ANALYSIS OF READERS' COMMENTS ON BUHARI'S ELECTION ON VANGUARD NEWSPAPER WEBSITE

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation entitled: **Analysis of Readers' Comments on Buhari's Election on *Vanguard* Newspaper Website** has been carried out by me in the Department of Mass Communication. The information derived from the literature has been duly acknowledged in the text and a list of references provided. No part of this thesis was previously presented for another degree or diploma at this or any other institution.

Sumner Shagari SAMBO _____ _____

Signature Date

CERTIFICATION

This dissertation entitled: **ANALYSIS OF READERS' COMMENTS ON BUHARI'S ELECTION ON *VANGUARD* NEWSPAPER WEBSITE** by Sumner Shagari SAMBO meets the regulations governing the award of the degree of Master of Science of the Ahmadu Bello University, and is approved for its contribution to knowledge and literary presentation.

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ABSTRACT

This study analysed comments posted by readers on *Vanguard* newspaper website relating to news reports of President Muhammadu Buhari's election victory and whether such comments are positive, neutral or negative. It also examined if readers used appropriately or abused the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website as provided to serve as a feedback mechanism between the news medium and the public. The study was guided by research questions which bothered on what the connotations expressed by readers indicate about their understanding of news reports on the election of Buhari in relation to the way they used the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website. The reception theory was used to explain how readers receive media reports and how such content of the reports make them to post positive, neutral or negative comments on any media content related to Buhari's election based on individual differences and preferences. The theory is concerned with the effect a text has on its readers and how such readers behave after assessing its content. The research method used in this study is content analysis and the duration of the research is from March to June, 2015. The population consisted of 1,135 reports published in 122 online editions of *Vanguard* newspaper between March to June, 2015. The study used simple random sampling method to select 20% of the population; this resulted to 227 news stories which were coded under the following units of analysis: straight news, feature article, column, opinion and editorial. Also, various content categories were derived and analysed by four coders using established criteria, including the four most frequently used keywords and phrases used by readers to describe Muhammadu Buhari which were purposively sampled from the 14,934 comments attached to the 227 news stories. The collated data was quantitatively and qualitatively presented and analysed using tables. The findings of the study indicate the following: that majority of the comments, keywords and phrases posted by readers on news reports related to Muhammadu Buhari on *Vanguard* website had negative connotations. This suggests that the comments section is misused as a feedback platform; the comments section was dominated by readers who did not react to issues in the news as presented but used the platform for their own motives regardless of whether or not their comments will cause division or even scare away other readers from the website; the level of tolerance among readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website is extremely low especially considering Nigeria's multi-ethnic/religious society and if left un-moderated, commenters on newspaper websites like this can resort to use of injurious words and phrases that could spark crises in the country; and that despite its abuses, the comments section of newspaper websites remains a veritable tool for free speech, feedback, sharing of ideas, posting eyewitness pictures or videos and providing more facts on news items. Therefore, the study recommended that despite the poor finances of most media outfits in Nigeria, *Vanguard* and other newspaper websites should consider the use of moderators that should review comments, not in a censorship format, before they are posted on their platforms or else they risk losing readers and potential visitors thereby affecting their online traffic and advertisements. Such moderators should edit comments that do not promote national unity or morality by prohibiting the posting of comments with abusive, ethno-religious, pornographic or foul language by readers.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

This study examined readers reaction to published news reports through their views posted on the comments section of newspaper websites. The introduction of online news publishing by many newspapers have led to citizens across the globe reacting to such news content with immediacy on the Internet via websites and blogs. These reactions often come in many forms such as correction, commendation, confrontation, abuse, displeasure, division, anger, explanation and advertising. These forms of reactions often led to a better understanding of the news item in focus or a denunciation of the report as false, public relations (PR) or biased item. (Harper, 2010)

Most online newspaper readers are those in their late teens and mid-forties and several studies have established facts that the most conspicuous users of the Internet are adolescents and undergraduates. (Kausar & Zobia, 2006). Reading (online or offline) has often been an interesting phenomenon across all ages and generations and serves as a vehicle for assimilation of knowledge whether in form of information, ideas or culture. Generally, reading enlightens the mind, makes the intellect sharper and makes an individual to travel far without any motion. Reading has been accepted as an interactive process, a communication process, an active process and a meaning-induced process. (Braunger & Lewis, 2006)

Reading is not just about printed matter but also about the ability to interpret anything that is intended to convey a message so as to facilitate communication. Thus, online reading of published news content differs a bit from printed (offline) matter in the

sense that the former is device-based through a computer, smartphone, tablet or other micro-devices while the latter is presented in scrolls, books, slates or other hard surface. Reading and commenting in digital formats have been made easier with Web 2.0 tools that allow for note-taking, highlighting, editing of comments or formatting while reading online materials such as the type of news content presented on newspaper websites.

Okonofua (2012) states that Nigeria has a vibrant newspaper industry with a number of active print outlets, and that as at 2004, there were about 95 reasonably regular newspapers: 20 national dailies, 23 national weeklies, 10 regional dailies, 19 regional weeklies, 6 provincial or local dailies, and 17 provincial or local weeklies. As at 2012, the number had almost doubled with Ayankunbi (2012) positing that the total number of newspapers in the country is presently within the neighbourhood of 150. Majority of these newspapers now have websites where they post their news content or post breaking news as it breaks.

The print media is very agile in the transformation process to serve new readers who feed on its content via the Internet due to either the lack of their physical presence in Nigeria to purchase a hard copy of the newspaper or who prefer reading the papers online in a digital format. Most newspapers in Nigeria now have an online presence and have gradually been placing about two-third of their daily content for their online readers who although do not purchase a copy but serve as traffic flow from which marketers of the medium often use to attract advertisers to the website.

When the Internet got a foothold in Nigeria, most publishers were initially weary and jittery as they felt it would take a sizeable portion of the reading public. Gradually, most publishing companies embraced the medium half-heartedly, placing only headlines and lead-ins for their online readers. But over time for example, *Punch*

newspaper started publishing full content on its website and shortly after asked readers to subscribe to it if they hope to read the full content of the news story. The online readers were asked to open an online account with the website after paying a subscription fee at a designated bank. (Mobilityng, 2009)

The infiltration of the Internet by online-based discussion platforms, citizen forums and e-newspapers like *Sahara Reporters* via www.saharareporters.com, *Nigerian Village Square* via: www.nigerianvillagesquare.com, *Premium Times* www.premiumtimesng.com, *The Cable* via www.thecableng.com, *The Will* via www.thewillnigeria.com and *Nairaland* via www.nairaland.com among others who continued to offer free news services and attracting more online advertising revenue through their readers later made *Punch* and other mainstream newspapers to dump the *Financial Times* of London (via *www.ft.com*) model for subscription-based online newspaper services. (Giwa, 2006)

The *Punch* experience made most mainstream newspaper websites to open up their portals freely without any surcharge and this has gradually returned traffic to the newspaper websites. A cursory observation shows that some of the popular mainstream newspaper websites in Nigeria as at 2016 are: *www.vanguardngr.com, www.punchng.com, www.dailytrust.com, www.leadership.ng, www.thenationonlineng.net, www.thisdaylive.com, www.pmnewsnigeria.com* among others.

Driven by user-friendly Internet applications and better connectivity, the introduction of Web 2.0 tools have led to an explosion and expansion of the use of the Internet. Web 2.0 tools now allow readers of a website not only to read but also to make comments, post pictures/audio/video's, blog and form communities openly or

anonymously with other readers thereby making reading the news an interesting phenomena. This has made reading fun and is gradually increasing literacy levels across the globe. (Fernando, 2013)

The downside of online interaction however seems to be that some people who comment on the Internet and especially on the comments section of newspaper websites often use their anonymity to aggressively twist the news, commend, abuse others, engage in defamation of character or throw-up divisive issues for debate using religious, ethnic political or tribal sentiments thereby leading to members abusing themselves.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

Commenting on news items posted on newspaper websites has grown in recent times due to the availability of web 2.0 tools that have made the Internet more interactive and user-friendly. Mainstream newspapers have embraced technological innovations over the years that now allow them to present news content in an interactive format using web 2.0 tools to create attached platforms for commentary, posting of pictures/videos, blogging, download of public reports/documents and job services among others.

Readers reaction to published reports on newspaper websites have however taken a new dimension in recent times. A cursory view of comments posted on Nigerian newspaper websites often shows sharp division among readers. They abuse or commend newsmakers who are the subject of published reports, cast aspersion on the journalists or news medium, post outrageous comments with ethno-religious sentiments meant to spark debates under an atmosphere of high tension or post comments with sexual and pornographic implications.

There are also hate speeches, use of swear-words, racist remarks and other forms of distortions such as illegal advertising by small business owners and illegal advertisements by the popular conmen known as 419. Some also advertise the sale of imported used cars at ridiculous prices allegedly as a result of custom auctions among many others who write provoking jargons in capital letters.

The increasing rate of abusive and antagonistic reactions or unprofessional adverts posted on the comments section of such websites by other readers have resulted in disillusioned online readers. Many perceive that there is misuse of the comments section of newspaper websites through postings that are not meant for that section thus derailing conversations there. (Brodesser-Akner, 2010).

Thus, this study assessed whether or not comments posted by readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website on published reports of Buhari's election are positive, neutral or negative especially on such news items that generated heated debate on the website. It also examined whether or not readers abused the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website as provided to give them a voice and serve as a feedback mechanism between the news medium and the public.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

The aim of the research is to understand website readers' comments on news content and how their connotations lead to use or misuse of the comments section of newspaper websites. In this case, the study examined online readers who reacted to news reports on the election of Muhammadu Buhari as President of Nigeria as published on *Vanguard* newspaper website between March and June 2015.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

i. To analyse readers comments on Buhari's 2015 election news reports on *Vanguard* newspaper website and whether such comments were positive, neutral or negative.
ii. To understand how the opinions expressed by readers lead to their understanding of news reports related to Buhari's election on *Vanguard* newspaper website.
iii. To examine readers use or misuse of the comments section while reacting to published reports of Buhari's 2015 election on *Vanguard* website.

1.4 Research Questions

This research was guided by the following questions:

i. What are the comments expressed by readers to reports of Buhari's 2015 election victory on *Vanguard* newspaper website?
ii. What do the comments expressed by readers on Vanguard newspaper website indicate about their understanding of news reports on the election of Buhari?
iii. How have readers comments reflected a use or misuse of the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website while reacting to news reports of Buhari's 2015 election?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The gap this study aims to fill is the near-absence of research on the online reading habits and connotations of readers who comment on newspaper websites in Nigeria. Since the introduction of Web 2.0-enabled websites in Nigeria, many citizens have embraced the innovation of attaching comments section to such websites as can be seen by the huge numbers of commenters on such platforms (Giwa, 2006). This online study becomes necessary in view of the fact that many Nigerians showed a huge interest on published reports by several newspaper websites on the campaigns of the two major contenders of the 2015 presidential election with emphasis on the opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, who eventually won the election. The news of Buhari's victory generated both positive, neutral and negative connotations from his supporters and opponents alike, based on divisive interests.

Thus, the study focused on the benefits of access to newspaper websites and use of feedback platforms by readers with a view to bringing out their divergent views on the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari in the 2015 presidential election. It also shows the nature of comments by readers and how such comments aid the understanding or misunderstanding of reports by fellow readers and whether the comments section of newspaper websites is a necessary tool for a better reading experience of news or not.

There is scanty research in this area, especially within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, hence the need for a study to document the nature of posted comments on newspaper websites; to investigate whether or not readers' comments are serving the purpose for the establishment of comments section in line with Harper (2010). Also, the study will determine whether new alternative needs are being served to readers through the feedback platform.

The study will be of benefit to communication scholars, news content researchers, Internet users, readers of newspaper websites among others on the motivating factors for readers' reaction to reports on newspaper websites and how such reactions, comments, observations, eyewitness accounts and criticism or commendation educate and boost the understanding of the news story or scare people away from newspaper websites.

It will contribute to policy formulation by those in government or private sector on how readers' feedback on reports published on Nigerian newspaper websites can help the dissemination of targeted communication messages to different segment of the society. It will also add to the existing body of knowledge and serve as a benchmark for future research on the use of the Internet as a news medium by Nigerians.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study limited itself only to online readers of news stories related to the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari as President of Nigeria as duly announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) which were specifically published on *Vanguard* newspaper website and not general comments by users of the social media, blogs, groups or the Internet as a whole.

The study covered four months from March 1st to June 30th 2015, which is before the election, during the election and after the swearing-in of Muhammadu Buhari as President of Nigeria by INEC.

The study is limited to *Vanguard* newspaper website because it has consistently remained the most visited newspaper website in Nigeria for years, recording about 21.3 million visitors monthly (Alexa, 2016). A cursory survey among Nigerian newspaper websites shows that it has the highest number of comments on news

reports published on its website; has an effective online archiving system that promotes research unlike other websites that lose content in months; features breaking news; is interactive; uses latest information technology features; and has effective social media integration tools that help to annex comments to it.

Based on these huge advantages when compared with the fewer comments on other Nigerian newspaper websites and their lack of proper archiving of stories or easy retrieval for research, the study resorted to using only *Vanguard* newspaper because the outcome of the research could become heavily tilted or skewed against any other newspaper website picked for comparism which does not have same parameters for evaluation and content analyses like that of *Vanguard* newspaper.

1.7 Operational Definition of Key Terms

Use – In this context, the word refers to the positive aspect of posting comments that contribute to the debate and tolerating the views of others irrespective of ethnicity, race or nationality.

Misuse – Refers to the abuse or illegal use of the comments section of the newspaper website in such ways that may not have been intended by the medium such as posting abusive comments, illegal advertising materials or distorting other commenters through trolling.

Readers Comments – Refers to views or opinions of what is presented in the news as expressed by readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website in form of texts which are posted on the comments section of a news story.

Analysis – It refers to the detailed examination of the elements or structure of the

study in trying to research the variables used which are: reader's comments, Buhari's election and Vanguard newspaper website. It means separating the research subject into its constituent elements for a proper investigation, comparism and understanding.

Buhari's Election – Refers to the presidential campaign period of Muhammadu Buhari between March to June 2015 where the candidate contested and won the general election under the platform of the All Progressives Congress, APC.

Vanguard Newspaper Website – As used in the study, this refers to all news stories related to Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 presidential campaign and published on the website of *Vanguard* newspaper. It does not mean all news stories published on the website.

Positive – For this study, it refers to any favourable news report on Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 presidential campaign published on the website of *Vanguard* newspaper

Neutral – Refers to any uninvolved news report that does not support or oppose Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 presidential campaign which is published on the website of *Vanguard* newspaper.

Negative – Refers to any opposing or unfavourable news report on Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 presidential campaign published on the website of *Vanguard* newspaper

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with several literatures that are relevant to the understanding of readers' comments on news content that are published by newspaper websites. It primarily focuses on Buhari's electoral victory news reports as published on the website of *Vanguard* newspaper and readers' reaction to such news reports during the election.

It is divided into sub-themes to allow for a better understanding of the subject matter and presents a theoretical framework to aid understanding of the study.

2.2 Newspaper Websites/Online Newspapers

A newspaper website refers to a medium that generates and publishes news on hard copies (paper) while placing the soft copy of the same news on its website with constant updates for readers who may not have access to the paper edition or prefer reading news through their digital devices like smartphones, tablets and computers. An online newspaper is a news-based organization that publishes news only on the Internet in a specialized website similar to or newspaper websites but the difference being that they do not print hard copies of their content on traditional print paper. They only do their business in a digital format online.

Both newspaper websites and online newspapers are published regularly on the Internet using new technologies to create a web-based platform that presents news content and information in a user-friendly and interactive format alongside a multimodal and multimedia format. (Newman, 2009)

Okonofua (2012) opines that an online newspaper, also known as a web newspaper, is

a newspaper that exists on the World Wide Web (www) or Internet, either separately or as an online version of a printed periodical.

Globally, the first online newspapers appeared in 1994 with few newspapers operating then, mostly in the advanced developing countries of United States, Germany, United Kingdom and Japan among others. Since then, most mainstream newspapers have gradually evolved into having online copies while Internet-only newspapers have also witnessed a rise. (Giwa, 2006)

Giwa (2006:1) further states that:

> Over 80% of all hard copy publications have online and digital versions. Ten years from now, that percentage may rise to 100. All traditional publishing activities will be supplemented by digital versions, which will be promoted more favourably.

Okoro and Diri (2014) states that most traditional newspapers and magazines now make use of the worldwide web (www) among other services of the Internet. They create and maintain web servers in which they publish contents of their papers for users of the net to access. Newspapers and magazines using the web are connected to the Internet via Local Area Network (LAN) or Wireless Local Area Network (WLAN) that are directly connected to the Internet via an Internet Service Provider's (ISP) or GSM-enabled phone network facilities. In this way the electronic pages of newspapers are brought to the doorsteps of people in Nigeria and foreign countries as long as these people are connected to the Internet.

Online news readership is increasing as the hardcopy newspaper readership is decreasing. New technologies such as computers, cellphones and tablets play the major role in aging newspaper readership. Online news costs less when compared to regular newspapers hence young readers that are gradually replacing the older

generation of newspaper readers have shifted to accessing news through online sources. (Ekhareafo et al, 2013)

The flourishing of newspapers and magazines online may not be unconnected with some possible secondary reasons - including enthusiasm for new technology and the general sense that many persons wish to be part of the new wave at the moment. The fundamental reasons for the shift to digital newspaper publishing may also be economic as the people who own newspapers have now discovered that the Internet provides opportunities and challenges to which they need to respond to cut costs and provide lean but efficient operation.

Writing on the numerous advantages of the online media both in terms of supply and demand, Adeya (2001) states that the technology has brought about a veritable revolution in modern journalism even as one can now be a publisher and electronically transmit information around the world by spending less, with virtually no capital expenditures and spread the information at close to zero marginal costs. Clearly, Information Technology has completely changed from a network of oral and print mechanisms to one that is largely visual and computer-generated. The speed with which one can get information has also been reduced from months and days to nano-seconds.

Producing online newspapers is generally cheap and cost-effective. Though it requires some storage space on the server, constant payment for anti-virus or server security, nevertheless the cost is not prohibitive when compared to the expenses involved in the paper printing processes. The consumers of online newspapers themselves pay the costs of distribution; buying the electronic device (phones, tablets and laptops) and paying the Internet charges. Online publishing now offers mainstream newspaper proprietors the prospect of substantial cost reductions. (Okoro and Diri, 2014)

The need to print and transport a physical product of the traditional newspaper usually imposes a time restriction or deadline that slows down the news day and sometimes lead to a risk where an important news development will occur too late to be put into the hard copy newspaper on the day of its occurrence. This is where online publishing comes in. It has now created room for the editor to publish news as it breaks without any time restriction and for online readers of such news content to also have immediate access to such information from any part of the world and at any time.

Okonofua (2012: 4) opines that when taking a closer look at journalism as it is presently,

> We notice a dramatic change during recent years. Media is no longer dependent on time and space. New technology makes it possible to consume up-to-date media contents at all times. The consumer also plays an increasingly important role in choosing his or her own media content. The Internet has opened a new landscape for newspapers as it has given the print a platform to conquer its limitations, a platform where audience members are active participants in the news making process and are able to shape the news to meet their needs.

The continuous increase in the number of newspapers available on the stands and, consequently, competition, has pushed papers to increase the diversity of their contents and the diversity of the views captured in their contents. Newspapers are now looking for new and grey areas to gain advantage over other titles and capture a larger market share, and the online media has presented them this platform. The new media has offered these papers the opportunity to reach a wider range of readers through online newspapers without any demographic or distribution problems. (Ekhareafo, Asemah and Edegoh, 2013)

One major challenge faced by traditional news organizations which do not have a deliberate transition strategy to migrate to online news publishing is that which comes from news sources. Okoro and Diri (2014:5) writes that under the proliferation of the present Internet-led alternative platforms:

> The main generators of much of the standard news diet like government bodies, large businesses and corporations, pressure groups and so on hardly need the newspaper as an intermediary to reach the public. They can alternatively publish their own material, selected, edited and presented in ways that they see fit, and offer it directly to the public in competition with the newspaper journalists' reports of their doings. They are forced away from what they perceive as the restrictions imposed by conventional news values, which they often believe stress conflict, edit for brevity and, which marginal and oppositional groups impose dominant frames on activities.

However, Afolabi (2008) posits that a major flaw is that online newspapers or newspaper websites only reach a fraction of the population in Nigeria due to low computer literacy level and high cost of Internet subscription. Many experts are now seeking a cheaper and deeper penetration of broadband technologies in Nigeria so as to allow for more access to information.

2.3 Web 2.0 and Citizen Journalism

Web 2.0 is centrally important to understanding how new media works in today's globalized society. Lule (2016:11) describes it not as a new version of the web; but rather states that "the term is a reference to the increased focus on user-generated content and social interaction on the web, as well as the evolution of online tools to facilitate that focus." It is the concept of collaborative participation by the general public in the generation of content through user interaction, learning and social networking. Some leading Web 2.0 sites include Twitter, *Youtube* (videos), *Facebook, Wikipedia* (online encyclopaedia), *MySpace, Badoo, Flickr* (photography), *Friendster,* and *Bebo* among others.

These websites are designed with minimal centralized controls, with the focus on users and their interactions with one another. Whenever possible, they employ open-source or free software that can be adapted and modified according to changing

requirements by the users. Relatively simple and lightweight in their design, they have minimal administrative start-up and ongoing development costs. (Addison, 2013)

Web. 2.0 tools are some of the most useful innovations that have helped to entrench a strong online culture of technological inventiveness that allows easy access to the decoding and encoding of information online. Users no longer need to be IT professionals to use, adapt or modify user applications in an interactive manner.

2.3.1 Citizen Journalism

The introduction of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have ushered in an era of new media, signaling unbounded possibilities for interactivity and what is now known as Citizen Journalism. The term is colloquially used to describe news enthusiasts or journalism-like content produced and published on the Internet through the aid of Web 2.0 tools by non-professional journalists who are simply citizens interested in informing others of the happenings within their immediate environments through the use of text, pictures, videos and other signs that can easily and timely be conveyed through any technological device to many persons. (Banda, 2010)

Citizen journalism is a rapidly evolving form of journalism where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community. Ross and Cormier (2010: 66) state that:

> It is news of the people, by the people and for the people. Citizen journalists are independent, freelancing citizen reporters. They are not constrained by conventional journalistic processes or methodologies, and they usually function without editorial oversight. Citizen journalists gather, process, research, report, analyze and publish news and information, most often utilizing a variety of technologies made possible by the Internet.

Banda (2010) opines that ICT's have given rise to new ways of citizen interaction with the media. For example, phone-in programmes on both radio and television are now employing text messaging, Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp posts to get people's views on a range of topics. This is redefining the concepts of universal service and access in terms of new media technological opportunities for greater interaction between professional communicators and ordinary citizens.

Mainstream newspapers are now readily available online, some of them complete with interactive facilities for their online readers. Although still on a limited scale, this is serving to democratize the media. As such, reacting to news content published on newspaper websites is part of the overall benefits that Internet users now derive from using Web 2.0 tools to engage in blogging or citizen journalism.

Arao (2008) notes that citizen journalism is a mechanism for empowering the public by making them aware of the inner workings of the press and being part of the press culture. Audience participation is no longer confined to giving feedback after consuming media content alone. It now affords users of media content the opportunity of sharing ideas with fellow citizens from which the traditional media can also benefit from the ideas so shared.

The phenomenon of citizen journalism has been spurred on by the rise in the availability of the new media platforms of desktop publishing. Some of the technologies that have come to characterize citizen journalism are catalogued by Gillmor (2006: 27-41) as follows:

i. Mail lists and forums, made of diverse communities of interest
ii. Weblogs, a 'many to many, few to few' medium whose 'ecosystem' is expanding into the space between email and the Web, and could well be the missing link in the communications chain'
iii. Wiki's, server programs that allow users to collaborate in forming the

content of a Website.

iv. Internet 'broadcasting', whereby ordinary people can record and upload anything on to the Internet, as well as distribute it.

v. Peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing of files; and RSS (Really Simple Syndication), which allows readers of blogs and other kinds of websites to have their computers and other devices automatically retrieve the content they care about.

Ross and Cormier (2010) quotes the US-based National Association of Citizen Journalists (NACJ) on what it calls accidental journalists, which are far different from citizen journalists. NACJ states that just because someone uses a cellphone camera to photograph an incident and then uploads it to *Twitter* or *Facebook,* does not make that person a citizen journalist. Just because somebody has a blog and writes about his or her favourite subject, it should not be misconstrued that the individual is a citizen journalist. Accidental journalists are people who are caught unexpectedly in the middle of an event and take photos or videos and upload them to either social networking websites such as *Facebook, MySpace* or *Twitter,* or news websites such as *CNN*'s iReport or *Fox News*' uReport.

2.4 Reading the News Online

Reading of news content on newspaper websites has witnessed a geometric rise in the last decade. The proliferation of Internet-enabled mobile devices and affordability of broadband services has made reading online materials interesting and pleasurable. Reading can be said to be the bedrock of most forms of learning activities culminating in literacy. Some important factors in education are the ability to read, understand and critically apprehend the text. (Hetting and Knapp, 2001)

Readers often develop their reading habits on a daily basis. Reading habits are a vital part of lifelong learning concept and it is therefore not surprising that every nation prides itself in the reading culture of its literate population especially when such literacy levels are high.

Kim and Kim (2005) analyzed readers' patterns and comments on bulletin boards and separated them into four categories: (a) the logicality of the opinion, which was categorized as logical argument, non-logical argument, slander, or other; (b) types of interactions, which included single shot, sympathy, refutation, argument, convergence, confusion, and other; (c) offensive language, categorized as severe abuse, normal abuse, slang, and none; and (d) tone of the comments, which was categorized as approval, disapproval, neutral, and other. In the study, readers displayed their opinions by using assertive writing forms through various types of interaction. The comments they contributed generated more comments, indicating that readers' responses were active.

Choney (2011) states that a new finding shows that the Internet now trails only television among American adults as a destination for the news and that nearly half of all American Adults (47 percent) report getting at least some local news and information on their cell phones or tablets. The report found that 46 percent of those surveyed said they get their news online at least three times a week, compared to 40 percent who say they get their news from newspapers. Choney (2011) concludes that for the first time, more citizens are getting their news from the Web than from newspapers.

One of the more subtle trends of contemporary times has been the way that reading habits have changed due to a convergence of other web trends: mobile apps, real-time web (mostly Twitter) and social networking as a way to track news (mostly

Facebook). More people now use tools like Twitter, Facebook, Instapaper, Flipboard, LazyWeb, Feedly and TweetDeck, to track news. MacManus (2010:1) explains the transition from reading on stationary computers or laptops to mobile devices:

> The main point here is that Web reading has moved away from the PC and onto mobile devices, which is changing the way we find, consume and organize our reading. Consuming content has become a more social, mobile experience in 2010. Facebook and Twitter in particular have fundamentally changed the way we find and consume news. At the same time, mobile devices like Android phones and the iPad have become more widely used - leading to Flipboard, Instapaper and other innovative reading apps.

Choney (2011:1) quotes Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project as saying that:

> Many news organizations are looking to mobile platforms, in particular mobile apps, to provide new ways to generate subscriber and advertising revenues in local markets.

Based on the analysis of a recent survey of news reading habits, which shows that most users of mobile devices now consume their news using such devices rather than the traditional media platforms, Fernando (2013) opines that news consumption is rising through multi-sourced online platforms and that people are checking the news more frequently on mobile devices and that 75 percent of readers with smartphones and 70 percent with tablets check the news more than once a day.

Fernando (2013) states that the survey also indicates that people are increasingly checking sites like *Facebook* and *Twitter* for news updates. Fernando (2013:2) further states that:

> …43 percent of readers now use Facebook to check news and 42 percent of those who own cell phones or tablet computers use those devices to check local weather reports. 37 percent use the devices to find local restaurants or other businesses. 15 percent get news alerts about community sent via text or e-mail.

Thus, this development has now made most newspaper websites to also adopt the posting of headlines via website links on their social media pages like *Twitter, Facebook* and *Instagram* among others to promote news stories or articles.

According to Ahn (2011), very few people participate in the news by writing comments; the majority are instead readers. To support this fact, Kweon and Kim (2008) state that in Korea, the country with world's highest percentage of Internet users and Internet industries, NHN Corporation, the mother company of Naver, "analyzed users' comment-related behaviors on Naver's representative portal site. The corporation found that 50% of all comments were produced by only 0.25% of the total site users. In other words, of the average 1,200,000 daily users of the portal site, only 2.5% of these, or 30,000 people, contributed over 120,000 comments a day."

2.5 Nigerian Newspaper Websites and Online News Presentation

The Nigerian print media are very agile in their transformation process to serve new readers who feed on their content via the Internet due to its cheapness and immediacy or lack of readers' physical presence in the country to purchase a hard copy edition of the newspaper.

Most newspapers in Nigeria now have an Internet presence and have gradually been placing about two-third of their daily content for their online readers who although do not purchase a hard copy but serve as traffic flow from which marketers of the medium often use to attract advertisers to the website. (Ekhareafo et al, 2013)

Dare (2011) notes that one of the enablers of Internet penetration and online newspaper websites particularly in Nigeria has been Internet-enabled cellphones. The Internet has become a regular feature of mobile communication in Nigeria thanks to its affordability as a result of poor quality fixed landlines.

As a new media technology, the cell phone is a veritable mass communication tool in Nigeria and Africa and many have argued that there is the likelihood of mobile technology becoming the seventh mass medium: the first six being the print, sound recording, cinema, radio, television and the Internet as online-ready mobile phones represent around 90 % of all telephones in Africa. (Ekhareafo et al, 2013)

When the Internet got a foothold on the Nigerian cyberspace, most publishers were weary and jittery as they felt it would take a sizeable portion of the reading public who may not be willing to pay for online editions. Most publishing companies embraced the medium half-heartedly, placing only Headlines and Lead-ins for their online readers. (Ayankunbi, 2012)

In 2009, *Punch* newspaper, one of Nigeria's most popular newspaper via *www.punchontheweb.com*_started publishing full content on its website and shortly after asked readers to subscribe to it if they hope to read the full content of the news story. The online readers were asked to open an account with the website after paying a subscription fee at a designated bank or through an online payment portal, *Paypal*. However, this idea later failed as other competitors and blogging sites like *Saharareporters.com* that were offering free full content to their readers and attracting more online advertising revenue. *Punch* later rescinded its decision. (Mobilityng, 2009)

Some media analysts do not believe that online media are directly in competition with mainstream media organizations on the Internet. They opine that online websites are providing a service to Nigerians by becoming a first source for information on Nigeria by both Nigerians and non-Nigerians who are attracted by the divergent and varied views expressed in the websites while newspaper websites are platforms for traditionally reporting and analyzing the news through more stringent editorial

guidelines. They note that online websites and traditional newspaper websites can co-exist, even as independent websites often provide direct links to established newspaper websites on their platforms thereby signifying a partnership of sorts rather than rivalry and competition. (Nworah, 2005)

In contemporary times, most, if not all Nigerian national dailies and even regional newspapers, now have websites and use the social media like *Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and Instagram* to announce breaking news or promote their news stories, advertisements and websites.

A cursory observation of print media trends on the Internet shows that major news stories now break instantaneously and within minutes almost any citizen who has an Internet-enabled device can not only read it but also has the chance to comment on the story via the website of the newspaper. The knowledge of these news stories before the arrival of hardcopy newspapers have therefore led to a readership decline in the number of hardcopy newspapers sold on the streets except for news media that go more into investigative reporting to unearth additional information. (Ekhareafo et al, 2013)

Harper (2010) states that for newspapers to remain relevant in the changing times of technology, they should spend much of their daily production on news analysis and investigative reports rather than just breaking news or reporting staged or routine events by newsmakers which most times are presented on the move as breaking news stories by the social media or online websites.

2.6 Free Speech versus Hate Communication

Free speech or freedom of speech is basically the right to communicate one's opinions and ideas without fear of interference, arrest, imprisonment or censorship either by the coercive apparatus of state or any other civil nor non-civil authorities. Put simply, it is the act of seeking, receiving and imparting information or ideas using any medium. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Article 19:1) recognizes the right to free speech as a fundamental human right as it states that:

> Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference and everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

Citizens have a right to communication and it comes not only as free speech but it also guarantees access to different medium of communication as well. As such, the Internet is an offshoot of citizens' desire to expand their access to the media or public space due to the restrictive nature of traditional media, which are most times controlled by vested interests such as governments, corporations and powerful individuals. Thus, the Internet and its different formats such as websites and blogs now promote access and diversity of viewpoints with little restrictions.

Free speech engenders open communication hence newspaper websites like readers' comments because they foster loyalty, interaction and because they keep readers on such websites longer. This measure is known as engagement because the higher the number of visitors or traffic to a website through comments, the higher the newspaper can use such information for sourcing increased advertising revenues. (Harper, 2010)

Gagliardone, Gal, Alves and Martinez (2015) describes the definition of hate speech as a phrase that is difficult to be situated in one context when taking into cognizance the heterogeneous definition of such within a global setting. They state that hate speech lies in a complex nexus of freedom of expression, individual, group and minority rights, as well as concepts of dignity, liberty and equality hence its definition is often easily contested.

Hate speech (in national and international legislation) refers to expressions that advocate incitement to harm (particularly, discrimination, hostility or violence) based upon the target(s) being identified with a certain social or demographic group. It may include, but is not limited to, speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent acts. For some, however, the concept extends also to expressions that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance on the assumption that this may fuel targeted discrimination, hostility and violent attacks. (Gagliardone et al, 2015)

Jay (2009) defines hate speech as bias-motivated speech aimed at a person identified as a member of a historically victimized group based on gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, or disability. Similar to sexual harassment, hate speech is protected until it rises to the level of a threat. A common feature of harassment and hate speech situations is that "victims feel threatened by their victimizers' speech."

UNESCO (2015:3) states that in common parlance, hate speech may also:

> Encompass words that are insulting to those in power, or derogatory of individuals who are particularly visible. Especially at critical times, such as during elections, the concept of hate speech may be prone to manipulation: accusations of fomenting hate speech may be traded among political opponents or used by those in power to curb dissent and criticism.

The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) defines hate speech as "any form of speech that degrades others and promotes hatred and encourages violence against a group on the basis of a criteria including religion, race, colour or ethnicity. It includes speech, publication or broadcast that represents as inherently inferior, or degrades, dehumanises and demeans a group on the basis of the criteria above." (Mute, 2008)

Popular Nigerian newspaper websites now serve as a nesting place for many readers who not only read each news story but also have the opportunity to comment on such news content in a highly interactive manner through the comments box. Such comments may be positive or negative depending on the views of the reader. However, there has been a rise in the level of offensive or hate communication that occur in the comments section of newspaper websites as a result of the Internet's free speech license. Some website owners are now entrenching rules to moderate what readers can post or not post hence abusive comments that stray over the line are re-edited or rejected by website administrators. (Brodesser-Akner, 2010)

Farhi (2014) states that due to the high rate of hate speech found on its website, the *New York Times* decided to devote fourteen (14) of its staff to act as moderators who screen comments posted on news reports and articles submitted to the news organization. The strategy is meant to prevent hate speech advocates, minimize incivility and elevate comments that are commendable.

These among other measures by newspaper websites are aimed at sanitizing comments of all kinds, stopping illegal advertising and preventing hate communicators from hijacking their platforms and thereby scaring the bulk of their readers who complain about the menace of abusive readers. Although these measures

have been partially effective, there is however a fear among website owners that such rules and moderating measures may reduce a website's traffic thereby leading to a fall in its advertising revenue. (Farhi, 2014)

Erjavec and Kovavic (2012) underline the accountability of Internet's interactivity, anonymity and credibility not only in facilitating messages with positive content but also messages that encompass words of hatred. They also point out the potential of producing hate speech in the comments section, a fact that could also be used in the case of replies on newspaper websites.

The pre-election activities of Nigeria's 2015 presidential election were characterized by a high level of online and offline hate speech and divisive public communication between the campaign organizations of the top political parties and their presidential candidates. This necessitated the intervention of the international community to douse tension and warn that any party or presidential candidate that propagates hatred and violence will be subject to trial by the International Criminal Court (ICC). (Vanguard, 2015)

2.6.1 Prejudiced Speech and Hate Communication

According to Ruscher (2001), prejudiced speech or communication can be hurtful to recipients when it is deployed especially in nonverbal communication where there is no face-to-face interaction. She argues that "many people are the recipients of presumptuous and patronizing speech, the recipients of hostile, ambiguous, or unhelpful feedback and are ridiculed and assaulted by group-targeted humor and hate speech. Such individuals see their groups lampooned, ignored, and misrepresented by the major media. Diversity in nonverbal or speech patterns is not well tolerated and in

some cases pressures to abandon the nonstandard language, dialect, nonverbal pattern, or manners of dress may be resented."

Scholars such as Maass and Franco (1999) recognize that research into prejudiced communication especially between individuals among groups is very essential but quickly points out that theories on prejudiced communication are sorely lacking. Even though some existing theories can be invoked to understand pieces of the puzzle, the duo say their focus of convenience may be too broad to stimulate empirical research on prejudiced communication. The general group dominance perspective, for example, "may provide insight into why people from powerful groups limit lower-status groups' access to working within the major media, allow hate speech, or are neglectful mentors to members of lower-status groups." (Ruscher, 2001).

The study found that in recent years the question of intentional control has become a central issue in hate speech communication research and that the question on whether hostile or discriminatory reactions towards outgroups are the result of intentional processes or whether such reactions occur unintentionally, or even outside of people's awareness is one that requires an accurate understanding of various intervening factors.

Another example of intentional control through the use or choice of language (verbal or non-verbal) which fuels hate communication is established in KNCHR (2008:5) where officials state that "Kenya presently exhibits characteristics which are prerequisites for the commission of the crime of genocide. One such feature is the dehumanization of a community using negative labels or idioms that distinguish the target group from the rest of society. Communities such as the Kikuyu and Kisii resident in the Rift Valley were referred to by some Kalenjin politicians as

'madoadoa' ('stains') (or 'spots') before and during the post-election violence… Consequently, unless the state and Kenyans take remedial measures, the probability of genocide happening in Kenya at some future point in time is real."

2.6.2 Criticism of Hate Communication

Civil libertarians argue that words do not cause harm because speech is abstract or symbolic, not at all like physical blows (Heins, 2007; Strossen, 1995). They argue that any attempt to restrict hate speech will contradict the democratic principles of freedom of speech and the right to free expression.

Brinks (2001) mentioned that attempting to limit hate speech would result to censorship. He presented this great dilemma in his work by mentioning that regulating hate speech might bring equality but it would affect liberty. In a similar vein, Downs and Cowan (2012:1354) maintains that "if speech is restricted, it silences those who may benefit largely from its expression". However, Jay (2009) disagrees by stating that harms experienced by victims of hateful speech, as outlined by Matsuda et al (1993) include psychological and physiological symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as panic, fear, anxiety, nightmares, intrusive thoughts of intimidation and denigration.

Jay (2009) further notes that harm may be exacerbated if a victim's friends or subordinates witness the incident (Matsuda et al., 1993; Neu, 2008; Sullaway, 2004). Secondary harm to the victim's community may accrue, as incidents of hate speech or bias-motivated crimes can have a rippling effect on those who identify with the victim. "In the past, claims of emotional and psychological distress in reaction to hateful speech have been regarded as credible injuries based on the specific facts of each case. Research indicates that victims of hate crimes are more severely traumatized."

According to HateBase, a web-based application that collects instances of hate speech online worldwide, majority of cases of hate speech target individuals based on ethnicity and nationality, but incitements to hatred focusing on religion and class have also been on the rise. (Quinn, 2016). The portal also classifies types of hate speech into the following categories: Ethnicity, Nationality, Religion, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Disability and Class.

To drastically reduce the menace of online hate speech or communication, UNESCO (2015) has outlined the following suggestions:

i. There should be constant monitoring and analysis by civil society.
ii. Individuals should promote peer-to-peer counter-speech.
iii. There should be organised action by NGOs to report cases to the authorities.
iv. Campaigning for actions by newspaper websites or Internet companies hosting the particular content.
v. There should be empowerment of users through education and training about the knowledge, ethics and skills required to use the right to freedom of expression on the Internet.

While contributing to peaceful efforts aimed at countering hate communication during Nigeria's 2015 general election, the international community and diplomatic corps in the country encouraged Nigerians to work towards cutting down on rhetoric that may lead to violence, ethnic cleansing or promote electoral rigging. Michel Arrion, EU Ambassador and Head of Delegation to Nigeria as quoted in Ogbonnaya (2015:1), called on political actors in the country to desist from using hate speeches widely spread on the Internet or social media and shun violence that may result from such.

> We all fear some electoral violence; we really insist that it is a duty for all players and all stakeholders of the political bodies, the government and the media to really make sure that violence is not used, that hate speech is avoided. I will not hide what I read today in the press. If really the speech delivered in Hausa by the Governor of Katsina (Ibrahim Shema) is real and confirmed, I would say it is the beginning of something that is a serious source of concern for us. He's quoted as having said: "you should not be bothered with cockroaches of politics. What do you do when you have a cockroach in your house? and the crowd respond `you kill it, yes, you must crush them."

The government of the United States of America (USA), through its Secretary of State, John Kerry, went further to warn those spreading hate speeches that they would not be granted visas in the event of a nationwide breakdown of violence due to incitement and that any leader or citizen found to have rigged or manipulated the outcome of the election will face the full wrath of the international community. (*Vanguard*, 2015)

In another statement, United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Linda Thomas-Greenfield as quoted in Shobiye (2015:1), warned Nigerian politicians that America would shut its doors on any person involved in any form of violence during the 2015 polls.

> Anyone found to have incited violence or interfered with electoral processes will be unwelcome in the United States and subject to visa sanctions.

2.7 2015 Nigeria Presidential Election and Contestants

The 2015 Nigeria presidential election was the 5th quadrennial election to be held since the end of military rule in 1999. Voters elected the President and members of the National Assembly (House of Representatives and Senate) on the same day of the election. (INEC, 2015)

The elections were first scheduled to be held on 14th February, 2015. However, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) postponed it by six weeks to 28th March 2015, mainly due to the poor distribution of Permanent Voter Cards, and also for security agencies to curb the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno, Yobe and Gombe. The presidential election eventually held on March 28th and was extended to March 29th due to certain delays and technical problems with biometric card readers. (INEC, 2015).

The two top contenders of the presidential election were: Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)'s Goodluck Jonathan, who also happened to be the incumbent president at the time, and All Progressives Congress (APC)'s Muhammadu Buhari who was also a former military head of state. With the presidential elections over, the electoral body announced APC's Muhammadu Buhari as winner. Incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan had conceded defeat on 31st March 2015 even before the final results from all 36 states were announced.

Fourteen political parties fielded candidates in the election that was keenly contested. Figures below show some closeness between the APC and PDP candidates which may have contributed to sharp divisions among readers and supporters of both candidates.

Table 2.1. Scores obtained by political parties in the 2015 presidential elections

Political Party	Score
AA	22,125
ACPN	40,311
AP	30,673
ADC	29,666
APA	53,537
APC	15,424,921
CPP	36,300
HOPE	7,435
KOWA	13,076
NCP	24,455
PDP	12,853,162
PPN	24,475
UDP	9,208
UPP	18,220
Accredited Voters	31,756,490
Total Valid Votes	28,587,564
Rejected Votes	844,519
Total Votes	29,432,083

Source: INEC (2015)

2.8 Comments Section of Newspaper Websites and Disqus Comment System Application

The Comments Section of newspaper websites is that bottom part of the webpage where readers are allowed to react to the published news story that they have read. Harper (2010) notes that most newspaper websites introduced this platform as a way of getting feedback from their readers, as a means of attracting readers to their websites and as an opportunity to allow readers express themselves on topical issues contained in the news report.

According to Leetaru (2015), readers' comments on newspaper websites evolved as a way to leverage the bidirectional communication of the Internet to allow newspaper readers for the first time to engage directly with reporters and news outlets to discuss important issues of the day. The idea was that instead of audiences merely passively consuming the news, they could collaboratively discuss their views both with other readers and with the newspapers themselves. Newspapers and other websites raced to add interfaces to allow organic conversation to occur on their pages.

Henrich and Holmes (2013) states that readers' comments posted in response to online news articles are a form of participatory journalism that gives the public a medium for expressing their perspectives on current issues. The comments have the potential to increase the understanding of public opinions, how the public makes decisions and how beliefs are formulated. Commenting in response to online news provides an opportunity for readers to interact with each other or express their agreement or disagreement with the content of the article or other comments.

Comments yield real-time insights into public attitudes on issues, the factors that influence decision making on an issue, and the particular content that most strongly influences these decisions. These comments and responses serve as a gauge of public opinion that is immediate, spontaneous and (presumably) honest (Henrich and Holmes, 2013). The volume of comments on a topic may act as an indicator of the relative importance or passion the public has for different issues. Due to the immediacy, anonymity and largely unmoderated nature of comments, comments tend to be more impulsive, shallow and aggressive than traditional forms of audience participation (Reich, 2009) as cited in Henrich and Holmes (2013).

Dare (2015) states that in the analogue era, one would have had to write a letter to the editor of a newspaper for that purpose. And of the dozens, sometimes hundreds of

letters that arrive in the editor's mailbag, only a handful gets published. Not infrequently, what gets published is not exactly what the writer had in mind. The submission is vetted for grammar, facts and good taste, then cut to fit into the available space.

Dare (2015:1) further noted that:

> In the digital era, the era of interactive media, anyone who can work an electronic mouse can post a response to a news story, feature, editorial, photo or article. Space is not a constraint. It helps, but there is no obligation to be factual or courteous or even decent. Out there, it is an unregulated, anarchic world, in which the writer has almost full control of his or her material.

The comments section platform is a technology aided by the introduction of Web 2.0 interactive tools and programs. One major computer program among other applications that have made the use of the comments section possible is Disqus Comment System. Disqus is a plugin service for web comments and discussions. It makes commenting easier and more interactive, while connecting websites and commenters across a thriving discussion community. Most websites that use the Wordpress website formats use the application. (Wordpress, 2014)

Disqus is also a blog comment hosting service for websites and online communities that use a networked platform. It enables social integration, social networking, user profiles, spam and moderation tools, analytics, email notifications, and mobile commenting. With over fifty million users globally, the Disqus comment plug-in or widget is popular because it is a nearly-free service used by blogs and websites.

The advantages of using the Disqus application are wide hence its adoption by most websites to allow for the posting of comments by readers, especially on newspaper websites. Apart from being a free service, Wordpress (2014) states that the major

reasons why most websites use Disqus are due to the fact that comments are indexable by search engines, it supports importing of existing comments, it encourages threaded comments and replies hence increasing exposure and readership and that it has powerful moderation tools. Some of its disadvantages include that the advance packages are expensive and that it takes time to load comments.

The advent of the comments section in websites, especially newspaper websites has granted unquantifiable freedom to readers of published online content (whether news, entertainment, sports, academics or fashion) to express themselves in an interactive format that contributes to knowledge and feedback which becomes even more beneficial to non-commenting readers, the medium publishing the content and the general public for gauging reactions towards a particular story or news item. However, such comments would not have been made possible if not for applications like the widely used Disqus plug-in. (Newman, 2009)

According to Lee (2012), user-generated commenting is a key characteristic of Web 2.0 and when coupled with the news article, it can bring changes to the readers' interpretations of news and the reactions they exhibit. Thus, studies have shown that the way certain readers see news stories can be distorted by the comments below them. When someone cares deeply about the issue being covered, disagreeable commentary may stoke concern over media bias.

A major disadvantage of the comments section is that most newspaper websites do not leave articles and their associated comments online indefinitely. This limits access to the data to the window during which the information is posted and may prohibit use of these data for exploring research questions retrospectively (Henrich and Holmes, 2013).

2.9 Characteristics of Readers on Comments Section of Newspaper Websites

According to Manosevitch and Walker (2009), comments may become more reflective of general attitudes as readers (and even those who do not comment) tend to integrate the perspectives of the comments into their own views. Studies show that people modify their beliefs and behaviours based on how they think other people are responding to media, and readers interpret comments as a good gauge of public opinion despite their non-representativeness (Lee and Yoon, 2010). Although, a minority of the public actively posts comments, these comments are read by large swaths of the population (Park and Lee, 2007).

Nigeria has a huge population of online communities and newspaper websites' readers. Since 2006 when websites like *www.sahara*reporters.com, *www.nairaland.com, elendureports.com, 234next.com* and other websites started adopting Web 2.0 technologies to present interactive websites before being joined by Nigerian newspaper websites, many Nigerians have adopted reading and commenting on newspaper websites as part of their daily living. Many comments section of popular websites and blogs have now evolved into communities where certain commentators know themselves by names and follow each others' comments religiously. (Dare, 2011)

Most commenters have become popular through the use of their real names or anonymous names. A casual observation of popular names that cut across both newspaper websites and other prominent online communities and blogs are: Deri, Wahala, Elmango Meat, Bitter Truth, Dr. Pat Kolawole Awosan, Toby777, Tunde Mash and so on. Others go by the names: Viperman, Ahmed, Mobinga, Musanga and many others. These commentators often go along way in their arguments and counter-

arguments all in a bid to dissect the issues presented in the news report. To appreciate its readers, *Vanguard* Newspaper in 2012 began an award system where their online readers and commentators were solely given the privilege of nominating the *Vanguard* Online Readers Man of the Year. That year, most readers nominated Chief Chukwuemeka Ojukwu as their 2013 Vanguard Online Readers Man of the Year. (*Vanguard*, 2013).

Most debates on Nigerian newspaper websites are often centered on politics, political leaders, sports, unemployment, economy, religion, corruption, human rights violations, ethnic and tribal issues among others. Observers agree that anonymity or anonymous comments continue to be the problem with holding healthy conversations on newspaper websites or cyberspace generally as certain persons appear within conversations anonymously or use fake names to generate religious, ethnic and political tension through comments that lead to the abuse of others via name-calling and pouring of invectives. Dare (2015) in his study of the phenomena describes the development as a new scourge that has descended upon "the feedback loop of our online newspapers."

Dare (2015) describes the comments section as a valuable feedback platform where factual errors are pointed out and faulty reasoning examined with counter-arguments laid out. He further argues that it helps to ensure other perspectives are explored, gaps are filled and language use is questioned with an occasional commendation for fine execution. However, while analyzing how the comments section can sometimes be abused by all manner of users, he adds that the feedback posted there can be perverse and petulant with journalists, newsmakers and other commentators excoriated for not doing what they had not set out to do.

According to Dare (2015:1):

> When I go to my column online (on a newspaper website) and find that as many as 10 readers have bothered to respond, I feel gratified that the effort that went into writing it has not been wasted. But to my dismay, not one of the reactions is actually about the column. If the authors of the so-called reactions read it at all, it made no impression on them. What they are doing is pivoting in the column to advertise all manner of merchandise for sale. These crude and possibly fraudulent sales pitches are a gross perversion of the loop that is designed to provide useful feedback on media content. You encounter these irritants on the sites of most of the online Nigerian newspapers and journals. Even if they were advertisements duly paid for, they would be no less irritating. But they are nothing of the sort, just tawdry, opportunistic stunts.

Brodesser-akner (2010:3) also states that the speed at which commentators, especially negative persons, rush to cast aspersion on journalists or columnists is amazing.

> I was surprised when, within hours of my article going live, a slew of nasty comments appeared below it in the area reserved for readers to respond. Not every comment was negative. Some were sympathetic, supportive, even touching. I don't write this to say how hurt my feelings are. Rather, I'm confused. It's O.K. if people would like to debate the merits (or lack thereof) of the opinions and facts discussed in my work. It's also O.K. with me if people simply don't like my work. What confounds me is why online commenters are so gratuitously nasty; why, when given the opportunity to have an educated disagreement with an author or other readers, they use the space allotted to spew venom instead of presenting a well-reasoned argument.

Furthermore, Leetaru (2015) states that *Gawker Media* founder Nick Denton claimed in an interview that 80% of reader comments on his news websites were off-topic or downright toxic hence reader commenting had become "a joke" due to trolls, racism, sexism, flame wars, and other attacks as a result of misinformed user comments that have a dangerous effect on how visitors to such sites understand complex topics in the news.

Jarvis (2010:1) argues that media practitioners must stop looking at the Internet as a medium and start accepting it as a "place" meant for unregulated communication.

> When we see the Internet as a medium, we expect it to be packaged and pretty, clean and controlled like newspapers and magazines and shows, and so when someone dumps a nasty comment, we think the whole thing is ruined, as if bad editing allowed it to get into a letter printed in The *New York Times*. But as Doc Searls taught me early on, the Internet is not a medium — indeed, judging it as a medium brings all sorts of dangerous presumptions about control and ownership and regulation. No, Doc says, the Internet is a place. It's a park or a street corner where people pass and meet, talk and argue, where they are right and wrong, where they connect with each other and information and actions. It's a public place.

Writing on how journalists should respond to a huge number of spiteful comments by readers, Jarvis (2010) recommends that such writers should skim the comments and move on as if the comments never appeared on the website.

Several international news media like the *New York Times, Washington Post, Reuters, Popular Science, Chicago Sun-Times, CNN, Bloomberg* and others have either disabled or significantly scaled back their comments sections. Others still operating such platforms are now rethinking their approach to anonymous reader comments on their websites (Leetaru, 2015). These have led to some media analysts advocating the total removal of comments section from newspaper websites due to the vitriolic comments, which they say demoralizes passive and active readers including the author of the reports or articles. They further argue that the removal is necessary because most comments on newspaper websites tend to unconsciously dilute the news content or change readers' perception and values from the initial messages intended by the reporter, editor or author. (Brodesser-akner, 2010)

But, Jarvis (2010:2) notes that:

> The tool isn't the problem (any more than blogging tools or printing presses are). If you eliminate comments that's even more insulting than not listening to them and it risks giving up the incredible value the public can give if only they are enabled to. The issue isn't comments or identity or registration or tools. The issue is how you play host.

Online commenting should have been the Internet generation's greatest contribution to democracy if not for the growing abuses. Not only can you read your news media, you can now discuss them with like-minded readers and even air your opinions to the writer but the abuse by users is becoming alarming. (Brodesser-akner, 2010)

2.10 Role of Moderators in Managing Online Comments and Feedback in Journalism

An ombudsman is an official appointed to investigate individuals' complaints against a company or organization, especially a public authority. In the context of this study, an ombudsman or moderator is simply any media professional assigned to filter information, posts or comments of readers/commenters on newspaper websites that may not meet the standards of conventional or acceptable public conversation. (Oxford, 2016)

In recent times, most news organizations in Nigeria are beginning to focus at making their online platforms to conform to traditional gatekeeping standards. As such, most newspapers now have Online Editors who act as webmasters, ombudsman or moderators determining not only what news stories are published but also ensuring that the comments section of their newspaper websites are moderated through approval of non-offensive posts and removal of certain offensive posts/comments on published news stories. (Dare, 2011)

Most readers agree that there is a need for newspaper websites to have moderators to guide conversations but not necessarily to gag their readers. Newspaper website moderators also agree. The moderators note that effective comment sections on newspaper websites heavily depend on the author or ombudsman being engaged with and responding to the best or most important comments including sometimes warning and banning readers who go over that moderator's lines. (Jarvis, 2010)

On the role of Journalists as moderators, Richmond (2010:1) adds that:

> I've noticed that engagement by journalists breeds a culture of respect. If journalists join the conversation, they are more likely to be respected by readers. Having worked on community content at the *Telegraph* between 2005 and 2009, I can confirm that it's the case here too. It's not always easy and it's still a challenge to stop the conversation being dominated by the angriest, noisiest people – who often scare others away – but it's an important part of what we do. Our community is a community of ideas, a community of affiliation, and for a lot of people being part of that community is simply about joining the conversation.

Banda (2010) states that the *Mail and Guardian, a* South African newspaper has a 'Thought Leader' forum on its website that encourages robust online debate from established contributors and their readers. The paper's editorial guidelines for contributions and comments to its website have been identified as being expansive in the regulation of conducts by online readers of a newspaper website. The paper makes it clear to readers that it is an invitation-only collection of contributions written by interesting, influential and intelligent voices in politics, development and among others. The guidelines are reproduced below:

i. All comments first have to be approved by the editorial team before they appear on the website. This may take anything from one minute to 24 hours.
ii. Stick to debating the issues and respect other people's views and beliefs. Comments launching personal attacks or that are hurtful and insulting will not

be accepted.

iii. Keep your comment as brief as possible. If you want to refer to an article on another website, place a link to that article in your comment; do not paste the whole article into your comment.

iv. When you have finished crafting your comment, read it again before posting it. Consider whether others will understand your arguments. Something that you meant to be satirical or humorous might not be clear to another reader. Also, take into consideration that your words will remain on the Internet for a very, very long time, if not forever.

v. A swear-word in the right spot can work well, but gratuitous profanity won't do. If you have to swear, make sure it's justified.

vi. Don't write your whole comment in capital letters only.

vii. Comments that contain racist, sexist or homophobic remarks – or that may be interpreted as such – won't make it on to *Thought Leader*.

viii. There is a difference between criticizing a political party, a religion, an organisation, a cultural group or a community and unreasonably attacking such bodies. Try to motivate your comments and explain your arguments as much as you can. Above all, make sure your words represent fair comment.

ix. A comment that is obviously off topic, that is, unrelated to the article or contribution in question and the comments that precede it, or that clearly doesn't contribute to the ongoing debate may be deleted by the editorial team.

x. The editorial team keeps a close watch on legal matters too: defamatory comments, for example, will be deleted.

The system of comments moderation is however metamorphosing into a collaborative effort between newspaper websites and their commenters. In a research project on comment management strategies in more than twenty European and North American

online newspapers, Reich (2011: 108-109) identified two main attitudes: "pre-moderation" and "post-moderation". The "pre-moderation" strategy, in which the journalist retains a gatekeeping role when assessing every comment before its publication, entails more responsibility and investment from media outlets, as well as normative concerns about the quality of the debate. Most news organizations use a "post-moderation" system, in which journalists would only intervene in case of complaints of users or violation of the terms of participation. (Torres da Silva, 2015)

In Nigeria, a cursory observation reveals that only a few newspaper websites seem to have desk editors specifically dedicated to moderating comments. This is so because despite the signs showing that posts and comments are moderated on the website, an exploratory view often reveals negative comments, vitriolic attacks on personalities, leaders, religion, ethnicity and use of swear-words. However, Jarvis (2010) urges Journalists not to leave the comments section of newspaper websites to readers alone. He urged them to reconsider their roles as gatekeepers not only on traditional media but also on the comments section of their newspaper websites.

Leetaru (2015) argues that even with better technology tools, it will be difficult for news outlets, especially smaller ones, to be able to filter the off-topic and toxic conversation that can pervade online comment sections, especially on general-topic news outlets.

2.10.1 Feedback in Journalism

Igwenagu (2001) states that feedback is the reaction which takes place along the communication process and which is transmitted backwards by members of the audience to the communicator, and by different persons in the audience to each other. Feedback provides the source with information concerning his success or failure in

accomplishing his/her communication objectives. It allows the source or receiver to check up on himself, to determine how well he is doing in accomplishing his/her communication purpose. In its simplest form, feedback actually means a reaction to messages received from a sender by a receiver.

Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) as quoted in Ahn (2011) have suggested three types of communication models that engender feedback: one-way communication, two-way (reactive) communication, and interactive communication. In the period of one-way communication, the role of the news source or sender was perceived to be powerful. The news agenda was set by the source, and there was no direct feedback. In the two-way (reactive) communication age, receivers responded to senders and sent and received messages bilaterally. Interactive communication displays characteristics similar to those of two-way (reactive) communication but varies slightly in its feedback mode in the sense that it allows simultaneous and continuous exchanges and "multiple types of cues, potential spontaneity, emergent progression of the content, the ability to interrupt or preempt, mutuality, and patterns of turn-taking" (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997:129).

Feedback affects subsequent communication behavior, if the source and receiver are sensitive to it. When a source receives feedback that is rewarding, he continues to produce the same kind of message. When he gets non-rewarding feedback, he eventually will change his message. In responding to a message, the receiver exerts control over the source especially when such exchange is taking place online. According to Ahn (2011), not only can an online news audience submit immediate feedback regarding a certain issue or news story by submitting opinions via the website, but consumers of Internet news are also able to reconstruct or supplement their opinions of the news by viewing feedback from other readers.

Biagi (2002) while describing the importance of feedback in modern mass communication says the digital highway begins when the channel of technology carries information and entertainment (messages) from many different sources (senders) to many different people (receivers). The messages that return from the receiver to the sender are called *Feedback*. On this new digital highway, messages and feedback can occur instantaneously. The sender and receiver can communicate simultaneously. This makes the new system "interactive."

Baran (2008) states that the Internet is the most experimental lab in history, built on two-way, real-time interactions with millions of consumers whose individual consumption patterns can for the first time be infinitesimally measured, monitored and molded as a result of feedback. He states that traditionally, the focus of the media has been on the outbound message. But that the information coming back to the sender is now even more important than the messages going out.

Readers are no longer passive but active participants in not only digesting news content on newspaper websites but they also contribute their views on news reports through written reactions on the comments section of newspapers. The platform also affords them the opportunity to post pictures and videos to aid or counter the reporter's news story especially in circumstances of breaking news like disasters and fire. The comments posted on newspaper websites are the readers' feedback to the issues raised in the content of the news story.

2.11 The *Vanguard* Newspaper Website: An Overview

Vanguard Media Limited, publishers of *Vanguard* newspapers was established in 1984 by Mr. Sam Amuka (a renowned veteran journalist and columnist of the Sad Sam Fame who was also editor of *Sunday Times* and the First Managing Director of the *Punch* Newspaper). The maiden copy of *Vanguard* hit the news stands as a

weekly on Sunday, June 3rd, 1984 with the motto: Towards a better life for the People. It went daily on July 15, 1984. It aims to serve the people through unflinching commitment to free enterprise, the rule of law and good governance. (Vanguard, 2015)

As at today, the paper has on its stable, the *Daily Vanguard, Saturday Vanguard, Sunday Vanguard* and *www.vanguardngr.com*. It has since added other titles taken care of specialised interests. These include: *Financial Vanguard, Allure, Sweet Crude, Hitech, Sports Vanguard* and *Cyber life*. The paper circulates 20,000 copies (daily) in Lagos, the nation's business heartbeat. Others include Abuja-12,000 copies, South-West 15,000, South-South 25,000, South-East 15,000, North Central 18,000, North-East 7,500 and North-west 7,500. These total 120,000 copies with a print run of 130,000 copies daily. (Vanguard, 2015) The management states that the medium:

> Is a newspaper with a penetrating reach to all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria which is today complemented by the most sophisticated, global readership through the internet address *http://www.vanguardngr.com.* Vanguard is a reference point in sports journalism. We dare say that we serve the menu hot and fresh in this area and a high level of professionalism is used, thus, this is too obvious to warrant any serious argument.

The Vanguard operates the newspaper website: *www.vanguardngr.com.* According to an Internet traffic monitoring website, Alexa.com, *Vanguard* newspaper's website is the first (1st) most visited newspaper website in Nigeria (as at time of this research) and the sixteenth (16^{th}) most visited website in Nigeria. It is ranked 2,125 most visited website in the world. It has on the average, about 21.3 million visitors monthly (Similarweb, 2016).

The website is majorly categorised into the following: Home, News, Business, Tech, Politics, Sports, Entertainment, Style, Viewpoint, Editorial, Forum, Jobs, Columns

and Property among many others. It also has a rich online community known as "Vanguard Online Community" operating under a sub-domain of the website via: *www.community.vanguardngr.com.* It is a community where readers of the newspaper can share their news stories, pictures, videos or interact with each other away from the mother-website. (Alexa, 2016)

The community page has the following major categories where content are divided into: Home, News, My Page, Photos, Videos, Forum, Blogs, Privacy Policy, Posting-Rules, *Youtube.* It has a comments section beneath each published story where readers are expected to post comments or connotations on any news they have read on the website. The comments box usually has a disclaimer notice that reads: "Comments expressed here do not reflect the opinions of Vanguard newspapers or any employee thereof." (Vanguard (2015)

2.11.1 Demography of Commentators on *Vanguard* newspaper website

Online user demography provides information about the age and gender of users, along with their interests, location, keywords and purchasing activities among others as expressed in their online behavior. However, getting the accurate demography of users of a particular website can be difficult especially in countries where record keeping by such platforms are untidy. Also, in cases where there is proper data gathering, the issue of Internet users putting on their "Cookies", which records and logs down their online user information, is low. (Erjavec and Kovac□ic□, 2012.)

Chiwda (2015) states that to arrive at an accurate demographic data on a website, visitors or users to it must have cookies enabled. A Cookie is "a small text file (up to 4KB) created by a Web site that is stored in the user's computer either temporarily for that session only or permanently on the hard disk (persistent cookie). Cookies provide a way for the Web site to recognize you and keep track of your preferences. For

example, if your user ID and password are stored in a cookie, it saves you from typing in the same information all over again when accessing that service the next time. Quite a bit of personal data may reside in the cookie files in your computer. As a result, this storehouse of private information is sometimes the object of attack." (PCMag, 2016)

These cookies record clicks, interests, Internet Protocol (IP) number, purchase information, user location and other user profile information. However, getting traditional demographic data such as age, gender, ethnicity, tribe, political persuasion, residential area and among others are difficult as many users often refuse to give away these information due to their privacy settings which are meant to safeguard their personal and financial security. Even when these information are available in some websites, the data may not be totally accurate as "no matter who you get this information from, the information is based on cross-site information. This is based on 'third party cookies', which many users turn off (sometimes without knowing they are doing this) depending on their browser's security/privacy settings." (Chiwda, 2015)

As a result, the demographic metrics of *www.vanguardngr.com* are partly factual and partly estimates (see Alexa, 2016) as notable metrics-searching websites like Quantcast, Google Analytics, Similarweb and Alexa all returned information without full-archived data in a way that would have aided a proper understanding of our target audience. Hence, some relevant information within the Nigerian context such as geopolitical zone, ethnicity/tribe, age group, residency among others are unavailable.

Alexa (2016) metrics for *www.vanguardngr.com* shows that the website loads at 6.969 seconds (very slow as 97% of websites load faster) and Nigeria remains the major market of the website as 85.4% of its visitors come from there followed by United Kingdom 2.5%, United states 2.2%, South Africa 1.1% and Canada 0.7%. This data implies that majority of those who comment on the website are Nigerians

and those from the other listed countries may be Nigerians in the diaspora or foreigners.

The Vanguard website further has 54% of Male visitors and 46% of Female visitors. Majority of these visitors are categorized as Graduate School followed by College, others with some College education and lastly those with No College. Daily Pageviews per Visitor of 3.22 pages, a Daily Time on Site of 5:40 seconds and a Bounce Rate of 48.80%. Majority of its visitors browse from Work, followed by Home and lastly from School.

Similarweb (2016) also states that the website attracts 21.3 million visitors annually and that its major traffic sources come from Direct Search (33.76%), Search (33.56%), Referrals (19.31%), Social Media (10.85%), Mail (1.37%) and Display (1.15%). The data shows that majority of its traffic sources are from direct visitors who type the website address on the browser. This is closely followed by those who search for the name of the website on search engines such as google.com, yahoo.com, bing.com among others.

2.12 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the reception theory.

2.12.1 Reception Theory

The Reception theory, also known as, encoding/decoding model of communication, postulates that the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader. It is a form of textual analysis that focuses on the scope of negotiation and opposition by the audience. This means that a "text" — be it a book, movie, or other creative work — is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but that the reader/viewer interpret the meanings of the text based on his or her individual cultural background and life experiences. (Hall, 1973)

Sawyer (2004) argues that reception theory is very much concerned with the effect a text has on its readers. “It refers to all those literary devices designed to get the reader or listener to respond to a text in various ways.”

A basic acceptance of the meaning of a specific text tends to occur when a group of readers have a shared cultural background and interpret the text in similar ways. It is likely that the less shared heritage a reader has with the author of the text, the less he or she will be able to recognize the author's intended meaning, and it follows that if two readers have vastly different cultural and personal experiences, their reading of a text will vary greatly. (Jauss, 1982)

The reception theory offers a theoretical approach of how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. It is based on the notion that TV and other media audiences are presented with messages that are decoded, or interpreted in different ways depending on an individual's cultural background, economic standing, and personal experiences. In contrast to other media theories that disempower audiences, the theory advanced the idea that audience members can play an active role in decoding messages as they rely on their own social contexts, and might be capable of changing messages themselves through collective action. (Hall ,1973)

According to Hall (1973), the decoding subject can assume three different positions: Dominant/hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. He asserts that:

> The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional more active ideological dimensions.

In his essay, Hall (1973) advances a four-stage model of communication that takes into account the production, circulation, use and reproduction of media messages. In contrast to the traditional linear approach of the sender and receiver, he perceives each of these steps as both autonomous and interdependent.

Each stage will affect the message (or "product") being conveyed as a result of its 'discursive form' (e.g. practices, instruments, relations). This implies that, for example, the sender of information can never be sure that it will be perceived by the target audience in the way that was intended, because of this chain of discourse. Each of these steps helps defines the one that follows, while remaining clearly distinct. These four stages are:

i. *Production* – This is where the encoding of a message takes place. By drawing upon society's dominant ideologies, the creator of the message is feeding off of society's beliefs, and values.
ii. *Circulation* – How individuals perceive things: visual vs. written. How things are circulated influences how audience members will receive the message and put it to use.
iii. *Use* (distribution or consumption) – This is the decoding/interpreting of a message which requires active recipients. This is a complex process of understanding for the audience.
iv. *Reproduction* – This is the stage after audience members have interpreted the message in their own way based on their experiences and beliefs. What is done with the message after it has been interpreted is where this stage comes in. At this point, you will see whether individuals take action after they have been exposed to a specific message.

The encoding of a message is the production of the message. It is a system of coded

meanings, and in order to create that, the sender needs to understand how the world is comprehensible to the members of the audience. The decoding of a message is how an audience member is able to understand, and interpret the message.

Martin (2007) states that Hall (1973)'s "Encoding-Decoding" model of communication essentially states that meaning is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver and that these encoded meanings may be decoded to mean something else. That is to mean, the senders encode meaning in their messages according to their ideals and views and the messages are decoded by the receivers according to their own ideals and views, which may lead to miscommunication or to the receiver understanding something very different from what the sender intended.

Hall (1993) states that there are three different positions audiences (receivers) take in order to decode the meanings within cultural texts. They are the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the oppositional position.

(i) Dominant-Hegemonic Position: This is when the reader or viewer is located within the dominant point of view. Within this position, there is little misunderstanding and miscommunication, as both sender and receiver are working under the same rule set, assumptions and cultural biases. It is this position that will allow the transmission of ideas to be understood the best, despite certain frictions that may occur due to issues of class structure and power, specifically between the elites who are able to dictate the rule set and the non-elites who must adopt the elite's rules as dominant. (Hall 1993).

Under this, the textual consumer takes the actual meaning directly, and decodes it exactly the way it was encoded. The consumer is located within the dominant point of view, and is fully sharing the texts/codes and accepts and reproduces the intended

meaning. Here, there is barely any misunderstanding because both the sender and receiver have the same cultural biases.

(ii) Negotiated Position: This is when the reader or receiver is able to decode the sender's message within the context of the dominant cultural and societal views. The messages are largely understood, but in a different sense than the dominant-hegemonic position. The receivers in the negotiated position are not necessarily working within the hegemonic viewpoint, but are familiar enough with dominant society to be able to adequately decode cultural texts in an abstract sense. (Hall 1993, 102)

However, it is entirely possible for the audience member to decipher the message as a more personal message, which is when their own biases and viewpoints muddy the decoding process. This "near view" of the message usually occurs in certain situations that are close to the audience member, as opposed to the general "long view" they take of cultural texts in the abstract. (Jauss, 1982)

This position is a mixture of accepting and rejecting elements. Readers are acknowledging the dominant message, but are not willing to completely accept it the way the encoder has intended. The reader to a certain extent shares the texts code and generally accepts the preferred meaning, but is simultaneously resisting and modifying it in a way which reflects their own experiences and interests as Hall (1993) states that:

> Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules - it operates with exceptions to the rule.

(iii) Oppositional View: In this position a consumer understands the literal meaning, but due to different backgrounds each individual has their own way of decoding messages, while forming their own interpretations. The readers' social situation has placed them in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant code, and although they understand the intended meaning they do not share the text's code and end up rejecting it.

Examples of oppositional views in online newspaper websites are plentiful in Internet discussion communities on comments section, weblogs or message forums. In arguing how this position works, Fiske (1987) postulated that audiences are not merely passive watchers of the television screen, but rather are active audiences, engaging with the program in ways the producers never could imagine. It is through actions, such as fan fiction, fan videos, fan communities, and active campaigning for change on-screen that audiences not only absorb the meaning of the text in question, but actively engage with it.

Livingstone and Das (2009) states that audience reception studies have revealed the following key issues, that:

i. Audiences' readings could not be predicted from a knowledge of the text alone, this undermining the analyst's authority in identifying a singular, underlying meaning of any media text by demonstrating that polysemy operated not only in principle but also in practice.

ii. Audience readings are always plural, diverse, this demanding that interpretation be situated in relation to specific social contexts, and counter- posing the creativity of a locally-resistant viewer against the hitherto-confident claims of media imperialism.

iii. Everyday micro-tactics of appropriation reshape and remediate media texts and technologies, thus insisting on the contingency of mediation processes and so challenging top down, often universalising accounts of diffusion and effects.

Concerns that lay at the heart of audience textual reception include: meaning, agency, resistance, participation, conversation, interaction, and many others which are still the pressing concern of new media researchers. Interactivity brings us to the question of participation, deliberation and civic engagement more than ever before, as audiences transform into bloggers and cause activists on social networks.

In today's task of meaning production, users operating in a peer-to-peer environment are often highly collaborative, even undertaking the physical alteration of the texts themselves, thus reshaping the media environment experienced by others. In a mediated world shaped by texts, technologies and cultures, processes of interpretation still continue to cluster. (Livingstone and Das, 2009)

2.12.2 Limitations of Reception Theory and its Linkage to the study

Loter (1995) challenges the notion that the inability of readers to agree on a single, non-contradictory interpretation of any given text suggests to many reception theories that texts have no meanings or that meaning is *produced* by the reader through the interaction of him or herself and the text. He adds that a context, whether it be a material condition of existence or a belief held in one's consciousness, is accessible only through textual form. Therefore, the separation of text, from the context of meaningless "sense-data" from meaning-producing conditions, breaks down.

The reception theory is appropriate to this research because each individual reader, when encountering a text (such as news reports or posted comments on a newspaper website), produces meaning based on his or her previously held opinions and beliefs

about texts and the world. It is what readers do to a text that becomes a meaning. Buttressing this, Sawyer (2004:1) states that:

> The reception of a text is more important than the text itself, and that a text doesn't really exist until somebody reads it. 'The bare text is mute'…A text without a reader has no meaning. It is the readers of a text that give it meaning. In a sense the reader creates the text as much as the author does.

The relevance of the reception theory to this research is that it explains the interpretation to meanings that readers individually attach to any text written on the comments section of newspaper websites. Thus, most comments posted on the feedback platform have the capacity to influence the understanding of the textual or contextual meaning of the content. Therefore, just like the commenting reader, the non-commenting reader is an active participant on the content of the text hence should not be seen as being passive. (Kinoshita, 2004).

The reception theory introduces the concept of reader involvement and how text and reader converge in a process of literary experience and meaning production. It focuses on some particular set of questions such as: who is reading the text?; what kind of baggage are they carrying when they come to the text – what presuppositions?; what do they make of the text?; and what effect does the text have on them? among others so as to get the required meaning or knowledge in a work, whether it is a news report, editorial, features, opinion piece or literary text. (Jauss, 1982)

The theory provided the theoretical platform for understanding the meaning readers make from the content of a message published on *Vanguard* newspaper website based on their individual contextual understanding. Making meaning out of a text written down by a Journalist is different from understanding responses to such texts by

commenting readers on the platform as every text has its own readership and their style of engaging with the text and how to make meaning out of it.

Iser (1974) argues that the reader's involvement coincides with meaning production in literature and that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text (by the reader), but that it must lie halfway between the two. "The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader…The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence."

Most of the content posted and read on newspaper websites are by youths (Kausar and Zobia, 2006) who are voracious consumers of online content using several devices to access the Internet (Fernando, 2013). Thus, reading posted comments and understanding it alongside the colloquialism of the online community depends on the context of the reader. Contextualization here, appeals to readers based on their sociological, psychological and physiological mood when reading a particular text thereby making individuals to receive and perceive the same text in different ways. Contextualization stresses the need to be aware of the fact that texts are read, interpreted and applied under different social, economic, ethnic, religious, political situations. (Sawyer, 2004)

The theory also shows how active and interactive readers on newspaper websites are using new technologies and platforms like the Internet not only to receive messages, but also to select certain messages they intend to act on which they eventually do by reading and commenting on those specific messages that they have so chosen. The interaction here takes the story further. Individuals differ in their personal

psychological and psychographic make-up thus attitudes, values and beliefs are often learnt through experiences and this often results in differences in perception and cognition among readers.

Through their comments, correction, commendations, banters, insults/abuses, scoops, and chatter, these acts tend to provide additional information and statistics to the news story. It brings more illumination to both commenting and non-commenting readers of such published news content on the newspaper websites.

As a result of these interactions and sharing of ideas, many of the active users tend to feel gratified by the sheer opportunity provided for them to enlighten others through their thoughts or learn new information from other users. Such information often serves as an avenue for education that may not be taught in the four walls of a classroom. In the process of interaction between readers, textual communication occurs and the reception theory is birthed. Here, the constant interactivity leads to the generation of a particular language or code that is unique to commenters and readers of such newspaper websites or news forums.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the methods that were used to arrive at data gathering. It takes a look at research design, population of the study and sampling technique. It also considers the instruments used for data collection, the procedure and method of data presentation and analysis.

3.2 Research Method

Content analysis method of communication research was used for this study. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in the study. Beck and Manuel (2008) states that content analysis is a research method for defining, measuring, and analyzing both the substance and meaning of texts. Content analysis was chosen because it deals with text as penned down by readers on the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website.

Haneefa and Nellikka (2010) states that research methods like surveys, web server log analysis and web link analysis can be used for analysing various aspects of online news sites. Thus, the website of *Vanguard* Newspaper was used to identify news items through the use of texts, links, webpages and Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) of the news stories for the study.

Four months edition of *Vanguard* newspaper website between March and June 2015 were analysed through its archives collected on *www.vanguardngr.com* and two archiving websites, *www.archive.com* and *www.alexa.com*. These archives were carefully analyzed based on five key content categories: straight news stories, feature articles,

columns, opinion and editorial items; with frequent keywords and phrases, frequently used by readers to describe the research subject.

3.3 Population of the Study

The population of this study consisted of all news elements and comments that appeared under the five selected news content categories on *Vanguard* newspaper website (*www.vanguardngr.com)* between March 1, 2015 to June 30, 2015. The study considered only those news items and comments related to the campaigns and election of Muhammadu Buhari as President of Nigeria in 2015.

Kerlinger (1977) states that an infinite population could be studied, despite the size and it could bring out a generalizable result than a definite population. Hence, 1,135 stories were generated (under the following five content categories: straight news, feature articles, columns, opinion and editorial) from news stories published on *Vanguard* newspaper website within the period under review: March - June, 2015. Thus, 1,135 figure served as the universe or population.

Individual stories analysed had average between 150 – 400 posted comments at a time which appeared underneath each story on the newspaper website. These high volumes of comments per story is largely due to the 2015 electioneering campaigns where deliberate communication messages were delivered most times through the use of rhetoric in vote-canvassing, propaganda, fiery choice of words or language among others as used by politicians and election stakeholders in a charged political atmosphere. However, the focus of the research was more on the number of comments, nature of comments and quality of language used by readers in the comments so expressed as posted on *www.vanguardngr.com* rather than the individuals who made such comments or their demographics.

Alexa (2015) shows that majority of the comments posted on *www.vanguardngr.com* within the period under review came from locations in the following order: Nigeria, United Kingdom, India and United States. (Alexa, 2015). Some of the comments (included per story) on *www.vanguardngr.com* came from *Facebook* platform and as such the comments were automatically embedded into the primary comments section of each story on *Vanguard* newspaper website. Thus, the population also included Facebook users integrated into the comments section of vanguard newspapers.

Social media integration is a new method used to feed or integrate comments into the comments section of newspaper websites or blogs. (MacManus, 2010). Due to the interactive nature of the comments section of *www.vanguardngr.com*, some of the comments posted were repeated responses from particular individuals who were debating the content of individual news stories in focus. Such comments and interactions focused on the type of news, newsmaker, campaign promises, religion, ethnicity, electoral processes, security of elections, journalists that wrote the news among many others. Thus, an individual could post a comment, reply to a post on his or her comment over and over until the issue is worn out or a new thread is created.

3.4 Sampling Techniques and Size

Nwanna (1981:71) notes that if the population is a few hundreds, a 40% or more sample will do; if many hundreds, a 20% sample will do; if a few thousands, a 10% sample will do and if several thousands, a 5% or less sample will do. Hence, 20% sample of the population of 1,135 reports on the homepage of *Vanguard* newspaper website resulted to: 227.The entire population was numbered from 1 – 1,135 out of which a raffle-draw system was used to pick from 1 - 227 to satisfy the required sample size of 20%.

3.4.1 Content Categories and Unit of Analysis

A randomly selected sample of 227 news stories out of a total population of 1,135 news elements published in 122 online editions of *Vanguard* newspaper website was coded under 5 content categories: Straight News, Feature Articles, Columns, Opinions and Editorials by the author and three research assistants within the period under review. The unit of analysis included words and phrases purposively selected from comments sampled.

3.4.2 Measurement

To check the frequency of texts used to describe the subject under review (Muhammadu Buhari), the content-analysis was coded under the following quantification ratings: Positive (means all favourable news stories to Buhari as captured by trained coders), Negative (unfavourable news stories to Buhari as captured by trained coders) or Neutral (neither favourable nor unfavourable news stories to Buhari as captured by trained coders). (See Wimmer and Dominick, 2011)

To measure the choice of words in texts or language used to describe Muhammadu Buhari, the content-analysis was coded using the four most frequently used keywords/phrases to describe the subject out of ten keywords/phrases purposively sampled from the 14,934 comments content-analysed under the 227 news stories as shown below:

Table 3.1 Ten most frequent words and phrases associated with Muhammadu Buhari on *Vanguard* newspaper website between March – June, 2015

KEYWORDS/PHRASES	FREQUENCY	REMARKS
Buhari Bokoharam sponsor	3,496	Negative
Bokohari	3,321	Negative
GMB for Change	2,294	Positive
Sai Baba	2,065	Positive
March4Buhari	1,203	Positive
Buhari Islamize Nigeria	856	Negative
Febuhari	558	Positive
Buhari-Osinbajo change	447	Positive
Buhari, Blood and Baboons	429	Negative
GMB is a Dictator	265	Negative

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Thus, two most-used positive words/phrases among these ten and another two set of most-used negative words/phrases out of the ten tabulated above served as units of analysis to qualitatively verify their frequency within the 14,934 comments posted by readers under the selected 227 news elements.

This resulted in the following frequently occurring keywords/phrases: "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor", "Bokohari", "GMB for Change" and "Sai Baba" serving as the qualitative units of analysis during the study.

3.5 Intercoder Reliability

Wimmer and Dominick (2011) state that intercoder reliability is used to assess the degree to which a result can be achieved or reproduced by other observers. The ideal is that two or more observers who use the same operational measure and the same measuring instrument should reach the same results.

Thus, intercoder reliability was used to cross-check whether error exists in the content-analysis research during the coding process or not. When calculated among the four coders using the Krippendorf's alpha (KALPHA) tests, the result was: 74%.

Hayes and Krippendorf (2007) states convincingly that KALPHA should be the basic measure to apply for most intercoder reliability research in content analysis. They state that sample size, multiple (more than 2) coders or missing data are not problematic for calculating KALPHA and that all measurement levels can be tested as KALPHA makes calculation easily accessible under SPSS.

3.6 Method of Data Collection

The instruments of data collection for this research were gathered from primary and secondary sources. The primary data were gathered from a content analysis of the website of *Vanguard* newspaper based on the research questions.

Secondary data related to this study were collected from books, journals, websites and other relevant materials. The literatures used for this study were drawn from previous research conducted in this area of study as it concerns mass communication, political communication, online newspapers, newspaper websites, online comments, reading and feedback in journalism.

3.7 Instrument of Data Collection

The instrument of data collection was the codesheet for the content analysis of news stories in 122 daily online editions of *Vanguard* newspaper which were coded under five content categories of news presentation: straight news, feature article, columns, opinion and editorial.

The coding sheet was also used to derive the frequency of keywords/phrases that were used to positively or negatively refer to the subject matter (Muhammadu Buhari) in all news elements that related to him directly or referred to information concerning him in the electioneering process such as campaigns, press conferences, speeches, interviews and statements that were written as news reports or feature articles by the newspaper website.

3.8 Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive method was used to analyze the data gathered from the field. The data collected with the coding sheet of the content analysis was presented in tables, followed by interpretation. (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011)

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the data gathered from the field, its analysis and interpretation are presented. The quantitative data is presented first, followed by the qualitative analysis before discussion of findings where the data is extensively discussed and analyzed in line with the research questions.

4.2 Quantitave Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the field are tabulated in ten tables and briefly analyzed as follows:

Table 4.7 Readers' comments on Buhari's election reports in the month of March, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	Frequency of Reports	CONTENT CATEGORIES Readers Comments			
		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total (%)
Straight News	42	1,080	1,968	663	3,711 (63.2)
Feature Articles	16	327	484	286	1,097 (18.6)
Columns	9	266	190	77	533 (9)
Opinion	13	136	122	25	283 (4.8)
Editorials	5	114	97	53	264 (4.4)
Total	85	1,923	2,861	1,104	5,888 (100%)
		(32.6%)	(48.5%)	(18.7%)	(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Table 4.1 shows that in March, 2015, about half of the readers comments related to Muhammadu Buhari as posted on stories published on *Vanguard* newspaper website were Negative. It also shows that out of these data, Straight news stories dominated the content categories. In the overall four months surveyed, this is the month that had the highest number of connotation of comments recorded under Straight news stories.

These figures fall within the month that the presidential election was conducted hence the high numbers may not be unconnected with the charged atmosphere of electioneering campaigns where the use of campaign rhetoric or propaganda was at its peak by major candidates and their followers in the political parties.

Table 4.2 Readers' comments on Buhari's election reports in the month of April, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	Frequency of Reports	CONTENT CATEGORIES Readers Comments			
		Positive	**Negative**	**Neutral**	**Total (%)**
Straight News	21	617	1,024	258	1,899 (57.3)
Feature Articles	8	192	427	141	760 (22.9)
Columns	5	210	28	43	281 (8.4)
Opinion	5	77	147	14	238 (7.1)
Editorials	9	45	66	22	133 (4)
Total	48	1,141	1,692	478	3,311(100%)
		(34.4%)	(51.1%)	(14.4%)	(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Here, figures indicate that in the month of April 2015, half of readers comments related to stories on Muhammadu Buhari published by *Vanguard* newspaper were Negative. Over half of the stories were also straight news stories followed by feature articles. When compared with the previous month of March, it shows that there were more negative comments against the subject in April, which happens to be the month that the results of the presidential election were released with Buhari declared a winner by the electoral body.

Table 4.8 Readers' comments on Buhari's election reports in the month of May, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	Frequency of Reports	CONTENT CATEGORIES Readers Comments			
		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total (%)
Straight News	18	481	502	251	1,234 (49.2)
Feature Articles	7	313	158	118	589 (23.5)
Columns	2	189	73	21	283 (11.2)
Opinion	9	61	104	18	183 (7.3)
Editorials	7	39	133	44	216 (8.6)
Total	43	1,083	970	452	2,505 (100%)
		(43.2%)	(38.7%)	(18%)	(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

The data for May 2015 shows that about one-third of all comments on news reports about Muhammadu Buhari were negative. Also, connotation of comments under Straight News had a high increase despite a slight decrease in the number of news stories under it. Straight news stories maintained the lead as the content category with highest number of connotations. When compared with previous months, it shows that the reality of the election results may have dawned on readers hence a change in perception towards Buhari.

Table 4.9 Readers' comments on Buhari's election reports in the month of June, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	Frequency of Reports	CONTENT CATEGORIES Readers Comments			
		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total (%)
Straight News	27	395	1,120	285	1,800 (55.7)
Feature Articles	11	79	677	37	793 (24.5)
Columns	3	103	85	48	236 (7.3)
Opinion	4	40	84	9	133 (4.1)
Editorials	6	122	106	40	268 (8.2)
Total	51	739	2,072	419	3,230 (100%)
		(22.8%)	(64.1%)	(12.9%)	(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

The figures in Table 4.4 points to a huge increase in negative comments against Buhari. This may be attributed to the slant given to the coverage of news stories related to him by the website due to the fact that *Vanguard* newspaper is a southern-based daily with a bias for news that appeals to their largely southern readers. Since Buhari defeated a southern candidate and was sworn-in as President within this period, a slant in presentation or publishing of other unfavourable news reports by the medium may have contributed to the upsurge in negative comments.

Table 4.10 Summary of readers' comments on Buhari's election reports between March - June, 2015.

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	Frequency of Reports	CONTENT CATEGORIES Readers Comments			
		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total (%)
Straight News	108	2,573	4,614	1,457	8,644 (57.8)
Feature Articles	42	911	1,746	582	3,239 (21.6)
Columns	19	768	376	189	1,333 (8.9)
Opinion	31	314	457	66	837 (5.6)
Editorials	27	320	402	159	881 (5.8)
Total	227	4,886	7,595	2,453	14,934 (100%)
		(32.7%)	(50.8%)	(16.4%)	(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

The overall table shows that in the four months under review (March - June 2015), slightly more than half of readers comments posted by readers on *Vanguard* newspaper website were negative towards Muhammadu Buhari. Positive comments followed immediately with 32.7% and neutral comments came last with 16.4%. Straight News also maintained its lead as the content category with highest reports and number of posted comments by readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website followed closely by Feature Articles.

Generally, from the connotative analysis of comments, one can deduce that majority of the readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website were hostile to the candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari in the 2015 presidential elections. It also shows that many of the readers made more comments in reports under straight news stories and feature articles compared to other content categories.

4.3 Analysis of keywords and phrases used by readers to describe presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari between March to June, 2015.

The keywords and phrases used by readers to describe the personality of presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari between March to June, 2015 on *Vanguard* newspaper website were content-analysed and are presented below.

Table 4.11 Analysis of keywords and phrases used to describe presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari in the month of March, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	CONTENT CATEGORIES				
	Sai Baba	GMB for Change	Bokohari	Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor	Total (%)
Straight News	207	463	1,253	896	2,819(41.1)
Feature Article	289	213	416	535	1,453 (21.2)
Columns	111	77	178	196	562 (8.2)
Opinion	184	118	456	370	1,128 (16.4)
Editorial	142	300	188	259	889 (12.9)
Total	933 (13.6%)	1,171 (17%)	2,491 (36.3%)	2,256 (32.9%)	6,851 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

In the month of March, 2015, "Bokohari" was the most popular keyword used to describe or refer to presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, by readers who differed in their assessment of him. It was immediately followed by the phrase "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor". These terms among others were widely used by readers to comment on published stories that appeared under Straight News and Feature Articles content categories on the medium within the period under review.

Table 4.7 Analysis of Keywords and phrases used to describe presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari in the month of April, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	CONTENT CATEGORIES				
	Sai Baba	GMB for Change	Bokohari	Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor	Total (%)
Straight News	171	206	695	474	1,546 (31.7)
Feature Article	187	154	219	609	1,169 (23.9)
Columns	275	107	50	214	646 (13.2)
Opinion	228	245	79	315	867 (17.7)
Editorial	44	127	183	292	646 (13.2)
Total	905 (18.5%)	839 (17.2%)	1,226 (25.1%)	1,904 (39%)	4,874 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

In the month of April, 2015, the phrase "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor" recorded the highest use among commenting readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website within the four months reviewed. Under the content categories, Straight News stories recorded the highest use of such phrases. Compared to the previous month, the use of the phrase "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor" is higher in April and this may not be unconnected with the fact that the election results were released within this month hence the division among readers especially those who may have been aggrieved that their preferred candidate did not emerge victorious in the election.

Table 4.8 Analysis of Keywords and phrases used to describe presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari in the month of May, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	CONTENT CATEGORIES				
	Sai Baba	GMB for Change	Bokohari	Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor	Total (%)
Straight News	143	333	607	718	1,801 (35.7)
Feature Article	320	237	381	462	1,400 (27.7)
Columns	58	101	66	73	298 (5.9)
Opinion	179	47	241	224	691 (13.6)
Editorial	92	388	177	197	854 (16.9)
Total	792 (15.7%)	1,106 (21.9%)	1,472 (29.1%)	1,674 (33.1%)	5,044 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

These figures show that the phrase "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor" also recorded the highest use among commenting readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website in the month of May, 2015. Under the content categories, Straight News stories recorded the highest use of such phrases.

A similar scenario occurred in the previous month with the only difference being that the percentage of usage of the phrase "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor" is lower in the month of May (33.1%) but higher in April (39%). The reason may be adduced to the desire of some aggrieved readers to continue voicing their rejection of the outcome of the elections or presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, through their posts on *Vanguard* newspaper website.

Table 4.9 Analysis of keywords and phrases used to describe presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari in the month of June, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	CONTENT CATEGORIES				
	Sai Baba	GMB for Change	Bokohari	Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor	Total (%)
Straight News	168	209	1,023	552	1,952 (43.8)
Feature Article	101	304	252	171	828 (18.5)
Columns	136	136	38	111	421 (9.4)
Opinion	114	92	167	158	531 (11.9)
Editorial	323	171	96	130	720 (16.1)
Total	842 (18.8%)	912 (20.4%)	1,576 (35.3%)	1,122 (25.2%)	4,452 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

In the month of June, 2015, "Bokohari" was the most popular word used to describe President Muhammadu Buhari by many readers of the website. It was immediately followed by the phrase "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor".

These figures tally with that from the month of March, 2015 and the recurrence maybe as a result of the fact that June was when the presidential candidate started functioning in his elected capacity as President after being sworn-in on May 29, 2015. Thus, those readers that were antagonistic to his emergence may have still been feeling aggrieved.

Table 4.10 Summary of keywords and phrases used to describe presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari between March – June, 2015

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	CONTENT CATEGORIES				
	Sai Baba	GMB for Change	Bokohari	Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor	Total (%)
Straight News	689	1,211	3,578	2,640	8,118 (38.2)
Feature Article	897	908	1,268	1,777	4,850 (22.8)
Columns	580	421	332	594	1,927 (9)
Opinion	705	502	943	1,067	3,217 (15.1)
Editorial	601	986	644	878	3,109 (14.6)
Total	3,472 (16.3%)	4,028 (18.9%)	6,765 (31.8%)	6,956 (32.7%)	21,221 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2015

The overall table of the period under review (March – June, 2015) as qualitatively analysed shows that "Bokohari" was the most popular word used to describe presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari before, during, after election and swearing-in. It is closely followed by the use of the phrase "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor".

"Bokohari" and "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor" all fall within negative sphere of use of language as they point to the support or sponsorship of Boko haram terrorists. When compared with the ratings of the positive language used by other readers to describe the subject: "GMB for Change" and "Sai Baba" it is obvious that the former overshadows the latter hence it becomes clear that the expressions of majority of the readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website were connotatively negative towards Muhammadu Buhari.

4.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

This study also researched qualitatively on the content of some comments expressed on *Vanguard* newspaper website by readers between March to June 2016. Four comments were purposively picked per month (that is one comment favourable to Muhammadu Buhari and another comment unfavourable to him), presented and analysed as follows:

Table 4.11 Qualitative analysis of readers' comments on Buhari's election news reports in March 2015

Date	News Story	Comment	Reader
March 7, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari hold campaign walks in Abuja, Lagos today	"Sai Baba, sai Buhari, sai APC, sai ChANGE"	Isaac Olaifa
March 7, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari hold campaign walks in Abuja, Lagos today	"Where is Bokohari? We watched our presido exercising at Abuja stadium today. So where is Bokohari?"	Obode Anslem
March 7, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari hold campaign walks in Abuja, Lagos today	"The best for Nigeria is PGEJ. Mustapha, Buhari is a ritual killer and a religious bigot. Fulani cow."	Abusi Gift Ebiegberi
March 7, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari hold campaign walks in Abuja, Lagos today	"Atleast he built amagiri school 4 ilitrate boy lik u wic ur hard working bokohari did nt do 4 u"	Marie Ndukwe

Source: Field Survey, 2015

The sampled comments above by four readers of the same news story on *Vanguard* newspaper website shows the ideological differences in responses of readers on the website who visit to read and comment on news stories. The connotation of comments show that in one comment alone, one negative word "Bokohari" appeared three times

in two posted comments as used by the commenters to describe Muhammadu Buhari. In the positive comment, "Sai Baba" was used by one of the readers to praise the presidential candidate. The keywords and phrases expressed here form part of the texts purposively selected and analysed in previous tables.

Table 4.12 Qualitative analysis of readers' comments on Buhari's election news reports in April 2015

Date	News Story	Comment	Reader
April 5, 2015	Buhari: 'We feared Jonathan would not accept defeat'	"We do not need an upright man for a leader but one who is firm and resolute. Sai Baba"	Mario Andrew
April 5, 2015	Buhari: 'We feared Jonathan would not accept defeat'	"Mumu Bokohari, GEJ is not like you. Shame on you"	Obioha Oti
April 5, 2015	Buhari: 'We feared Jonathan would not accept defeat'	"Where is dat half dead man(buhariboko) in this gathering?"	Fidelis Akwukaegbu
April 5, 2015	Buhari: 'We feared Jonathan would not accept defeat'	"Who told you? And where did book haram come from if not Buhari, long mouth"	Michael Obeta

Source: Field Study, 2015

The trend continues here in Table 4.12. While a Buhari supporter is celebrating his victory that he will be a "firm and resolute" leader as the president-elect (as he was then) the other reader is negatively associating Muhammadu Buhari with sponsorship of terrorism through the use of the reoccurring term "Bokohari". The connotation of comments here show how divisive readers could be while reading and commenting on the newspaper's website. Sometimes the exchanges become heated with readers using vicious words as can be seen by the use of "Mumu Bokohari" or "Buhariboko".

Table 4.13 Qualitative analysis of readers' comments on Buhari's election news reports in May, 2015

Date	News Story	Comment	Reader
May 12, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari's transition committees clash	"Idiot criminals cannot submit criminality to our leader. The right thing must be done. Buhari-Osbanjo for change ...hahaha"	Mo Fagbee
May 12, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari's transition committees clash	"Bokohari no get sense. Na only to sponsor Boko haram e sabi. Buhari Bokoharam sponsor. Chai, he is so desperate"	Uzibor Charles
May 12, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari's transition committees clash	"Jonathan na goat. Thank God we have chased him out of Aso Villa. He won't eanymore of our yam again"	Adama Isaiah
May 12, 2015	Jonathan, Buhari's transition committees clash	"EXPORT BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY. Earn foreign currencies from the exportation of wood charcoal, bitter kola, shea butter, cassava chips, etc. You can start the business even without capital. Visit www.ashumanendurance.blogspot.com"	Ashuman Endurance

Source: Field Study, 2015

This table indicates the harsh words used by readers who supported or opposed the election of Muhammadu Buhari. The first comment is positive to Buhari while the second comment is negative towards him. Here, the popular word used to describe the winner "Bokohari" is seen to have reoccurred again while one of the major phrases used to also describe him "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor" surfaces.

Also, a negative comment is posted against one of the candidates, ex-President Goodluck Jonathan by a Buhari supporter. An example of illegal advertisement can also be seen as posted here by another reader. The purpose for the illegal posting of an

advert may have been either to take advantage of many readers following exchanges or to annoyingly derail their conversations.

Table 4.14 Qualitative analysis of readers' comments on Buhari's election news reports in June, 2015

Date	News Story	Comment	Reader
June 3, 2015	Buhari set to name Chief of Staff, SGF, other aides today	"Weder u like or u no like Sai baba is ur presdo. Bad belle ppl. GMB for Change"!	Abdullahi Mohammed
June 3, 2015	Buhari set to name Chief of Staff, SGF, other aides today	"How? This is a military-styled sole administrator. Snail old brain-dead dictator Buhari. Just heading Nigeria to doom"	Antony Efobi
June 3, 2015	Buhari set to name Chief of Staff, SGF, other aides today	"Ur Comment Shows U Lack Parental Care. Where Are Ur Parents? @ #IME FAVOUR IME#"	Sheriff Adesola
June 3, 2015	Buhari set to name Chief of Staff, SGF, other aides today	"When Jonathan was there, u never knew this was ur country and u shd join hands to build it then. May be u are a fool then."	Obiefuna Ezebuna

Source: Field Study, 2015

The choice of words in this table indicates the lack of decorum in comments expressed by readers on the website. This goes a long way to show how un-moderated the *Vanguard* newspaper website is due to vile abuses and hot exchanges between readers on the platform. A cursory observation here shows that majority of the commenters on the website that bear northern names seem to always back President Buhari (probably because he is from the North). Also, most of the names that

dominate the website are those of people who come from the southern part of Nigeria and majority of such readers are often antagonistic to Buhari but pro-Goodluck Jonathan (probably because he is from the South), maybe due to the election results.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The data was content-analysed from the website within the period under review (March – June, 2015) and in this discussion, the findings were reviewed according to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the comments expressed by readers to reports of Buhari's 2015 election victory on *Vanguard* newspaper website?

The analysis reveals that majority of *Vanguard* newspaper website readers who commented on news stories related to the candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, during the 2015 presidential elections had negative connotations towards him. The distribution of popular words or phrases used to describe Buhari was negatively dominated by the following keywords and phrases: "Bokohari" and "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor". These connotations suggest the readers believe that the candidate has a link with sponsorship of terrorism through the terrorist group, Boko haram. This supports Hall (1973)'s textual reception theory which states that the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself but that it is created within the relationship between the text and the reader.

Hall (1973) argues that a "text" — be it a book, movie, or other creative work — is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but that the reader or viewer interprets the meanings of the text and react to it based on his or her individual cultural background and life experiences and that the meaning of a specific text tends to occur when a group of readers have a shared cultural background and interpret the text in

similar ways. The texts used by the readers to describe Buhari connote negative perceptions that align with their worldview that he is a product of extremist thinking and that he sponsors terrorism hence they saliently abhor his candidacy in the election.

Being a southern-based newspaper, it can be argued that the shared cultural background of the readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website in this geographical axis may have contributed to their beliefs that the presidential candidate should not enjoy their support and sympathy because he is a northerner who does not share the same political or developmental characteristics and ideologies with them. If this is the case, then it will be a surprise especially when considering that Buhari was once a military Head of State and should naturally be viewed from a cosmopolitan and pan-Nigerian viewpoint rather than being viewed through regional frames or perspectives.

Lawrence (2011) in his study on the media coverage of the Boko haram terrorism in Nigeria has majorly accused newspapers of bias in the coverage of the crisis. He contended that their coverage has almost glorified terrorism with many individuals being demonized and unnecessarily accused of sponsoring terrorism only for the public not to be offered specific facts on such allegations when inquired from journalists that wrote such reports. Also, Okoro and Chukwuma (2012) in their study of audience perception of broadcast coverage of the Boko haram terrorism concluded that based on these half-truths, the audience mostly perceive the media as being biased in their reportage of the conflict. These studies may explain why *Vanguard* newspaper website readers hold such perceptions of Muhammadu Buhari.

The result of the study also confirms Katz et al (1974)'s position that audiences are very active rather than passive in their information reception and personalization to

suit their beliefs. Despite that *Vanguard* newspaper journalists and editors reported and presented the news in line with their house style and profession, the readers may have chosen to interpret and react to the news based on their own preconceived or biased convictions due to various intervening factors irrespective of what the encoders meant initially meant to achieve.

The study also indicates that more readers preferred making comments on news items that are either straight news or feature articles. This may be due to the fact that straight news stories are shorter to read as a result of the 5W's and H (Who, What, Where, When, Why and How) which are often straight to the point with shorter sentences on news events that happened including appropriate pictures and cartoons to back it up. The readers' behavior may also be connected with the fact that feature articles are usually written in an indepth style with better pictures and exposition of the subject matter to allow for more assimilation.

These readers' behaviours align with Okonofua (2012)'s submission on the uses and gratifications theory which he states is more concerned with how people use media for gratification of their needs. In this case, people choose what they want to see or read and different media compete to satisfy each individual's needs. Those media outfits that cannot satisfy these needs are easily jettisoned by the readers.

The finding is also in conformity with Erjavec and Kovavic (2012)'s submission in chapter two of this study that the Internet's interactivity, anonymity and credibility not only aids the facilitation of messages with positive content but also messages that encompass words of hatred thereby promoting prejudiced communication. They also point out the potential of producing hate speech in the comments section, as could be seen in the case of posts and replies on newspaper websites such as *Vanguard*.

Research Question 2: What do the comments expressed by readers on Vanguard newspaper website indicate about their understanding of news reports on the election of Buhari?

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative data show that majority of the comments on *Vanguard* newspaper website, between March and June, 2015, were those of readers not favorably disposed to the personality of Muhammadu Buhari as a presidential candidate during the elections hence the high turnover of negative connotations in news stories related to him on the website. The nature of their comments are not only divisive but also dismissive of the subject due to several factors which could range from the southern ownership of the newspaper (President Muhammadu Buhari is from the North), the paper's editorial slant, access to the Internet broadband which is higher in the southern part of the country thereby shutting out readers from the North who could not comment due to poor access to technological devices for internet connection, limited broadband connectivity, religion (the phobia that Buhari will Islamize Nigeria) or tribalism (Buhari is Hausa/Fulani) among other likely intervening factors.

Ademola and Okeke (2011) in their studies on the press coverage of political conflict found that lack of objectivity in the Nigerian media through political, religious and ethnic slants have been hindering accurate information dissemination to the public hence those who do not access more than one newspaper medium to balance their understanding of news reports may comment based on skewed perspectives.

This, according to the finding, is because of various inhibitions that the press has allowed to influence their professional performance. They state that for instance, the Nigerian journalist often allows his employer, region, state of origin, language, family, friends and monetary gifts to influence the content of his or her news reports which are eventually consumed wholeheartedly as the "gospel truth" (Ademola and

Okeke, 2011) by uninformed readers that may not quickly decipher facts or the bias of the writer or medium.

Eze (2013) in a study on the Nigerian print media coverage of 2011 post-presidential election crisis that focused on two national dailies, *Daily Trust* (based in the North) and *Daily Sun* (based in the South), also found that newspapers instigated people against each other with the two newspapers taking sides through biased news stories, headline presentation, news analysis and perspectives thereby heightening tension among their readers and Nigerians generally. These type of bias by reporters, editors and columnists may have contributed to how readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website viewed the candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari, especially if some of the news reports related to him were constantly being skewed unfavourably.

Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that negative reactions by majority of the readers on the subject matter may have ended up confusing or reshaping the views of others who commented on reports of Buhari's 2015 presidential election victory. The comments point to divisive connotations over the personality of the candidate, Muhammadu Buhari as expressed by readers through their texts, but a cursory look indicates that the overwhelming influence of majority of those with pessimistic comments may have drowned those supporting the candidate on the website thereby making the minority to reassess their stance or sticking to such views.

The findings of this study confirms the Uses and Gratifications theory which states that people are more concerned with what they do with the media rather than what the media does to them. (Anaeto et al, 2008). It confirms that *Vanguard* newspaper website readers are not just passive receivers of messages or media content but that such people often have active influences on the messages sent out by the medium to soothe themselves. This position is a mixture of accepting and rejecting elements. The

readers are acknowledging the dominant message, but at the same time they are not willing to completely accept it the way the encoder (Muhammadu Buhari, Buhari campaigners or *Vanguard* journalists/editors and so on) has intended due to other intervening variables.

Hall (1993)'s submission that readers to a minor extent generally accept the preferred meaning by the encoder, but after this, they then begin to simultaneously resist and modify the content in a way that reflects their own experiences and interests has been clearly revealed in this study as earlier discussed under literature review.

The finding is in agreement with the Reception Theory's postulation that readers not only acknowledge the dominant message, but that they are often not willing to completely accept it the way the encoder has intended. Hall (1973) notes that the reader to a certain extent shares the text's code and generally accepts the preferred meaning, but is simultaneously resisting and modifying it in a way which reflects his or her own experiences and interests.

The finding is also in agreement with the uses and gratifications theory which explains how active and interactive readers on *Vanguard* newspaper website are using new technologies and applications like the Internet and Web 2.0 tools not only to receive messages, but also to select certain messages they intend to act on, which they eventually do by reading and commenting on those specific messages that they have so chosen, according to their beliefs. Here, readers generally modify the contents or draw meanings that reflect their own interests and extraneous meanings different from the encoded message.

Research Question 3: How have readers comments reflected a use or misuse of the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website while reacting to news reports of Buhari's 2015 election?

The content analysis shows that the two most popular negative or unfavorable keywords and phrases turned out as follows: "Bokohari" and "Buhari Bokoharam Sponsor". When combined together, the negative words accounted for 64.5% of all comments reviewed while the combined positive or favourable keywords and phrases reviewed recorded 35.2%.

From these percentages, we can deduce that majority of those who commented on reports related to the presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, before and after the election on *Vanguard* newspaper website misused the comments section of the website as it could not have been the intention of a respected newspaper like *Vanguard* to set up a website for the purpose of castigating people and describing them in such undignified terms or phrases.

This confirms Dare (2015)'s submission on comments section of newspaper websites:

> A good deal of the feedback is often perverse and petulant. Columnists and other commentators are excoriated for not doing what they had not set out to do. Their academic and professional qualifications are called into question. Their looks are derided. Their antecedents up to three generations back are vilified. Name-calling, coarse and vulgar abuse and ethnic baiting are standard fare.…For, instead of serving as the digital-era equivalent of Habermas' public sphere, it is often a hate-filled platform for trading insult and abuse and perpetuating prejudice.

Majority of the readers who commented on the news stories used keywords and phrases linking Muhammadu Buhari with terrorism, religion and tribalism among others in a manner that may likely provoke dissension while other commenters used words that tend to promote the subject matter so as to garner electoral votes or a

favorable image. The fact that such indecorous comments were allowed showed accurately that *Vanguard* newspaper website does not have a moderator that sieves comments which may turn its platform into a vicious community of negative commenters that incite rational members of the public.

The results from the study support De Fleur (1970)'s Individual Differences theory, which states that attitudes, values and beliefs are often learnt through experiences and that this most times leads to differences in perception, cognition and behaviour. The differences in the psychology and psychographic attributes of these readers or commenters resulted in selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception and selective retention as each individual decided what media messages to pay attention to and what he or she sees or perceives from those media messages which he or she later attended to by reacting through posted comments on *Vanguard* newspaper website. All of these confirm that the differences between individuals in their communal, environmental and cultural outlook make them to react differently to the same news contents. (Anaeto et al, 2008).

The comments section in websites (especially newspaper websites) is meant to grant freedom to readers of published online content (whether news, entertainment, sports, academics or fashion) to express themselves in an interactive format that contributes to knowledge and feedback which becomes even more beneficial to non-commenting readers, the medium publishing the content and the general public for gauging reactions towards a particular story or news item. However, Newman (2009) argues that the freedom expressed in the platform should be within a regulated atmosphere of freedom of speech so as to ensure it does not become a vicious playground that leads to abandonment of the platform by those members of the society who are supposed to benefit from it.

Due to the growing misuse of the comments section of newspaper websites such as that of *Vanguard*, Brodesser-akner (2010) states that some media critics have advocated its total removal from websites as conversations on it as the harsh and abusive comments there often demoralize passive and active readers including the authors of published content. They further argue that most comments on newspaper websites tend to unconsciously dilute the news story or change readers' perception away from the initial messages intended by the reporter, editor or author.

However, Richmond (2010) as earlier discussed in the literature review, cautions that calls for the removal of comments section is unnecessary as a good moderation of such websites will solve the problem. This conforms with Jarvis (2010:2)'s submission that the tool is not the problem (any more than blogging tools or printing presses are). "If you eliminate comments that's even more insulting than not listening to them and it risks giving up the incredible value the public can give if only they are enabled to. The issue is how you play host."

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the study took a look at the summary of the findings of the study on readers' comments on Buhari's election news reports published on *Vanguard* newspaper website between March and June, 2016.

It concludes and recommends the ways through which the research outcome can be beneficial to humanity.

5.2 Summary of the Study

This study focused on the benefits of access to newspaper websites through the use of feedback platforms by readers with a view to bringing out their divergent connotations on the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari in the 2015 presidential election as expressed through comments on *Vanguard* website. It also shows how such connotation of comments influence the understanding of reports by visitors to the website and whether the comments section of newspaper websites is a necessary tool for a better reading experience of news or not. The problem statement focused on whether or not comments posted by readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website on news reports of Buhari's election victory had positive or negative connotations thereby leading to a likely abuse of the feedback platform of the medium.

From the review of literature, Web 2.0 was analysed as the critical technology responsible for the setting up of the comments section of newspaper websites. According to Lule (2016), Web 2.0 is not a new version of the web but a reference to the increased focus on user-generated content and social interaction on the web, as well as the evolution of online tools to facilitate that focus. Feedback was further analysed as a critical component of journalism; and the comments section which is the

purveyor of such readers' feedback was reviewed based on its flexibility in serving as an unrestricted platform for free speech that elevates social discourse. Furthermore, the literature review showed that hate communication is on the increase on newspaper websites thus confirming Erjavec and Kovavic (2012)'s submission that the Internet's interactivity, anonymity and credibility not only facilitates messages with positive content but also messages that encompass words of hatred especially on those websites with no moderators.

Also, the reception theory was used to understand how readers interpret the meanings of textual comments posted on newspaper websites while reading news content based on their individual cultural background and life experiences (Hall, 1973). The study found that in today's task of meaning production, Internet users operating in a peer-to-peer environment are often highly collaborative in their posted comments and even undertake the physical alteration of published texts from that earlier presented by the encoder, thus reshaping the media environment experienced by others (Livingstone and Das, 2009).

The research method used in this study is content analysis. The population comprised of 1,135 news stories published in 122 online editions of *Vanguard* newspaper between March to June, 2015. The study used simple random sample method to select 20% of the population; this resulted to 227 news stories which were connotatively coded as follows: Positive (favourable news items to Buhari), Negative (unfavourable news items to Buhari) or Neutral (Neither favourable nor unfavourable news items to Buhari) under the following content categories: straight news, feature article, columns, opinion and editorial.

Also, four most frequently used keywords and phrases by readers to describe Muhammadu Buhari were purposively sampled from the 14,934 comments attached

to the 227 news stories. The field data was quantitatively and qualitatively presented and analyzed. Percentage frequency distribution tables were also used to present the data.

The findings of the study indicated that majority of the comments posted on news reports related to Muhammadu Buhari on *Vanguard* newspaper website during the 2015 elections resulted in negative connotations. Also, the result showed that the keywords and phrases used to describe the presidential candidate were indecorous and contained unverified accusations (Ademola and Okeke, 2011) especially for a man who was once a Nigerian Head of State. Due to these, the study recommended that newspaper websites should employ moderators that would preview comments before they are posted on their platforms.

The findings correspond with Kausar and Zobia (2006)'s findings that reading the news and commenting on newspaper websites remains an interesting phenomenon for many people, especially young persons, in this digital age. They however note that such interactivity must be done in a socially responsible manner devoid of abusive connotations in their comments or misuse of feedback channels.

The study was conducted in view of the fact that many Nigerians showed a huge interest on published reports by newspaper websites on the campaigns of the two major contenders of the 2015 presidential election with emphasis on the opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, who eventually won the election. The news of Buhari's victory generated both positive and negative connotations from his supporters and opponents alike, based on divisive interests.

The major findings of this study are as follows:

i. Majority of the comments related to the candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, as posted on the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website during the 2015 elections had negative connotations.

ii. The keywords or phrases used to describe Muhammadu Buhari in comments posted under news reports in *Vanguard* newspaper were indecorous and full of unverified accusations, especially for a statesman who was once a Nigerian Head of State.

iii. The comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website was misused and dominated by commenters who did not react to issues in the news as presented but used the platform for their own selfish motives regardless of whether their comments will cause division or even scare away other readers of the website.

iv. Readers do not react to stories or news elements the same way on newspaper websites due to individual and psychographic differences.

v. The comments section of newspaper websites promote information-sharing through interactivity where readers engage in dissecting issues in the news. This shows that *Vanguard* newspaper website readers are active and not passive users of information.

vi. Shows that *Vanguard* newspaper website does not have a moderator charged with moderating comments posted on the platform.

vii. The level of tolerance among readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website is extremely low especially considering Nigeria's multi-ethnic society.

viii. Left un-moderated, commenters on newspaper websites can resort to use of injurious words and phrases that could spark crises in Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

ix. Despite its abuses, the comments section of newspaper websites remains a veritable tool for free speech, feedback, sharing of ideas, posting eyewitness pictures or videos and providing more facts on news items.

5.3 Conclusion

Based on the above findings of this study, the connotation of commenting online readers on *Vanguard* newspaper website indicates that readers have formed themselves into a community; they posted relevant and irrelevant information on the comments section; they have a moderate level of Internet penetration; they are averagely educated as revealed in the content of their comments and that they are capable of deciding for themselves whether the reports on Muhammadu Buhari, as published on *Vanguard* newspaper website were capable of winning their support or not winning their support for him hence the negative reaction towards the candidate by majority of the readers.

Thus, this study answered the problem statement whether or not comments posted by readers of *Vanguard* newspaper website on published reports of Buhari's election victory had positive or negative connotations especially on such news items that generated heated debates or exchange of responses on the website. It also examined whether or not readers abused the comments section of *Vanguard* newspaper website as provided to give them a voice and serve as a feedback mechanism between the news medium and the public.

The study showed that comments posted on Nigerian newspaper websites are majorly dominated by sharp divisions among readers that resulted in the use of uncouth language and negative connotations. Readers abused or commended newsmakers who are the subject of published reports, cast aspersions on the journalists/news medium, post outrageous comments with ethno-religious sentiments meant to spark debates under an atmosphere of high tension or post comments with sexual and pornographic implications. There were also hate speeches, use of swear-words, racist remarks and other forms of distortions such as illegal advertising by small business owners and illegal advertisements by the popular conmen known as "419". This led to the misuse of the comments section of newspaper websites through postings that were not meant for that section thus derailing conversations there and promoting hatred, inter-ethnic discord and religious intolerance among citizens to the detriment of information exchange and peaceful co-existence. (Brodesser-Akner, 2010).

Due to the scanty research in this area, especially within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, the study was undertaken to document the nature of posted comments on newspaper websites and to investigate whether or not readers' comments are serving the purpose for the establishment of comments section in line with Harper (2010)'s recommendations.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the above findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

i. Newspaper websites like that of *Vanguard* should employ qualified moderators who preview comments to ensure that commenters obey the house style of the medium before they are approved to be posted. However, this

should not amount to censorship of views, the rules are to serve as a guide and not to hinder free speech. There should be a fine line of distinction according to Banda (2010).

ii. Newspaper websites should have outlined rules for posting of comments on their platforms so as to avoid abusive or advertising comments. The rules should be visible to the reading public upon entry into the website so that it wont take them unawares if their comments are moderated or rejected to be published.

iii. It is suggested that only those commentators who have verifiable Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, names, and means of identification such as photographs or risk being blocked from commenting through such IP addresses.

iv. The Nigerian government and civil society organizations should embark on massive awareness campaign on the need for tolerance among Nigerians so that it can reflect on the views of citizens who comment openly or anonymously on newspaper websites. As a result, newspapers should create spaces on the comments section of their websites with information that the area is for the purpose of democratic expression and not intolerance. A public announcement pop-up (a flash that comes on and off) should contain the message and serve as constant reminders to commentators not to use indecorous language while posting comments. Such campaign messages showing the evils of hate communication should be changed every week or once in a while.

v. Readers on newspaper website should be tolerant and learn to focus on debating issues presented in news stories by journalists rather than focusing on personalities or allowing religion, ethnicity or bigotry to determine how they relate with other users on the platform.

5.4.1 Recommendations for future Research

This study recommends that future researchers should do a field survey or textual analysis to find the relationship between comments expressed by readers on newspaper websites and how such posted comments influence other readers to have a positive or negative view of a news report published on the website. The assumption that news readers' opinions can be influenced by comments in response to a news article was based on previous research findings that found that opinions expressed in user posts had significant effects on news readers' attitudes toward all news issues (Yang, 2008).

There is a need for correlation analysis here due to the huge influence that comments posted on a piece of news report often have on other readers. (Ahn, 2011)

Also, the poor availability of the accurate demographics of online commenters and readers (especially in Nigeria) is one area where more research would greatly contribute to the understanding of online comments. Reader profile for news websites provide an indication of the population from which commenters on each site come from but it does not tell if the profile of commenters parallels the profile of readers (Henrich and Holmes, 2013).

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APPENDICES

Code sheet One: Quantitative Analysis

CODESHEET Date:
CODER:
NEWSPAPER WEBSITE: Vanguard (www.vanguardngr.com) **CODESHEET Number:**

NEWS FORMAT	NUMBER OF BUHARI'S ELECTION-RELATED NEWS STORIES	POSITIVE COMMENTS	NEGATIVE COMMENTS	NEUTRAL COMMENTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMENTS
Straight News					
Feature Article					
Columns					
Opinion					
Editorial					
TOTAL	TOTAL NEWS ITEMS:				

Code Sheet Two: Qualitative Analysis

CODESHEET Date:
CODER:
NEWSPAPER WEBSITE: Vanguard (www.vanguardngr.com) **CODESHEET Number:**

KEYWORD/PHRASE FREQUENCY ANALYSIS

NEWS CATEGORIES	SAI BABA	GMB FOR CHANGE	BOKOHARI	BUHARI BOKOHARAM SPONSOR	TOTAL
Straight News					
Feature Article					
Columns					
Opinion					
Editorial					
TOTAL					