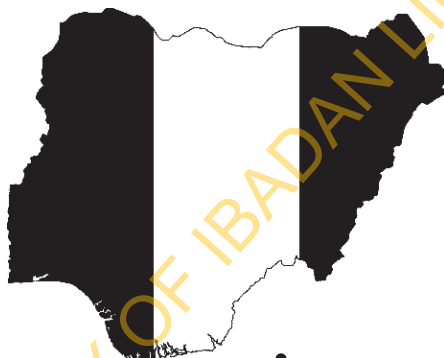


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Negative rhetoric in the user generated content of Nigerian news media

Babatunde Raphael Ojebuyi

Abstract

Despite its enhancement of citizens' freedom of expression and participation through content creation, studies have shown that the digital space enabled by Web 2.0 technologies is not without some negative consequences such as prevalence of negative rhetoric with serious implications for social cohesion. However, the veracity of this claim, as related to the Nigerian context, needs further empirical investigation. Guided by Face Negotiation Theory, this study, therefore, through quantitative content analysis and textual analysis, examined the nature of issues articulated by readers in the comment sections of purposively selected Nigerian news media—*Premium Times*, *The Punch*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *The Vanguard*. Analyses of 3,796 users' comments show that User-Generated Content (UGC) in the comment sections of the selected news media have more incidences of negative rhetoric (n=2,023; 53.3%) than positive (n=1,298; 34.2%) and neutral (n=475; 12.5%) comments. Besides, while negotiating self-worth and personas (face), users employ textual codes that carry elements of impoliteness, harassment, abuse, hatred, threats, incitement, and danger, and are capable of promoting cultural contradictions, ethnic dichotomies, and socio-political dissonance among Nigerians. A discourse culture where citizens predominantly employ negative rhetoric to negotiate conflicts is inimical to social and structural cohesion of the nation.

Key words: Face negotiation, Media gatekeeping, Nigerian news media, Online community, User-Generated Content (UGC), Web 2.0 technologies

Background and Rationale

The Internet has provided new digital platforms that have changed the role of the traditional gatekeepers. With the news media operating on Web 2.0 platforms (such as *Facebook*, *Blogspot*, *Twitter*, *Wikis*, and *Weibo*), one does not need much journalistic experience, or substantial resources to disseminate information to a large, scattered, heterogeneous audience. In the words of Howard Dean, the Internet is “the most democratic invention

since Gutenberg and the printing press” (cited in Fiedler, 2008:39). The Internet has 'democratised' the business of news gathering, selection and dissemination (Kim and Weaver, 2002). Once a story breaks, it can bypass the traditional media gatekeepers and appear in the Internet, (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wrigley, 2001; McKain, 2005; Shoemaker, 2006). The major difference is that a trained journalist is more likely to handle the story with professionalism by guiding his decisions with appropriate news values and ethical judgement (Shepard, 1999).

However, the Internet does not erode the relevance and roles of the traditional news media. The truth is that the synthesis of the traditional and the digital media has made it possible for the two media forms to maximise their strengths and complement their weaknesses (Author, 2012). The phenomenon has produced a multiplicity of digital news platforms, which Barzilai-Nahon (2005) describes as *network gatekeeping*. This is a multi-layer system where it is possible for the gated (i.e. the traditional media audience) to circumvent the gatekeepers and gatekeeping process (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) to make news available online, or react to a body of information. The Internet has thus produced a new trend in the information flow channels that has reduced the monopoly and hegemony of the traditional gatekeepers (Singer, 2014) and narrowed the information gap that had existed (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012). The digital platforms “allow users to connect, collaborate, and distribute information” (Coddington and Hoton, 2014).

Citizens, therefore, have the opportunity of getting information from different news platforms as well as sharing the same news either to entertain, educate, inform or mobilise (Bottorff et al, 2014; Maamari and El Zein, 2014; Ridder, 2015). Citizens now use their digital devices, which Wei (2008) described as a *hybrid medium*, to engage in a range of online and offline activities, especially social, religious, and political commentaries and mobilisation (Aoki and Downes, 2003; Wei, 2008; Velghe, 2012). Those who could not articulate their voice through the traditional media have the digital space to connect to others and express their feelings about various government policies and sundry issues affecting their society. They have become active participants in the democratic project of their country (Van Rensburg 2012; Pillay and Maharaj, 2014). And, the digital platforms now provide the space for more freedom of expression and political participation by the citizens. In the contemporary Nigerian society, the online media

platforms have created more opportunities for most Nigerians to participate in the nation's democratic project. They are rapidly embracing the computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies to interact with one another and to negotiate and articulate ideas, especially those relating to endemic socio-political issues that affect the Nigerian nation (Ifukor, 2011). Most of these conversations come as comments, or reactions to other readers' opinions on sundry national issues reported by news media. The comments spaces of most of the news media in Nigeria provide active platforms for articulation of these ideas and opinions. The content (comments or counter-comments) thus created by online audience are called User-Generated Content [UGC] (Singer, 2014).

However, some pertinent questions need to be addressed: What is the nature of issues articulated or negotiated by Nigerians through verbal conversations on the digital platforms of Nigerian news media? How much of the issues and comments raised in the UGC by Nigerians are positive, and how much are negative? What implications do the nature of the online rhetoric have for the structural and socio-political cohesion of the Nigerian nation? There have been studies on how the new or digital media affect or drive issues such as youth and politics, activism, democracy, and national development, (e.g. Daniels, 2008; Campbell and Kwak, 2012; Nam, 2012; Bosch, 2013; Khamis, 2013; Maamari and El Zein, 2014; *Gagliardone et al., 2016*), but the studies do not specifically focus on the nature of rhetoric in the digital space provided by news media and the implications of this new discourse culture for the construction of nationhood especially in a multi-ethnic and culturally complex country like Nigeria. In order to fill the gap, therefore, this study answered the foregoing questions by examining the composition of the rhetoric constructed by Nigerians as they negotiate ideas and personas in the comment platforms of Nigerian news media. The study also interrogated the implications that the discourse patterns in the user-generated content of the news media have for the unity and survival of Nigeria.

Literature Review

Although the Internet has opened the media gates and democratised information dissemination (Kim and Weaver, 2002; Fiedler, 2008), expanded the space for freedom of expression and political participation (Al-Kandari and Hasan, 2012; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012; Bosch, 2013;

Hoffman, Jones and Young, 2013), it is not without some deleterious features, which manifest in different forms such as negative rhetoric. Supporting the claim that the Internet has produced both negative and positive effects, *Gagliardone et al.* (2016: 13-14) describe the Internet as:

...spaces of engagement, where users seek to create communicative relationships across divides, rather than exacerbating existing tensions. These can be spaces where counter speech emerges as a direct response to hateful messages, but also, more broadly, spaces where users engage in other types of exchanges that have the potential to foster more debates.

This double-edge effect of the Internet as a modern communication platform is also acknowledged by Jaishankar (2008: 18) thus:

Today, the benefits of the Internet are being reaped in both a positive as well as a negative manner. The global community has become a tight knit space for communications through the Internet. However, the Internet has also provided an easy platform for online victimization.

The “online victimization” referred to in the foregoing submission of Jaishankar is a broad concept that defines antagonistic or negative discourse as a sub-construct that describes the darker side of the Internet. As *Gagliardone et al.* (2016) explain, negative rhetoric in the online community could come in three forms: offensive, hate and dangerous speech. An offensive statement is the one that contains only derogatory terms against other individual users or groups. It does not have the capability to evoke insult, humiliation, boycott, discrimination or call for physical violence. Next in rank above offensive speech is hate speech, which in addition to containing derogatory terms, also contains elements of incitement to discriminate against members of other groups. Marwick and Miller (2014: 16) admitted that hate speech is a difficult concept to define, but it may be broadly described as a “speech that carries no meaning other than hatred towards a particular minority, typically a historically disadvantaged minority.” Given the ubiquitous nature of the Internet, hate speech in the

online community could be any offensive or obnoxious utterance or message (encoded in words or symbols) directed at a person, a group, or a race. Also, in online community, hate speech “may prove more insidious than historical discourses of white supremacy” (Meddaugh and Kay, 2009: 253). Hate speech in the online community is potentially dangerous (Daniels, 2008) and may be difficult or impossible to control or retract once the hate message has gone viral. Different groups and individuals have exploited the semi-porosity and ubiquity of the digital space to launch hate campaigns against their targets, who could be individuals, a race, an ethnic entity, a religious group, or a political association. One of the common examples of cyber-hate is racial hatred; a type that has African Americans and other racially disadvantaged groups as the primary targets. This is evident in the case of White supremacists in the United States (Douglas, McGarty, Bliuc and Lala, 2005).

The highest rank of negative rhetoric in the digital space is dangerous speech. A statement is categorised as dangerous when it contains, for instance, a rumour of attacks by one ethnic, religious or political group on the other groups, or an actual call for people of one group to arm themselves and be ready to attack members of another group. In essence, dangerous speech is a negative rhetoric that encourages a group to riot, loot, beat, maim, kill, or take part in other forms of physical violence (Gagliardone et al., 2016).

With about 500 ethnic groups (Blench, 2003) including the three dominant ones—Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo—Nigeria was birthed when the Native Authority System was used to effect the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern protectorates in 1914 (Ojie and Ewhrudjakpor, 2009). Consequently, Nigeria has been described as a marriage of strange bed fellows; a product of a “fraudulent social contract” rather than that of a “negotiated will of the wielded parts” (Ajetunmobi cited by Rafiu, Owolabi and Folasayo, 2009: 156). In her postcolonial phase, Nigeria has been experiencing incessant ethnic, religious, political and ethnic crises (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005; Ahmadu and Yusuf, 2010; Odeyemi, 2014).

In spite of her chequered political history and ethnic configuration, Nigeria is the biggest democracy, and the most populous nation in Africa (Atkins, 2007; *ICYE, Nigeria*, 2010). The country has the highest Internet usage profile in Africa and eighth in the world with 2.30% (67, 101, 452 share) of

world Internet users ahead of the United Kingdom (1.95%) and France (1.90%). Nigeria has 16% yearly growth and 37.58% Internet penetration (*Internet Live Stats*, 2014). The religious, political and socio-cultural complexity of the Nigerian nation and her high Internet usage further justify the need for the current study which seeks to determine the extent to which Nigeria's ethnic, social, religious and political complexity is manifested in the rhetoric of her online communities, and the implication of this for Nigerian nation.

Face Negotiation (FN) Theory

This study employed the Face Negotiation (FN) Theory. Developed by Stella Ting-Toomey in 1985, FN theory provides the basis for comprehending how different cultures universally respond to conflict, that is, how cultural difference in people influences how they react to and manage conflicts (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Fitzgerald, 2010). Central to the FN theory is the concept of “face”, a metaphor for a public self-image—the feeling of identity, self-worth or the persona an individual keeps as a member of a given society. It is conceptualised as how we see and treat others, and how we want others to see and treat us as members of a social group (Thomas, 1995; Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). Face, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is fundamental to social interaction, and it is an aspect of speech acts that people use to negotiate social relationship and to manage conflict in the context of cultural differences. Deliberate examination of treatment of the individual's public image or self-worth (*face*) provides the basis for decoding how visual-textual discourses and language generally are employed by individuals to negotiate social interactions, manage conflict, and achieve social and political goals (Sunday, 2011) within the societal fabric. This process of negotiating social interaction, or what is called *saving face*, through the use of certain verbal and nonverbal codes, is known as *facework*. Through *facework*, an individual is able to maintain and restore face (self-worth) loss, as well as sustain and honour face gain (Fitzgerald, 2010).

The basic assumptions of FN theory, as enumerated by Littlejohn and Foss (2009), which are directly relevant to this study, are that: (1) people in all cultural settings try to maintain and negotiate face (self-worth or persona) in all communication contexts; (2) the concept of face is especially problematic in emotionally threatening or identity-vulnerable situations especially when the particular identities of the communicators are

threatened; and (3) individualism and collectivism value patterns shape communicators' preferences for self-oriented face concern versus other-oriented or mutual-oriented face concern. In summary, FN theory explains that people maintain face according to their cultures. That is, a culture to which an individual belongs influences how he sees and treats others, and how he expects other to perceive and treat him especially in times of conflict negotiation. Cultural differences explain how people of a social group react to and manage conflicts, especially through verbal and non-verbal communication codes (Fitzgerald, 2010), and “when an individual's face image is being threatened in a conflict situation, she or he would likely experience identity-based frustration, emotional vulnerability, anger, hurt, and even vengeance” (Littlejohn and Foss: 372). These threats to face can affect the entire membership of a group (i.e. an ethnic group or a nation) or an individual member of the group. The FN theory is considered to be appropriate for this study because the focus is to examine how Nigerians, being people of diverse cultures and ethnicities, interact and negotiate face (feelings of identity and self-worth) in the online community, through the comment sections of Nigerian news media, and implications of this face negotiation for the unity of Nigeria as a nation.

Methodology

The study examined the patterns of rhetoric in the User-Generated Content (UGC) sections of Nigerian news media with a view to highlighting the implications of the rhetoric for the construction of nationhood in Nigeria. To achieve the objectives, the researcher employed a mixed method approach using both qualitative content analysis and textual analysis. Quantitative content analysis was used to categorise and quantify the users' comments based on the constructed content categories (positive, negative and neutral rhetoric). To complement the quantitative data, textual analysis was used to identify and select verbal texts from the users' comments to exemplify the various patterns of rhetoric in the UGC.

Data for this study were collected from the comment sections of Nigerian news media. Specifically, *Premium Times*, *The Punch*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *The Vanguard* were purposively selected for the study. The selection was based on the criteria of web presence, and readership scope. Two of the news media—*Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*—were exclusively online-based media, while *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* had both print and online versions. All the selected news media had functional online platforms with

active UGC sections. Also described as *Consumer-Generated Media*, UGC means online content created by audience (readers or users) of online media. The UGC construction is enabled through the digital platforms of the media. Examples of UGC are chats, posts, tweets, comments, digital images, videos, audio files, and blogs (*Techopedia*, 2015). In this study, only users' comments that were expressed in words were considered for analysis. Based on reports by *AnswersAfrica* (2016) and *NaijaQuest.com* (2016), all the news media selected for this study, apart from having national coverage, were among the top 10 most patronised Nigerian news media with active online platforms.

Users' comments on the news stories about trending national issues during the period of the study (January to June, 2016) were selected for analysis. In order to ease the data selection process, after observing the trend of reported issues by the news media, the following key phrases that captured the trending national issues were constructed and used as the search indexes: *Fulani Herdsmen Attacks*, *Buhari's Medical Vacation*, *Niger-Delta Militancy*, and *Pro-Biafran Agitations*. During every search exercise, each of the key phrases was typed in the search space of the news media. From the generated list of news that the search produced, the news story that attracted the highest number of comments from the audience was purposively selected, and all the users' comments on such a story were mined for analysis. The process was repeated for every key phrase on each of the selected news media. The mining generated 3,796 readers' comments from a total of 16 news stories.

The selected news media and the news topics have implications for Nigerian nationhood. First, the four news media (*Premium Times*, *The Punch*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *The Vanguard*) are national newspapers with large readership across and beyond Nigeria. Because of their wide reach and online presence, they provide the platforms for Nigerians, home and abroad, to negotiate their thoughts on national issues. As they negotiate their thoughts, the citizens present their diverse perspectives on Nigeria as a nation. Other news media that do not have the online presence and widespread reach would not reflect these diverse and rich citizens' perspectives. Second, the selected news topics represented the most topical issues at the time of this study. The news stories were about topical issues that affected all Nigerians and had implications for Nigeria's unity. Consequently, it was believed that the selected news topics would attract readers' interest, and generate debate

among Nigerians in the online community.

Data Analysis

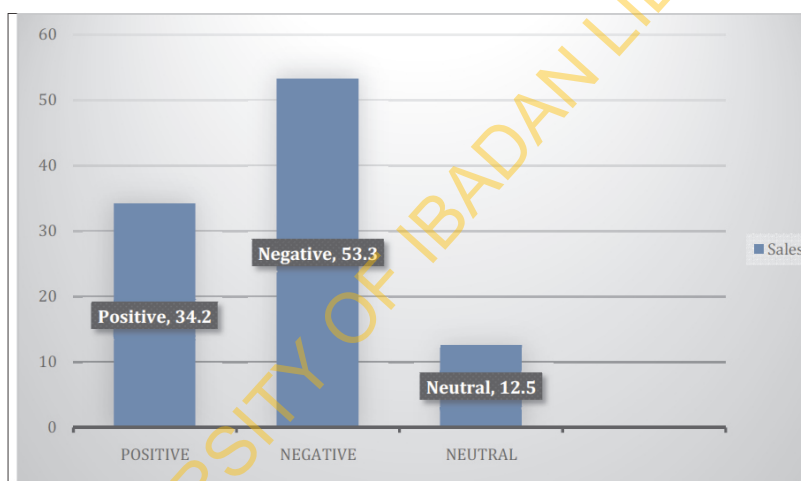
Mined data (UGC) were sorted according to the selected news media and key phrases that represented major national issues reported by the media. To code the data, a coding sheet comprising three broad content categories (*positive, negative and neutral*) with sub-categories of *personal* and *non-personal* was constructed. Positive personal comments were described as complimentary (inoffensive) comments directed at the news subjects (i.e. persons reported in the news story) or other readers, while positive non-personal comments were defined as inoffensive comments defending national unity and peaceful co-existence, or promoting public peace, but which were not directed at anybody in particular. Negative personal comments were coded as offensive, hateful or dangerous comments directed at the news subjects (i.e. persons reported in the news story) or other readers, whereas negative non-personal comments were described as offensive, hateful or dangerous comments supporting or suggesting ethnic sentiment, inducing national disunity or threatening public peace, but which were not directed at anybody in particular. Neutral comments were defined as comments that did not maintain a clear perspective or position that could be categorised as positive or negative.

To ensure validity and reliability, the coding sheet was subjected to an inter-coder reliability test using Ole Holsti's formula as described by Wimmer and Dominick (2011: 172-173). Two independent coders were given the coding sheet to analyse 18 items from the corpus of users' comments. The two coders agreed on 16 decisions but disagreed on only two decisions out of the 18 items. Using Ole Holsti's formula (i.e. $2M \div N_1 + N_2$, where **M** is the number of coding decisions agreed upon by the two coders, **N₁** is the total number of decisions made by the first coder, and **N₂** is the total number of decisions made by the second coder), the test produced a **reliability index of 0.888**, which was considered high enough thus making the coding sheet reliable to generate accurate results. All the mined UGC were, therefore, coded along the foregoing major and sub-categories and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Each comment in the UGC was the unit of analysis. Finally, the aggregates of all the comments were calculated for all the key phrases that formed the themes of discussion. Results were presented in tables and chats with brief interpretations following each presentation.

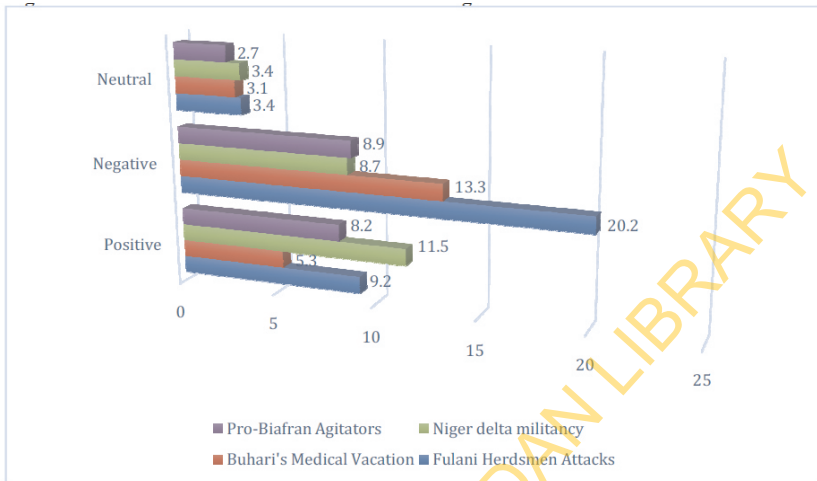
Results

Largely, negative comments (n=2,023; 53.3%) in the form of offensive, hate and dangerous speech dominate the UGC sections of the selected news media compared to positive comments (n=1,298; 34.2%) and neutral comments with just 475 (12.5%) occurrences (see Fig. 1). Out of the overall negative comments, 873 (23.0%) were non-personal as they were not directed at individuals whereas negative personal comments directed at the news subjects or other readers accounted for 1,150 (30.3%) occurrences.

Fig 1: Summative Distribution of Readers' Comments according to Patterns



As shown in shown in Table 1 and Figure 2, patterns of aggregate readers' comments on all the four issues selected for the study show that stories about attacks by Fulani herdsmen attracted the highest occurrence (20.2%) of the overall negative comments from the readers followed by stories about President Muhammadu Buhari's medical vacation to the United Kingdom with 13.3% of the negative comments.

Fig 2: Distribution of Readers' Comments according to All Selected Issues

Stories about Pro-Biafran agitations and Niger Delta militancy attracted 8.9% and 8.7% respectively of the negative comments. On the other hand, the highest percentage of the overall positive comments, which accounted for just 34.2% of all the readers' comments, dealt with news stories about Niger Delta militancy (11.5%) while news stories about President Buhari's medical vacation got the least (5.3%) of the positive comments.

Table 1: Aggregate Readers' Comments on All Selected Issues

ISSUES	POSITIVE		NEGATIVE		NEUTRAL	TOTAL
	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal	Personal		
Fulani Herdsmen Attacks	5.0%	4.2%	8.0%	14.2%	3.4%	1328
---	2.2%	3.1%	5.7%	7.6%	3.1%	822

Niger Delta Militancy	5.6%	5.9%	4.4%	4.3%	3.4%	898
Pro-Biafran Agitations	4.6%	3.6%	4.9%	4.0%	2.7%	748
TOTAL	662	636	873	1150	475	3796

Table 2 shows that out of the four news media selected for this study, the UGC space of *The Vanguard* newspaper has the highest incidence of negative comments (n=785; 20.7%) out of which 369 (9.7%) are non-personal and 416 (11.0%) are directed at individuals. With 6.2% of the overall positive comments in its UGC sections, *The Punch* newspaper has the least of the comments in this category marginally trailing *Premium Times* (n=246; 6.5%) and *Sahara Reporters* (n=252; 6.7%). The comment sections of *The Vanguard* attracted the highest occurrences (n=1,514; 39.9%) of the comments analysed, followed by *The Punch* (n=833; 21.9%), *Premium Times* (n=825; 21.7%), and *Sahara Reporters* (n=624; 16.4%) in that order.

Table 2: Distribution of Readers' Comments by News Media

NEWSPAPER	POSITIVE		NEGATIVE		NEUTRAL	TOTAL
	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal	Personal		
<i>Sahara Reporters</i>	3.3%	3.4%	3.3%	4.8%	1.6%	16.4%
<i>The Punch</i>	2.8%	3.4%	5.0%	7.7%	3.0%	21.9%
<i>Premium Times</i>	3.1%	3.4%	5.0%	6.7%	3.5%	21.7%
<i>The Vanguard</i>	8.2%	6.6%	9.7%	11.0%	4.4%	39.9%
TOTAL	17.4%	16.8%	23.0%	30.3%	12.5%	100%

The foregoing results as shown in Tables 1 and 2, and Figures 1 and 2, confirm that negative rhetoric dominate the UGC sections of the news media analysed. To exemplify the nature of these negative comments, texts of such comments from the samples of the analysed readers' comments are presented. As shown in the following section, each pattern of the negative comments in the UGC (as already explained in the data analysis section) is textually illustrated to complement the foregoing results from the quantitative data.

Examples of Negative Personal Users' Comments:

Sample 1:

Buhari, a man who repays good with evil, evil will never depart from his house; including ear infection, loss of memory etc. As for you a joker. God did not put Buhari there, Jega installed him

and that is why he is a disaster to-date. God is not the author of confusion. Buhari is confusion and wants Sharia in Nigeria through NASS. May you die young! (Comment by **emmanuel**).

Premium Times, June 5, 2016

Sample 2:

Who knows how much Buhari's bad-health is costing Nigeria? Buhari is a half-dead man; the life-support gadgets in his body is just what the Brits are using to rob Nigeria of massive proportion of our Commonwealth. Every fortnight they'll invite him to recharge his Life-Support apparatus and the bills are not disclosed to the populace (Comment by).

The

Vanguard, June 6, 2016

Sample 3:

Mr. Daura, brought from retirement to head the DSS, only investigates the killings of his fellow Fulanis and plays *boju-boju* when it's the other way round. He thinks we are all fools and does not realize that this is not the Nigeria of 1984/85 (Comment by **Gary**).

Sahara Reporters,

April 25, 2016

Sample 4:

Did you say criminality, then you must be living in some kind of illusion. Do you know what stakeholder engagement is called? The daft president makes divisive and misguided statements about a region that sustains the economy of Nigeria, you expect people in that region to cheer him on. Right. Those NDA have stated their demands, either dialogue with them on those demands or suffer the impact of a sabotaged economy (Comment by **Olistic**).

The Punch,

May 2, 2016

Sample 5:

You wish.....monkey. Why not lead the team that would come to confront the avengers. Talking like an idiot (comment by **Duruoha1**).

The Punch,

May 2, 2016

In samples 1 and 2, audience use of negative words such as “Buhari, a man who repays good with evil...”, “Buhari is confusion and wants Sharia in Nigeria...”, and “The daft President makes divisive and misguided statements...” are direct insults on the person of Muhammadu Buhari, President of Nigeria, who is the principal subject of the news stories about his medical vacation, and the issue of Fulani herdsmen attacks. Also, in sample 3, the utterance “Mr Daura...only investigates the killings of his fellow Fulanis...” is a direct, personal indictment of the Director General of the State Security Services (SSS), Lawal Daura. The phrase, “You....monkey...talking like an idiot” in Sample 5, is a direct attack on another user.

Examples of Negative Non-Personal Users' Comments:

Sample 6:

Lol! Nigeria is really a Zoo! Kanu was right! A country where criminals are leaders! Everything is upside down! A place where court order can't be obey... [?] (comment by **DE KING**).

Sahara Reporters,

January 15, 2016

Sample 7:

The picture makes me sad. Just take a look at the Biafran foot soldiers. They reminds me how Ikembana took to his heels and left his foot soldiers to die in the hands of Nigerian Army in the 70s. Sad! Who will be their next commander? I hope he will not be as cowardly as Ojukwu! (comment by **Dan Arewa**).

Premium Times,
May 31, 2016

Sample 8:

At the end Biafrans will win and Biafra restored is more of ideology than physical history will forever remember Mr Nnamdi Kanu...for our neighbours across the Niger...is nigeria thoroughly [?] the country of your dream?

(comment by [valD](#)).

The Vanguard,

May 23, 2016

Sample 9:

Wow, Nigeria is indeed a failed state...no wonder it is now accepted to be a Zoo. Welcome to Zoogeria!!! (comment by [Himazi Nigeria](#)).

The Punch,

May 2, 2016

Like excerpts in samples 1 to 5, examples presented in samples 6 to 9 also express negative intents. But more specifically, they encourage or suggest hate campaigns, ethnic sentiment, national disunity or threat to collective harmony. However, the users did not direct their negative rhetoric at specific individuals or characters in the news stories. The excerpts in Sample 9 contains some lexicon and strange coinage (e.g. *Zoo* and *Zoogeria*) that do not, literarily, collocate in the context, but with some pragmatic implicature as explained in the discussion section.

Discussion and Implications for Nigeria's nationhood

Digital spaces, especially those provided by the news media to allow readers to generate their own contents have created a new culture of discourse where citizens, apart from reacting to the news stories, can also engage in conversations with other members of the online community. As submitted by scholars (e.g. Kim and Weaver, 2002; Fiedler, 2008; Bosch, 2013; Hoffman, Jones and Young, 2013) that the Internet has expanded the space for freedom of expression and political participation, the current study has also confirmed that Nigerian citizens now have ample space to participate in ongoing debates in the public sphere by articulating their ideas in the UGC sections of Nigerian news media. All the four news media selected for this study— *Premium Times*, *The Punch*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *The Vanguard*—have active comment sections that attract comments from the readers.

To answer the questions regarding the nature of issues articulated or negotiated by Nigerians through verbal conversations on the digital platforms of Nigerian news media, and the amount of the issues and

comments raised in the UGC by Nigerians that are positive or negative, the study has established that the UGC in the comment sections of Nigerian news media are of three categories—positive (34.2%), negative (53.3%), and neutral (12.5%). As evident in the foregoing results, textual and content analyses of the UGC show that, in most cases, users (online audience) post comments that do not really address the issues raised in the news stories. Most of these comments, which either attack individuals, or are directed at nobody specifically, have negative intents; they are conversations that carry elements of harassment, abuse, hatred, threats, incitement, or danger (Daniels, 2008; Jaishankar, 2008; Marwick and Miller, 2014; *Gagliardone et al.*, 2016). When such negative rhetoric are directed openly at the news subjects (i.e. persons reported in the news story) or other users who are also participating in the conversation on the UGC space, they are described as personal. However, the negative comments are categorised as non-personal when they are not directed at either the news subjects or other users, nonetheless they directly or indirectly evoke, encourage or suggest the substance of hate campaigns, ethnic sentiment, national disunity or threat to public peace. While negotiating ideas and face (self-worth and personas), readers use textual codes to describe their perceptions of others especially those that do not share their socio-cultural and political ideologies or those that belong to different cultural and ethnic groups.

Although, neither names nor profile symbols of most of the users reflect their cultural or ethnic groups, the discourse style adopted by the users to construct their messages of face negotiation suggest negative rhetoric that promote ethnic and cultural differences. This negative rhetoric has some pragmatic implicature with serious implications for the unity of Nigeria as a nation. The implicit message in the negative rhetoric by users as shown in this study projects Nigeria as a “failed nation” with no justifications for her existence as nation. For example, excerpts in samples 1 to 5 are examples of negative personal rhetoric in the UGCs of Nigerian news media. In all of the samples, the users construct negative rhetoric that directly attack either characters of other users or the individuals reported in the stories. The comments carry obvious negative properties of offensiveness, abuse, disrespect, animosity, hate, and threats to personal or collective safety.

Also, the use of phrases such as “...zoo”, and “Zoogerman” (Samples 1 and 9) as metaphors for the Nigerian nation, is an indication that the users do not believe in the project called Nigeria. Similarly, the user by the name *valD* in

sample 8 expresses apparent allegiance to the “Biafran nation”, but shows disdain for Nigeria. This is evident in the use of an initial lower case for “nigeria” instead of *Nigeria*. One would have conceded that this act is an oversight or an expression of cyber culture where users do not necessarily observe the grammatical rules, but the user in this case did not forget to use the initial capital for the following proper nouns: *Biafrans*, *Biafra*, *Mr Nnamdi Kanu*, and *the Niger*. This is a pragmatic expression of lack of trust in the unity of Nigeria.

The constructed rhetoric in the corpus of UGC analysed for this study—as evident in the foregoing examples—are capable of evoking incitement to ethnic, religious and national hatred among Nigerians. This study has further confirmed earlier submissions that the Internet has provided an open space for public discourse to negotiate and articulate ideas especially those relating to contemporary socio-political issues that affect the Nigerian nation (Ifukor, 2011). It has also confirmed the claim that the digital space has equally provided the platform for negative rhetoric (Daniels, 2008; Jaishankar, 2008; Meddaugh and Kay, 2009; Marwick and Miller, 2014; *Gagliardone et al.*, 2016) where individuals—Nigerians in this context—are using verbal texts to negotiate their self-worth and personas (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Sunday, 2011) as proposed in Face Negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Thomas, 1995; Littlejohn and Foss, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2010), in a way that reflects and legitimises cultural and ethnic contradictions. The intensity of negative rhetoric, which reflect divergent and conflicting values expressed by users in their comments, is a construction of nationhood that confirms the popular views that Nigeria is a heterogeneous country where different nations find themselves in a union that was forced on them by their colonial masters (Ojie and Ewhrudjakpor 2009; Rafiu, Owolabi and Folasayo, 2009).

The Face Negotiation theory, as the theoretical framework adopted for this study, uses the concept of “face”, as a metaphor for a public self-image—the feeling of identity, self-worth or the persona an individual keeps as a member of a given society (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Fitzgerald, 2010). Nigeria as a “face” is constructed by users as a nation of diverse cultural and ethnic identities. In negotiating this “face”, majority of the users use negative rhetoric to express their hatred for other ethnic groups and their disbelief in the Nigerian project as a united country. Nigerians, who engage in conversations on the digital platforms of the selected news media,

frequently use negative rhetoric that do not only offend, insult or threaten the image and self-worth of fellow Nigerians, but also insult and threaten both the symbols and institutions of authorities of Nigeria as a nation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the nature of issues articulated and negotiated by Nigerians through verbal discourses on the digital platforms of Nigerian news media in terms how much of such issues discussed in the UGC by Nigerians are positive, and how much are negative. The study also aimed to emphasise the implications of the nature of the online rhetoric for the structural and socio-political cohesion of Nigeria. The study established that positive, negative and neutral rhetoric abound in the UGC created by Nigerians that interact on the digital space of Nigerian news media, but the whole corpus of the discourses is dominated by negative narratives that contain elements of impoliteness, insult, and hate directed at individuals participating in the online conversation, or characters in the news stories. Most of the negative rhetoric also evoke incitement to violent act or disloyalty to public office holders and Nigeria as a nation. The study confirms previous arguments that the Internet is a double-edged sword. It has both positive and negative consequences. Therefore, Nigerian governments and other stakeholders must formulate policies that do not only maximise the positive nature of the Internet but also mitigate the negative consequence of its use. But in doing this, the fundamental human rights, especially the freedom of expression and access to the public sphere, which the Internet has offered Nigerians, should not be compromised. Government should also initiate public awareness projects on the ethics of discourse on the Internet that give proper orientation to Nigerians, especially the youth who constitute the most active members of the online community.

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