (n=340, 90.7%) shared newsworthy content but 48.8percent shared newsworthy content occasionally. Those who shared regularly (often and very often) accounted for 46.9percent of those that were on social media. Undergraduates in selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria participated in citizen journalism through their digital devices and social media accounts to a large extent. However, those who participated occasionally outnumbered those who participated regularly.

RQ 2: What is the prevalence of sharing sensational content in the course of practicing citizen journalism among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria?

Table 3. *Undergraduate’s Types of Newsworthy Content Mostly Shared*

Content Type	Frequency	Percent
Religious	14	3.9
Health	10	2.8
Social Movement	10	2.8
Business	43	11.9
Politics	8	2.2
Sexual Acts	2	0.5
Entertainment	160	44.3
Accidents	6	1.7
Scandals	6	1.7
Emotional Cases	63	17.4
Criminal Acts	22	6.1
Controversies	17	4.7
Total	361	100.0

Note: Field Survey, 2021

Table 4. Prevalence of Sharing Sensational Contents among Undergraduates

Items	VF F (%)	F F (%)	O F (%)	R F (%)	N F (%)	Σ	\bar{x}	S D
I create verbal and visual contents that provoke excitement and promptly share such on social media.	103 (28)	99 (27)	77 (21)	37 (10)	51 (13.9)	367 (100)	3.66	3.28
I am pleased with receiving thrilling newsworthy content on social media.	104 (28.7)	146 (40.2)	67 (18.5)	32 (8.8)	14 (3.9)	363 (100)	3.81	1.07
I like sharing thrilling content that are newsworthy on social media after receiving such.	120 (32.5)	111 (30.1)	68 (18.4)	44 (11.9)	28 (7.7)	369 (100)	3.69	1.23
I check for the factuality of emotional newsworthy content before sharing them on social media.	153 (41.7)	109 (29.7)	49 (13.4)	38 (10.4)	18 (4.9)	367 (100)	3.92	1.18

Note: Field Survey, 2021

KEY: Very Frequently=FV, frequently=F, Occasionally=O, Rarely=R, Never=N

*****Decision Rule: If mean is ≤ 1.49 = Never; 1.5 to 2.49 = Rarely; 2.5 to 3.49 = Occasionally; 3.5 to 4.49 = Frequently; 4.5 to 5 = Very Frequently**

Out of 12 categories of newsworthy content identified as mostly shared by the undergraduates while participating in citizen journalism, entertainment was the most shared (n=160, 44.3%). Emotional causes (n=63, 17.4%) and business (n=43, 11.9%) ranked distant second and third respectively, while sexual acts ranked the least (n=2, 0.5%). Findings also showed the undergraduates created and shared exciting content frequently (\bar{x} =3.66), they were frequently pleased with receiving thrilling content (\bar{x} =3.81), they frequently liked sharing thrilling content after receiving such (\bar{x} =3.69) and they did fact-checking before sharing emotional content(\bar{x} =3.92). These imply that there was a high level of prevalence of sharing sensational content among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria.

RQ 3: What are the motivations for sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism among undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria?

Table 5. *Undergraduates' Motivations for Sharing Sensational Contents*

Items	SA F (%)	A F (%)	D F (%)	SD F (%)	UN F (%)	Σ	\bar{x}	S D
Entertainment values of sensational content make me share them on social media.	161	169	15	16	3	367	4.3	2.2
	(4)	(46)	(4.1)	(4.4)	(1.6)	(100)	7	9
My attraction to sharing thrilling content on social media is based on the various kinds of appeal they contain.	114	215	22	6	10	367	4.1	0.8
	(3)	(58.6)	(6)	(1.5)	(2.7)	(100)	4	1
Controversies in thrilling newsworthy content motivate me to share	117	179	30	30	11	367	3.9	1.0
	(3)	(48.8)	(8.2)	(8.2)	(3)	(100)	8	0

them on social media.								
I share sensational content that are newsworthy for public awareness purpose.	15	160	29	14	8			
	2	(44.	(8)	(3.8)	363			
	(4	1)			(2.2)			
	1.				(100)	1.1	0.9	
	9)					9	0	

Note: Field Survey, 2021

KEY: SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree, UN=Undecided

*****Decision Rule if mean is ≤ 1.49 Undecided; 1.5 to 2.49 = Strongly Disagree; 2.5 to 3.49 =Disagree; 3.5 to 4.49= Agree; 4.5 to 5= Strongly Agree**

Results in relation to motivations for sharing sensational content while participating in citizen journalism showed that the undergraduates agreed to be motivated by entertainment values (\bar{x} =4.37), appeal (\bar{x} =4.14) and controversies (\bar{x} =3.98), while they were largely undecided about public awareness values (\bar{x} =1.19) of the content shared. Therefore, undergraduates of the selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria were not certain about being motivated by the need for public awareness but were motivated by entertainment, appeal and controversies which made them share sensational content while practicing citizen journalism.

RQ 4: What is the perception of undergraduates of selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria about the ethical implications of sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism?

Table 6. Undergraduates’ Perception about Ethical Implications of Sharing Sensational Contents

Items	SA F (%)	A F (%)	D F (%)	SD F (%)	UN F (%)	Σ	\bar{x}	S D
Sharing inaccurate or manipulated content on social media is ethically wrong.	24	105	19	8	3	375		
	0	(28)	(5.1)	(2.1)	(0.8)			
	(6				(100)		4.5	0.7
	4)						2	6

False, inaccurate or manipulated content shared on social media can mislead the public	22 1 (5 8. 9)	129 (34. 4)	12 (3.2)	7 (1.9)	6 375 (1.6) (100)	4.4 7	0.7 8
Sharing newsworthy events to the public through social media is good for public awareness.	22 3 (5 9. 5)	130 (34. 7)	18 (4.8)	2 (0.5)	2 375 (0.5) (100)	4.5 2	0.6 6
Checking of facts is important before newsworthy content are shared on social media.	24 6 (6 5. 6)	104 (27. 7)	12 (3.2)	6 (1.6)	7 375 (1.9) (100)	4.5 1	0.7 5

Note: Field Survey, 2021

KEY: SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree, UN=Undecided

*****Decision Rule if mean is ≤ 1.49 Undecided; 1.5 to 2.49 = Strongly Disagree; 2.5 to 3.49 =Disagree; 3.5 to 4.49= Agree; 4.5 to 5= Strongly Agree**

Results of the test of perception showed that the undergraduates strongly agreed that: sharing of inaccurate/manipulated content was wrong (\bar{x} =4.52), sharing newsworthy content was good for public awareness (\bar{x} =4.52) and checking of facts was important before newsworthy content was shared (\bar{x} =4.51). They also agreed that false, inaccurate or manipulated content shared on social media could mislead the public (\bar{x} =4.47). Therefore, undergraduates in selected universities in Ogun State Nigeria perceived sharing of sensational content to be ethically wrong and misleading. However, they perceived sharing of newsworthy content to be good for public awareness and fact-checking as important.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study have achieved the stated objectives. The study revealed that a vast majority of undergraduates in selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria participated in citizen journalism through their digital devices and social media accounts. This confirms the position of previous researchers such as Dare (2011) who reported that numerous Nigerian youths now leverage on the instrumentality of the internet, digital devices and emerging sites to aggregate and share information, news and diverse opinions, thereby opening new frontiers of possibilities in the way news is produced, disseminated and consumed. Kim and Lowrey (2014) reported that citizen journalism is a common task engaged in by youths who are motivated by the need to connect to close friends and generate new relationships as well as the need to gain new ideas and experiences about the world around them. The researchers also found out that social media use and personal civic inclination mostly predict youth participation in citizen journalism. Also, Tsegyu (2016) affirms that there are several Nigerian youths who have set up social network accounts and used such for news dissemination.

The study discovered a high level of prevalence of sensationalism in citizen journalism among undergraduates. A total of 12 categories of news content were identified to be shared among undergraduates: religion, health, social movement, business, politics, sexual acts, entertainment, accidents, scandals, emotional cases, criminal acts and controversies. Among these, entertainment ranked as the most commonly shared sensational content. Also, the study discovered that participants were motivated by entertainment, appeal and controversies in sharing sensational content while practicing citizen journalism. The foregoing gives credence to Kim and Lowrey (2014) who discovered that the need for bonding through social media predicted youths' engagement in citizen journalism. Ojomo and Oriola (2016) asserted that one of the normative challenges of citizen journalism was preference for entertainment and sensationalism. Iyorkyaa, Iorkosu and Vaungwa (2020) identify the thematic characterization of sensationalism in news reports to include exaggeration, bias, dramatic appeal and lavish use of photos. According to Hadzialic (2019), sensational stories receive high coverage not because they are newsworthy or serve the greater good but because they are exciting.

Lastly, undergraduates in selected universities in Ogun State Nigeria perceived sharing of sensational content to be ethically wrong and misleading, though they perceived sharing of newsworthy content to be good for public awareness. They agreed strongly that fact-checking is important before sharing newsworthy content. This result is in tandem with Okoro, Christian and Chijioke (2013) who reported that Nigerian youths perceive that the prevalence of sensationalism as wrong and are more motivated by the quest to sell than to tell news stories on the digital space. The market-driven model of journalism that has been of concern in mainstream media practices is now noticeable in citizen journalism as owner of blogs, vlogs, news sites and social media accounts disseminate all manner of content without recourse to accuracy and social responsibility. The pursuits of breaking news events first and generating traffic on their sites or pages often account for most of the cases of sharing sensational content. Hadzialic (2019) contends that the goal of sensationalism is to deviate people's attention from the very essential questions and problems of common life. Etemad (2020) asserts that negative tendencies in citizen journalism, such as the spread of sensational content, impede on the rights of citizens within a country and portend grave implications for international relations in a globalized environment.

Conclusion

The high level of internet penetration, the emergence of numerous digital platforms and the adoption of digital devices in Nigeria have opened a vista of opportunities for undergraduates to participate in citizen journalism. This has broadened the scope of the public sphere with youths who were hitherto news audiences participating in news production, sharing and commentary on issues of interest. However, there is an attendant ethical breach of the high prevalence of sensationalism associated with citizen journalism among undergraduates who mostly share entertaining content and are motivated by entertainment values, appeals and controversies in the content shared. Thus, excitement, emotions and conflicts associated with content, which are some of the basic characteristics of sensationalism give impetus to its prevalence on various digital platforms, especially social media. Sensationalism is a breach of journalism ethics that demands truth, accuracy and fairness. It is a breach of public trust in the profession that holds public conscience.

Recommendations

There is a need for an ethical revolution in Nigeria, which should include media literacy for the purpose of educating the public on the social, ethical, and legal implications of spreading inaccurate/manipulated content on the digital space without recourse to truth, accuracy, and fairness as tenets of professional journalism. The National Orientation Agency (NOA), Ministry of Information and Culture, and Ministry of Communication and Digital Economy in Nigeria have roles to play in this regard. Authorities and regulators of higher institutions need to include media literacy in the general studies curriculum to formalize media education. Operators of news blogs, news sites and social networks should engage in, and encourage users on rigorous fact-checking before sharing content in the digital space.

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