

Social Media, Youth Mobilization and Urban Crime

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Abstract: This paper was focused on exploring the drivers of urban crime through social media mobilization of youths. Adopting the use and gratification theory, the paper x-rays the extent to which social media has been adopted by youths in Nigeria for social participation and activities including the perpetration of crime. In addition to changing the way information is shared, social media also provides a veritable tool for the creation of criminal networks which have proved challenging to effective functionality of justice system in Nigeria. The paper further explores the intersection between poverty, youth violence, drug peddling, and activism on the one hand, and social media utilization. To address the problem of urban crime, the paper suggest that government at all levels should engage in massive employment of youths and provides greater focus on positive utilization of social media.

Keywords: youth Mobilization, social media, crime, drug peddling.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the factors and role of social media in youth mobilization and urban crime in its varied forms in the Nigerian state and the reactions of the excluded segments of the population; such as anger, frustration, hopelessness and alienation, which creates a socio – political context conducive to urban crime and in its extreme form, and ultimately violent extremism, to manifest as Boko Haram and other forms of violent behaviour.

The logic of the analysis sees the various empirical manifestations of exclusion as repudiation of the social contract which Nigeria represents as sovereign and concretely spelt out in the 1999 Nigeria constitution. This widespread repudiation in the Nigerian socio-political space that delegitimizes the social contract (represented in the constitution), gives room for the excluded to seek solutions to their existential problems in various forms of socio-political and economic self-help such as armed robbery, kidnapping, yahoo and 419 activities, prostitution, child trafficking, drug peddling, oil bunkering; oil theft, etc. The ultimate reaction is rebellion, which sees the system as irredeemable and need to be replaced by a better system, which urban crime is espousing.

According to Rogers (1995), the rapid evolution of the computer brought the internet. The internet services have reduced the world into a global village which makes it look as if everybody is in the

same place at a particular point in time. The internet has made for an easier and faster way of life, with financial and economic transactions done at the speed of light. In this direction, Oyewole and Obeta (2002) argued that the internet, with its inter connection of computers across the world has created unlimited opportunities for humans. Similarly, Ehimen and Bola (2009), argued that the internet has provided a pedestal for massive growths and removal of economic barriers faced by individuals and the nations. One of the offshoot of the internet is the social media.

Social media has become commonplace; individuals, groups, clubs, businesses, churches and government agencies maintain multiple social media accounts to do everything from staying in touch with old classmates, meeting new people, sharing their everyday lives, promoting a brand, gaining support for an idea or spreading a movement. The advent of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and the likes has changed the way people connect with their immediate friends and the rest of the world. Since the 2000s technological progress has brought the world together in a way that it has never been before. It is now possible to instantly converse and share information with people anywhere in the world who have access to a computer and an Internet connection.

Social media has completely changed the way information is created, disseminated and utilized. This

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has made it quite relevant to government and private businesses (Kaplan & Haelien, 2010). It has provided users with the both the ability and medium to share opinions and perspectives, without depending on centralized news outlets (Kwak *et al.*, 2010). The information generated from social media is valuable as it provides an opportunity for speedy analysis of public sentiments and for establishing a trail of who shares what information and when such information are shared.

A large volume of information shared on social media has been utilized in public activism (Xu *et al.*, 2014), for emergency purposes (Avvenuti *et al.*, 2016, 2018), to detect disease spread (Lampis & Cristianini, 2012), to examine user role on the internet (Martinez Teutle, 2010), to assess media coverage (Prieto Curiel *et al.*, 2019), to provide indications for tourists (Cresci, 2014), to detect traffic pattern (D'Andrea *et al.*, 2015), to identify impact of ideological messages (Himmelboim *et al.*, 2013), political participation (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). Although most of what is shared in social media are not news, nor posts related to public issues, it has nonetheless become, for some, one of the main sources of political information and news (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012).

This new virtual reality creates a new space for the government, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies to observe behaviour as well as detect the possibility of criminal behaviour in urban areas. It is therefore on this basis that this study investigates on how social media has been utilized among youths in engaging in urban crime.

Statement of the Problem

There is no doubt social media has been beneficial for some criminal justice institutions. For the police, social media has given them unprecedented access to the public, and vice versa. Via Facebook and Twitter, police and the public can communicate in real time about incidents and events. This has proven invaluable not only during times of crisis, but also on a day-to-day basis and at the local level (Alyce & Sanja 2016) For a long time, due to many factors, including the 'hegemonic' nature of communication in Nigeria, youths had little opportunity to be active in governance, or make their views heard which has emancipated to a lot of crises, protest and agitations especially in the urban areas most notably the end SARS protest at least 56 people have died, hundreds were badly injured to lose of lives (both citizens and members of Nigeria police force) looting of different properties, shops, police stations, houses most notably is the looting of Oba of Lagos Palace and making away with the staff of office. The Internet tools like the Social media have revolutionized this process as there was no any form of meeting, gathering as per planning, execution or any

form of leadership of this protest and other related protest.

Deriving from the above is the fact that Nigeria, youths, who have higher levels of affinity with the social media, are using it to achieve different ends. It holds lots of potential for news, information, entertainment, mobilization, interaction and expression. Given these potentials, it is pertinent to find out how the social media impacted youth mobilization and increased urban criminality as observed in the last few years most especially the End SARS 2020 . Some studies have been carried, most focusing on events such as leadership participation and governance. It is however pertinent to examine how social media and youth mobilization and urban criminality with relation to youths reasons for this mobilization. This forms the basis of this paper.

Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 brought a number of expectations among the people (Maier, 2000). Nigeria has witnessed poor performance in terms of economic growth. The country is bedeviled with massive corruption and has suffered from reoccurring political instability and policy reversal, with the attendant alienation of a vast majority of citizens. When the country returned to democratic rule, there was high expectation from a large segment of people based on the observation of how other democratic countries were performing. Therefore, one could understand the widespread hope for democracy and justice when the country returned to democracy in 1999.

It is generally accepted that democracy promotes and produces stability and accountability within a political system (Yagboayaju, 2011). These fundamental elements are duly acknowledged as indispensable to economic development at both the individual and collective levels (Ringgen, 2004). Reflecting on the over two decades of democratization, it is apparent that these expectations have not seen the light of day.

For over two decades of democratic governance, economic growth remains stunted, wealth distribution remains uneven and political stability remains a mirage. According to Ucha (2010), poverty, unemployment and inequality has been on the increase, especially in urban areas. Confirming this reality, Aliyu (2014) asserts that there have been an increase in prostitution, drug abuse, robbery, kidnappings, human trafficking, militancy, thuggery, hooliganism, youth violence, and even terrorism. Some might argue that these realities have existed in all of Nigeria's history, however, two important points needs further considerations. Firstly, problems such as human trafficking and kidnappings are recent developments. Secondly, even for those problems that have for long been part of Nigeria's urban landscape such as

prostitution, drug peddling and armed robbery; their intensity and frequency has witnessed astronomical multiplication since 1999 when Nigeria democratized. What are the possible explanations for the rise of urban crime in Nigeria; what are the factors and or conditions that facilitate the escalating level of urban crime in Nigeria specifically in Delta State.

Theoretical Bases

The paper is anchored on the uses and gratifications theory. This theory was propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1974). The theory is concerned with what people do with media instead of what media do to people. The major postulation is that people determine the impact media have on them. The Uses and Gratifications theory argues that the audience is not passive but actively interprets and integrates media into their own lives. Asemah (2011), notes that the theory emphasizes motives and the self-perceived needs of audience members. Thus, in applying this theory to this paper, it is reasoned that internet users deliberately choose the social media to serve their need for involvement and awareness about governance issues in the country especially in youth mobilizing against police brutality that lead to the EndSars protest of 2020. The utility they need here is a level of participation in government, and the social media is employed by them specially to gratify that need.

THE ROAD TO YOUTH MOBILIZATION AND URBAN CRIME IN NIGERIA

The factors contributing to youth mobilization and urban crime. The study reviewed media reports, databases, policy reports, newspapers, and the academic literature on the subject.

POVERTY

It is no longer a matter of debate that urbanization in developing countries has been seen as a major predictor of poverty (Schweitzer, Kim & Mackin, 1999). As the urban population increases, it results in congestions of living spaces, stretching of social services and limiting of employment opportunities among urban dwellers which further exacerbate the poverty rates (Baker & Schuler, 2004), and thus the attendant spread of urban crime and violence (Curley, 2005).

Most third world countries, especially those in Africa, urban areas are characterized by a mixed presence of affluence and extreme poverty. Studies have repeatedly shown that these representations is a robust recipe for the proliferation of urban crime (Baker, 2008). This is especially true for third world countries where socio-political and economic conditions are sharply different from those of the developed societies.

Social media has shown to many youths the opportunities that abound in their environment and the abundance that are within their reach. Thus social media has been used as a channel to peep into the dynamics of the “haves” by those who do not have. This situation has been further compounded by the advent of different social media platforms where youths who has been alienated or silenced, unlawfully jailed for speaking out utilize it to speak and written against uneven governance which has also increased the challenges of urban crime as experience in 2020 by the mobilization of the youth through social media.

Youth Violence and Thuggery

There have been massive violent youth activities in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta Region. These activities range from militancy in the Niger-Delta, kidnappings in the South East, to political thuggery and touting in the South West and Northern Nigeria respectively. One remarkable commonality among the occupants of all these criminal groups is their age and employment status in their communities: they are all youths and unemployed (Oyeshola, 2005, p. 123). Usually when these acts are executed, the channel of communication is through social media. Most youths hear about these crimes with the rich imagery, and feel attracted to it.

In another dimension, one of most common form of youth violence and thuggery stems from their use by politicians during electioneering campaigns as hoodlums and thugs for the purpose of disrupting campaign activities of political rivals. These are readily available on social media. It serves as a scouting opportunity for politicians, who also have a large number of youths online to defend their excesses. Often, youths are mobilized into groups that provide services-for-hire to the highest bidders among the politicians. Their uses range from simple and pretty harmless disruptions during campaign rallies, to more violent uses including abetting electoral fraud by stealing the electoral materials, intimidation of electoral officials, and rivals’ party agents.

Drug Peddling

Illicit drug dealing, including its trade and consumption is a feature as well as effect of urbanization (Bobo, 2009). One possible explanation for this is that urbanization facilitates the coming together of various social influences in one single place. Drug dealing is today a dangerous problem which practically all societies, developed and developing, are grappling with. But while most of the developed societies are able to institute measures that at least contained its spread through peddling and abuse, the same cannot be said of the developing countries. In many of the developing countries there is an evident failure to tackle this serious issue. Social media has been used as a channel for the trade and trafficking of illicit drugs. According to the findings of Kazemi,

Borsari, Levine and Dooley (2017), social media is used by youths to establish their network of sales agents and for avoiding detection by law enforcement agents. The commonly used social media networks were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, while delivery is done with motorcycles, bicycles, and walking across the street without law enforcement agents being able to track them.

END SARS PROTEST

The sharing of online contents of the Special Anti-Robbery Squared (known as SARS) officials killing a man on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, led to widespread protests across Nigeria. According to a post on twitter, SARS officials shot a young man, left him by the roadside and took his Lexus SUV in Ughelli, Delta State, Nigeria, on October 3, 2020. This started an online protest which proceeded to widespread live protests all over the streets of Nigeria.

Youths in Nigeria protested both on social media and in the streets of Nigeria against police brutality and for further reform of Nigeria as a whole. This has led to the loss of more young people who are part of the protests. Social workers in Nigeria have a responsibility to join in the fight against oppression and injustice using online and offline platforms while also ensuring people are protected at a time when of the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic is still prevalent. These protests are similar to the death of George Floyd in the USA on May 26, 2020, which was captured on video, and sparked widespread protests all over the world with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (Eligon, 2020).

There have been several calls on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for an end to SARS and their unjust activities, but the Nigerian government has paid little attention to these online agitations. This continued until the recent killing of the young man in Delta state cited above which has resulted to the a nationwide protests across Nigeria.

Facebook, Instagram, and chief amongst them, Twitter was pivotal in the protests which started with the demand by young Nigerians for the government to dissolve SARS, end police brutality, and reform the Nigerian Police Force. It metamorphosed into a demand to reform Nigeria at a time when the entire world was fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many Nigerians shared gory tales of their experiences and that of their family and friends on social media which keep fuelling the protests. The protest was on two fronts: online, via social network sites, and on the ground in the streets of Nigeria. The internet was flooded with posts about other injustices and corruption that have plagued Nigeria for years and the demand for immediate change with new hashtags

such as #NassSalaryCut, #EndSWAT, and #EndBadGovernanceInNigeriaNow and so on.

Social media made it possible for people to get information in real-time and in many cases with digital video evidence. Thus, protests as we know them changed in line with digital technological advancements, and many protests will be influenced by social media (Noble, 2007). While the protest recorded some success as the SARS were disbanded it equally, lead to lot of criminal activities especially in urban areas such as looting of shops and businesses, burning of police stations, prison breaks, killing of police officers and government effort to crack down protesters lead to killing of harmless citizens at Lekki toll gate by Nigeria Army.

CONCLUSION

The simple measures the government can take is begin with creating employment opportunities, reviving the economy, more accountability from the governor to the governed and also address the lop-sided class structure in the country would go along away in addressing the issue of urban crime which has eating deep to the fabrics of the our urban areas.

As the number of youths engaging in social media with all its fanfare, unemployment, inequality is a formidable catalyst for the increased urban crime. The inability of cities to cope with the sharp increases of population has also generated crime hotspots, social tensions, and mistrust in local and federal government response, in addition to violent protests. The unequal balance in wealth distribution and the obvious differences in urban areas is likely to stimulate increased crime in these areas. It is therefore important cities and governments develop policies and strategies to cope more effectively with urban crime by formulating and implementing comprehensive solutions and interventions that mitigate the negative impact of social media.

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