Social Media Comment Feature and its Use by National Youth Service Corps Members in Patani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the Internet and focused specifically on the comment feature of the social media to determine the extent of the usage of the comment feature for public discourse by the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) members in Patani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. It provided an insight into the deliberative nature of comments by commenters. This exploratory study, which was foregrounded in the media richness theory, utilised the survey research method. Data collected provided empirical evidence to the effect that youths use the comment sections mostly to comment on entertainment and sports issues, and they do so mostly through blogs. It was, therefore, recommended that youths should spend less time on social media, especially if what they are using social media for will not be to their optimal benefits. They should not limit themselves to only reading and commenting about entertainment, sports and fashion stories, but also engage in discussions about politics and other salient issues. Also, apart from blogs, youths should visit other sites to make comments, especially online newspapers and online news platforms where topical issues are reported and commented on regularly.

Keywords: Blogs, Comment feature, Discourse, Internet, NYSC, Social media,

Introduction

The advent of the Internet, according to Gillmor (2004), has engendered a "powerful global conversation" (p.14) driven by technology and manifested by the fact that "people are (perpetually) discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed" (p.14). The Internet is a welcome development, and Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) admit that selectivity accounts

for much of the sense of interactivity of social presence associated with new media. However, the duo express reservation about the Internet due to the "user proliferation and diversity of content and sources that are now available, which have raised concerns about the quality of the content in regards to authenticity, reliability, anonymity, identity of participation on online interaction" (p. 25). The offerings of the Internet include information-sharing platforms such as Instant messager, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Blogs, SoundCloud, Hulkshare, 2go, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Evernote, and others. They are generally referred to as the social media, which are now classified as a part of the mass media.

The mass media are expected to give information to the public as affirmed by Oso (2019) who advocates that based on the idea of collective decision making through deliberative communication, the formation of opinion, and debate among the generality of the citizenry, the media are expected to provide the needed information. However, the circle will not be complete without adding the fact that the media are also to provide the needed platforms for citizens to participate in any democratic process by letting their voices be heard, and their views to be expressed and exchanged with that of others. A very important means through which citizens can participate in public deliberations is via the commenting feature of various social media platforms. Deuze (2003) attests that one of the dominant features that is fundamental to the possibility and validity of online journalism is interactivity, which he defines as the ability for readers or audience of online content to react to, or interact with and even adapt news content presented to them. Deuze (2003) iterates that the comment section of online content is a very key element of this attribute. Comments exist in many different digital spaces, including social media and sites/apps about products, services, news, and entertainment. Stroud, Duyn and Peacock (2016) avow that online comment sections provide "a space for the public to interact with news, to express their opinion, and to learn about others' views" (p.1). Through commenting, online discourse takes place, and Joinson (2001) affirms that discussing with others online has the potential to support interpersonal growth or the exploration and development of one's identity.

The interactivity nature of the Internet has made most newspapers to create their online versions to direct traffic to

themselves, and garner subscribers, pass-along rate, and a high number of comments (McLellan Marketing Group, 2010). The same applies to online news platforms and blogs being managed by individuals and organisations. Commenting goes a long way in engaging readers and viewers in the news process, and it sort of builds loyalty between online content creators and content consumers. Robert Steele asserts that the intent in allowing and encouraging these comments online is to increase page views and time spent on the site, claiming that, "It's a business motivation" (as cited in Goldberg, 2010, p. 2). With the Internet, the feat of readers commenting on whatever they read online, and reacting to associated articles published by newspapers and other platforms is now possible. Although scholars like Leung (2009) and Holmes (as cited in Awodi, Gambo, Etudaiye, Sani, Mohammed & Ezeaghasi, 2019) point out that professional journalists are critical of online comments, and referred to them as informal and inflammatory. Moosa (2014) also sees Comment sections as "the chronic pain centres of the Internet, the part of the digital body we're all forced to accept exists, but must manage by injecting policies and systems into" (p.2).

Therefore, this research offers an examination of how members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) members in Patani Local government Area of Delta State, Nigeria, use the comment sections of the social media to engage in dialogue, national discourse, and public deliberations. The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is a scheme set up by the Nigerian government to involve Nigerian graduates in nation-building and the development of the country. According to Marenin (1990), there is no military conscription in Nigeria, but since 1973 graduates of universities and later polytechnics have been required to take part in the National Youth Service Corps program for one year. Patani Local Government Area (LGA) is one of the 25 LGAs that make up Delta State. Its administrative headquarters is in Patani. This LGA, which is the Delta State's Southern Senatorial District, thus forming a federal constituency together with Bomadi Local Government Area, is made up of 10 wards and comprises of people of Kabowei, Kumbowei, Agoloma, Bolou, Apelebiri, Bolou-Angiama, Odoruba, Toru-Angiama descents. The study was focused on NYSC members because of the fact brought forward by Roe (2000) and Valkenburg (2000), that the issue of media influence on youths is a global

phenomenon. Moreover, NYSC members fall under the category of those who use the digital (new) media and online communication that have become the main channels of communication youths now engage in, which government can capitalise and leverage on to reach youths who are very active on these communication platforms (Guanah, Obi, Egbra, & Akumabor, 2017). Most youths are technology savvy, and they tend to spend much time surfing the Internet.

Statement of the Problem

The comment section of social media platforms affords citizens, especially the youths, the opportunity to participate in public deliberations, but it seems they are not exploiting this rare opening optimally. They seem to be more inclined to use the comment sections to discuss matters that will not add value to their lives and prepare them to be "the 'leaders of tomorrow' who need "to take responsibility in all ramifications" (Guanah et al., 2017, p.28), instead of exploiting the comment section as "a curated space of proper discussion and debate to move important ideas forward for all" (Moosa, 2014, p.2). Similarly, while challenging youths to make good use of the social media, Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka, observes that many youths abuse their use, saying, "they wake up in the morning, and all they do is try to be the first to comment, and their comment is vapid, unserious and usually abusive, instead of arguments, instead of analysis, instead of a cogent approach to social problems, and you wonder what kind of generation is this that cannot understand the magnificence of this technology" (Soyinka, 2018, s.1). Also, though researchers like Oyedele and Agberu (2018), Guanah (2019), and Awodi et al. (2019) have previously studied online readers' comments on news stories, yet, there is a dearth of empirical studies carried out on youths' usage of the comment sections for public discourse. This study attempts to fill that gap.

Objectives of the Study

This study sets out to:

1. ascertain the extent of use of the comment sections of social media platforms by the NYSC members;

2. determine the topics and issues the corps members comment on; and
3. identify the social networks through which the Corps members make comments.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study conforms with the media richness theory, sometimes referred to as information richness theory. The theory was developed by Richard Daft and Robert Lengel in 1984 (Daft & Lengel, 1984). It is an extension of the information processing theory framework that is used to describe and evaluate a communication medium's ability (richness) to reproduce the information sent over it. While explaining this theory with phone calls, emails, and video conferencing, Asemah (2016) asserts that a phone call cannot reproduce visual social cues such as gestures, so it is a less rich communication medium than video conferencing, which allows users to communicate gestures to some extent. According to Lengel and Daft (1989), media richness is a function of a medium's characteristics, including the ability to handle multiple information cues simultaneously; ability to facilitate rapid feedback; ability to establish a personal focus; and ability to utilise natural language. Jonah and Nwogbo (2019) say the theory postulates that communication channels that can convey messages to others in clear and in timely manner are considered as having the richness of communication channels. Therefore, Morah and Ekwenchi (2019) opine that mass media messages become more appreciable when the audience moves beyond the passive level of mere comprehension to a stage of actively seeking such messages because of the benefits they feel they are going to derive from them based on their potentialities and richness.Tsado and Santas (2018) point out that the major tenet of the theory espouses the notion that the more certain a task is, the richer the format of media that suits it, and that an individual's choice of media technologies is influenced by characteristics of each medium. The takeaway from this theory is that the capability of a medium of communication to function effectively more than others in a given communication process, unequivocally transmitting a message within a specified framework of time, determines the rating of its level of richness. The relevance of this theory to this study is hinged on the fact that the richness of

social media has been extremely effective in allowing readers and consumers of online information and products to comment on what they read or view online, courtesy of the comment sections of the social media.

Social Media Comment Sections

The comment feature in social media platforms provides veritable podiums for commenters to air their views on various burning issues they read online. This key affords citizens the opportunity to partake in public discussions, and to participate in decision making concerning their affairs. Not participating will mean commenters shutting themselves out from public debate on crucial matters that affect their well-being. According to Oyedele and Agberu (2018), to comment on the news is the most common form of participation in modern news consumption, and it is the most common form of citizen engagement online. Comments are like the lifeblood of articles or stories, and to some extent, they indicate the readership of a news story and show if commenters agree with the stories or not. That is why Hygienic Fascism declares that "if a post doesn't get many, it's likely that the post didn't offer much" (Listgarten, 2020, p.3). Hence, online news sites make advanced efforts to maximise comment quality and to incorporate user comments into the content of their sites so that readers can express their opinions on various issues through online debates and discourses. With comments, sites engage in conversation with users, and through this means they can measure which stories appeal most with audiences. The comment section is created with the hope that comments that stories receive will be thoughtful.

Scholars like Manosevitch and Walker (2009) and Witschge (2008) support the fact that online comments can provide an outlet of social interaction for news consumers. Through comments, readers interact with stories and other commenters rather than taking in everything they have read hook-line-and-sinker without making their input. This has widened commenters' horizons for limitless debate and discussion in the public sphere. Natalie and Holmes (as cited in Oyedele & Agberu, 2018) affirm that comments in reaction to online news provide an avenue for readers to interact with one another, express their opinions on the content of the article or comments of others. The twosome opine that commenters may

also change what they perceived to be half-truths in the comments of other readers, provide support, 'facts', and links to the websites with more relevant content. This interaction among readers creates a conversation in which ideas are debated and negotiated.

Through commenting, multiple ideas are brought forward by different people thereby bringing about a solid network between content creators and consumers. Therefore content producers gain from readers' comments because of the opportunity of getting new, unseen, and additional insights from knowledgeable readers. Comment platforms and the comments they generate also provide a form of feedback on the issues covered and serve as new stories and depths to be explored (World Editors Forum, as cited in Oyedele & Agberu, 2018). From comments, news organisations, government, and other stakeholders can understand the minds of the citizens, plan and implement policies and actions to meet the yearnings of the populace. The volume and intensity of discussion generated on a particular issue or topic will show the interest or importance placed on such (Henrich & Holmes, 2013).

However, there is the need to moderate comments so that discursive civility that brings about deliberative dialogue can be maintained. A situation whereby commenters with dissenting views are attacked and referred to as idiots and fools is discursive incivility. When incivility is directed at a view held by someone, it may deepen the antagonism of that person (Hwang, as cited in Santana, 2014). That is why, though Adam Lee welcomes comments, but he thinks it is digital suicide not to moderate comments because "there are too many cranks, crackpots, bigots and nasty people with nothing but time on their hands. Bad comments inevitably drive out good ones" (Moosa, 2014, p.2). This tallies with Max Hauser's longstanding consensus observation from many online discussion fora that if most comments are civil and responsible, a norm is set, and misbehaviour is seen as exceptional, and that when off-putting posts surpass a certain percentage, it drives away the more constructive commenters (as cited in Listgarten, 2020).

Youths and the Social Media Use

For statistical purposes, the United Nations (UN) classified those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years to be youths, without prejudice to other definitions by member states. All United Nations

statistics on youths are based on this definition (UNESCO, 1985). However, Haddon (2015) points out that 'youth' as a term "can cover different ages in different countries; in some societies, youth extends into the late twenties, whereas in others such an age would be considered young adulthood" (p.1). Therefore, the Nigerian National Youth Policy (2009) defines youth as a person between the ages of 18 years and 35 years; this definition covers members of the National Youth Service Corps who are usually graduates of tertiary institutions from 30 years down. According to the UN, more than 70 percent of the Nigerian population is under 35 years (Ibekwe, 2016). This set of young people are growing up in an environment ruled by digital devices, the Internet and social media because, all over the world, the reach of digital technology is growing at an extraordinary rate, even in developing countries (Uzuegbunam, 2020). Whether we like it or not, the Internet has come to stay with us, and it affects every facet of human endeavour, either positively or negatively. Moosa (2014) describes it as:

> The biggest, most diverse, most deep, most annoyingly beautiful space we've created: lives are entirely made here. It's not different to the "real world", it's part of it. To portray it as some disconnected space helps no one; indeed it only provides ammo to those who would see it as a mere playground for their sadistic taunting. (p.1)

According to Uzuegbunam (2020), Nigeria is one of the African countries in which the Internet and digital media penetration have been increasing in leaps. Nigeria is said to account for close to 30% of Internet penetration in Africa. Uzuegbunam (2020) refers to global digital reporting that there were 85 million Internet users in Nigeria as of January 2020, adding that, although an estimated 60% of the population is made up of young people, there is little known about how they use digital technology every day. However, a "majority of Facebook users in Nigeria are youths" (Guanah et al., 2017, p.38), and Facebook was the most popular social media in Nigeria with membership strength of 6,630,200 as at December 31, 2012 (Internet World Stats, 2013).

As the media of communication, social media enhance the collection and dissemination of information generally. Apart from enhancing interaction between and among users, they also connect individuals, groups, organisations, and governments around the

world, making insignificance boundary factor. Sweester and Lariscy (2008, p. 179) conceptualise social media as a "read-write Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content" (p. 179). By the age definition of who a youth is, some are still students of tertiary institutions while some are graduates who either are working for themselves or others. Regardless of what they do, and where they work, they still use the social media as long as they have their smartphones that the United Nations Children's Fund indicates are young people's gadget of choice that guarantees easy online access and are more private (Uzuegbunam, 2020).

Youths that are students use social media for their academic work; to search for information online, and to download relevant materials to aid their academic pursuits (Omoera, Aiwuyo, Edemode, & Anyanwu, 2018). The artists among them use them for the publicity of their works to reach the right audience globally, just like the youth dramatists use social media to stream live performances. They post flyers on their friends' social media pages and tell them to tag their friends and families, as well as well-wishers. In the agricultural sector, youths use social media to access current information since "the social media help in disseminating the right information about farming practices daily. For instance, in America, social media platforms have allowed the younger generations to showcase what they love about agriculture while also sharing a positive depiction of farm life" (Guanah et al., 2017, p. 37). In fact, in all professions the youths find themselves, they use social media to enhance them.

However, there are some negative aspects of social media due to misuse by some unguided youths. Hence, the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, Most Revd. Alfred Adewale Martins, urges action against negative use of social media among youths by relevant authorities re-orientating youths against corrupt morals through the use of social media (Taboola, 2016). The attention of youths is being diverted from their work and other engagements that would add more value to their lives, due to the long hours they spend on social media. Also, there have been cases of youths who met on social media, and their 'online friends' eventually murdered them when they decided to meet physically. Some female victims were even robbed of their valuables and raped before they were killed. Bullying

and stalking by fellow youths on social media have made some youths to commit suicide out of frustrations. Some use them to access pornographic sites, thereby corrupting their morals while some use them to commit cybercrime and to spread fake news which Guanah (2018) says has become so disturbing globally that it was a major topic for discussion during one of the annual meetings of the World Economic Forum (WEF) which focused on the loss of trust in institutions, and the spread of misinformation and fake news.
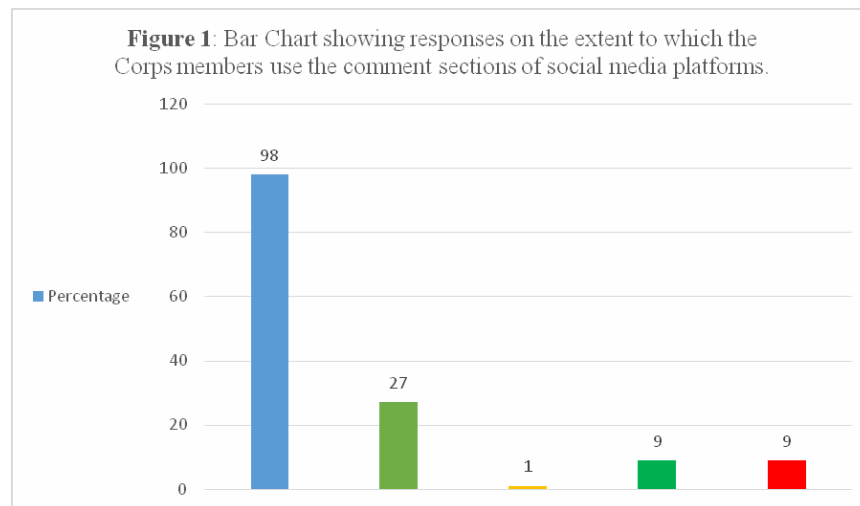
Methodological Consideration

The survey method was used in this study. The population of the study is made up of the 270 (According to the Administrative Officer in charge of Corps members' affairs at Patani Local Government Council). National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) members made up of 2019/2020 Batch B Stream 2, and 2019/2020 Batch C Stream 1, deployed to serve in schools, health centres, and government offices in Patani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The sample size of 159 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for determining the sample size of a finite population. The sample size was established at a 95 percent confidence level and a 5 percent sampling error. According to Krejcie and Morgan, when the finite population is 270, the required sample is 159. Patani Local Government Area (LGA) is made up of 10 Wards; 16 Corps members were picked from the 9 most populated Wards, while 15 Corps members were picked from the least populated Ward (Ward 5 made up of Afinaware, Ogeinware, and Akoloware communities).

A structured questionnaire was used as the data gathering instrument for this study. The questionnaire contained dichotomous responses of option questions and Likert Scale format, such as Very Large Extent (VLE), Large Extent (LE), Undecided (U), Low Extent (LE), and Very Low Extent (VLE). To ensure that appropriate responses were elicited from the respondents, the reliability of the questionnaire was carried out by administering the questionnaire twice to 30 members of the Peace Corps, a non-governmental uniformed youth organisation within three weeks interval to ascertain the internal consistency. After the pilot test, the reliability of the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient value of 0.87 was recorded. Communication experts and senior researchers validated the questionnaire through peer review before it was used.

The copies of the questionnaire were administered to the Corps members when they gathered for their weekly Community Development programmes in their different locations through their Corps Liaison Officers (CLOs). Out of the 159 copies of questionnaire administered, 144, representing a response rate of 90.57% were completed, returned, and found useable. The responses were simply counted for all respondents. That is, there were no total scores for respondents, but total item scores. The data collated were analysed, using simple percentages. The demographic data showed that the 144 respondents (100%) are between the age brackets of 21-30. Out of this, 101 (70.14%) were males and 43 (29.86%) were females. 137 (95.14%) of the respondents have HND/Bachelor's degrees while 5 (3.47%) have master's degrees, and 2 (1.39%) have PhDs.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Bar Charts and simple percentages were used to analyse the data.

Figure 1: Bar Chart showing responses on the extent to which the Corps members use the comment sections of social media platforms.

Source: Field Survey, 2020.

KEY: ■ Very Large Extent (VLE) ■ Large Extent (LE) ■ Undecided(U) ■LowExtent (LE): ■Very Low ■Extent (VLE).

Scale: 1cm = 10%

Figure 1 shows that the corps members used the Comment sections of the social media quite often, and regularly.

Figure 2: Bar Chart showing responses on the topics and issues the Corps members comment on.
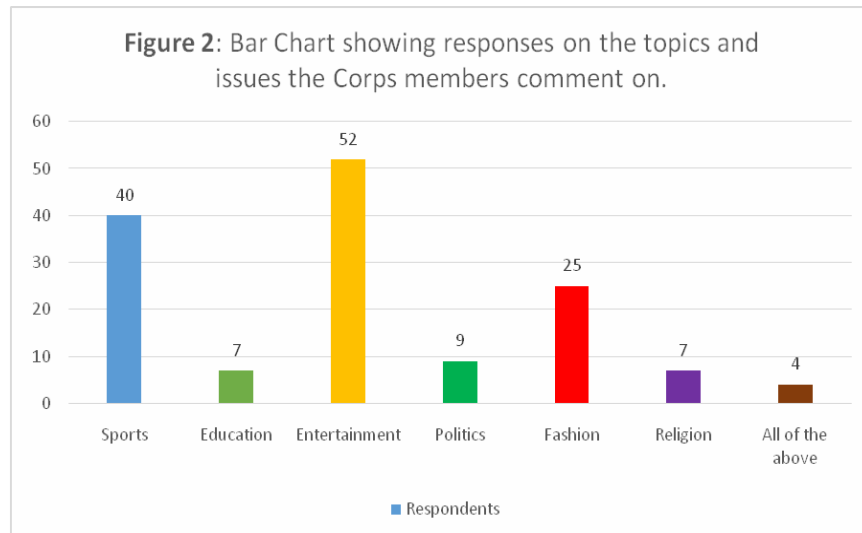
Source: Field Survey, 2020.
KEY:　　■Sports　　■Education　　■Entertainment　　■Politics
　　　　　■Fashion　■Religion
All of the above
Scale: 1cm = 10%

As shown in Figure 2, the Corps members made their comments most in this order: Entertainment, Sports, Fashion, Politics, education, Religion, and All the above.

Figure 3: Bar Chart showing responses on the social media networks through which the Corps members make comments.
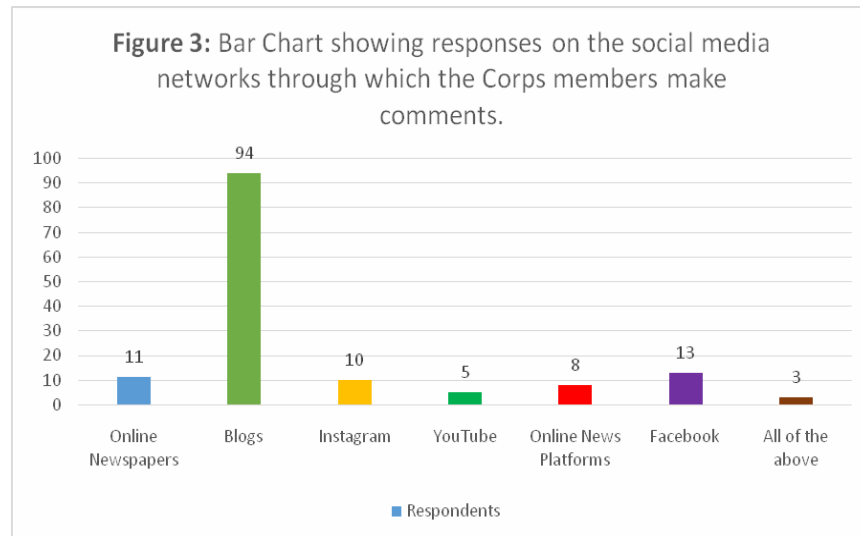
Source: Field Survey, 2020.

Key: ■Online Newspapers   ■Blogs   ■Instagram ■YouTube ■Online News   ■Platforms   ■Facebook   ■All of the above

Scale: 1cm = 10%

In Figure 3, it can be observed that the corps members made their comments mostly through Blogs as compared to other listed social media outlets.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding is that the youth corps members use the comment sections of the social media to a very large extent to air their views on the issues raised in social media. Their reasons for doing so may be to express an emotion or opinion, to add information, to correct inaccuracies or misinformation, just to take part in a debate, to educate others, to applaud other people or actions, to share an experience, to note missing information, to balance a discussion, to ask questions, to add humour to a discussion, to show sympathy to others, to persuade others, or to see how others react, and to discuss with others since it is interactive. Hitherto, Internet users that participated in comment features on news articles or blogs, reported that they "follow the news because they enjoy talking to

others about what is happening in the world" (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010, p.4). The above-listed reasons for engaging in commenting accentuates Mason's (2017) stand that the social media are a value-free media that facilitate communication between people, hence "young people have embraced this medium to explore and share aspects of their developing identity" (p.6).

Second, the data got from the field revealed that most of the comments were made with Entertainment, coming first before Sports, Fashion, Politics, Education, and Religion. This finding resonates with Guanah's (2019) assertion that "youths are more interested in entertainment, sports, and fashion issues more than they are interested in national and political issues…." (p. 456). As a set of high money spenders, and influencers of others to do the same, youths remain the major consumers and demograph of entertainment and sports news and information producers. Youths feel they benefit from these in different ways, including being inspired to discover and build their talents, to interacting with others, and for relaxation. Youths tend to comment more on these because organisations, like the organisers of the Big Brother Nigeria aka (BBNaija), Laliga, Euro Sports and others see youths as important to numerous markets, from fashion, mobile, and technology to alcohol, snack foods, and entertainment, and therefore offer brands that are confirmed route to their hearts (Nairametrics Partners, 2019), and blogs are on hand to publish news about them. This also re-echoes the findings of Stroud, Duyn and Peacock (2016) that "news commenters and readers are younger and more educated than those who neither comment on the news nor read news comments" (p.5).

In analysing online comments, studies have suggested a close investigation of message content by considering the social and technical context of its surrounding (O'Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003), hence this study looked at social networks through which the Corps members in Patani Local Government Area of Delta State made comments. It was discovered that the youths made use of Blogs' comment sections more than that of other social media platforms. The study carried out by Stroud, Duyn and Peacock (2016) confirm that "reading comments and commenting are more common on social media sites than on news sites" (p. 2).

The main reason may be because the Blogs report more about entertainment and celebrities, sports, and fashion than platforms like online newspapers and news platforms. These latter outlets address issues that deal mostly with "more serious" issues about the general public, unlike the Blogs that are mostly manned by few individuals, and mainly focus on individual issues.

Although, Friend and Singer (2007) submit that "journalists and bloggers both value truth-but they get to it in different ways" (p.116), however, the youths should be watchful about what they read on some Blogs. Lamenting the negative impacts of new media adoption as news dissemination platforms on conventional news media's reporting activities in an interview, *The Guardian* Online editor, Akinlolu Olamuyiwa, said most bloggers do not authenticate stories before they publish, for "Bloggers just take stories and post, not minding whether they are true or just a rumour…. But for a professional media like ours, despite the fact that we want to reach our audience on time, we still check the authenticity of the story" (Guanah, Aizek, & Ojo, 2019, p. 436). This singular act of these bloggers who can be referred to as charlatans of the journalism profession contributes to the fall of the profession as well as create believability problem and decline in news value. *The Guardian* Online editor, warned that one has to be very careful about blogs because most of them are just out for sensationalism and not the truth, "they just want to publish things that would increase their number of hits" (Aizek, 2014, p. 90). The editor of *Daylight.ng* Online Newspaper, Amatus Azah, also called for caution while accessing Blogs for information because "Not all bloggers are journalists. There are many quacks" (Aizek, 2014, p. 91).

Conclusion

The youths form a significant part of the population worldwide, and they are very active on the Internet; this accounts for why they use the Comment sections of social media outlets to a very large extent. They tend to use Blogs to make their comments in reaction to what they have read online because Blogs concentrate more on entertainment and sports news which are the favourites of youths. The comment sections avail youths the opportunity to voice their opinions, not on only entertainment and sports issues but, on varied issues that have the potentials of adding values to their lives. To a

great extent, even though the comment sections condone some anomaly like inflammatory and abusive languages, yet, youths can utilise them as avenues to comment and contribute to issues that will better their lives and the society at large. It is based on this that the following recommendations are made: (1) youths should spend less time on social media, especially if what they are using social media for will not be for their optimum benefits; (2.) they should not limit themselves to only reading and commenting about Entertainment, Sports and Fashion stories, but should also engage in discussions about politics and other salient issues; and (3) apart from blogs, youths should visit other sites to make comments, especially online newspapers and online news platforms where topical issues are reported and commented on regularly.

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