**ACCESS, USAGE AND DEPENDENCE OF TWITTER AS A MEANS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: AISHA BUHARI & AMINU SAGA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Proliferation of new media platforms offers people in Nigeria and across the world the opportunity to use these platforms to communicate and share their feelings and opinions on any matter of interest. Researchers and scholars in communication, media studies and law have enquired on what constitutes freedom of information and expression and how it can be attained. Findings of various scholars have elicited diverse positions to the effect that what one considers freedom of expression is sometimes regarded as infringement on the right of another. This paper interrogates access, usage and dependency of Twitter as a means of freedom of expression in Aisha Buhari and Aminu Mohammed Saga. The paper gained support from Technology Determinism and Uses and Gratification theories as framework and discourse analysis research design was adopted. Explanation method was used to analyze data gathered qualitatively. This paper found out that the power of Twitter as a platform for sending and receiving of feedback on social and political issues among users cannot be overemphasized. The paper concludes and underscores the potency of indigenous language as a valid and reliable means of expression in constructive criticism and discussions that are relevant to the development of society.*

**Keywords:** **Access, Dependency, Freedom, Information, Expression, Twitter Usage.**

**Introduction**

The information age has made people to witness the rise of new media technologies, which decentered the act of communication by expanding the places for engagement between and among people, as well as public participation in mediated discourse (Asadu, 2021). Because of their potential to allow instantaneous human interactions and interconnectivity over place and time, such new media technologies have become known as “social media” (Stein, 2006; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Breuer, 2011). Social media platforms otherwise called “social networking sites” are applications that enable users to connect by building personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messaging (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

According to Tayeebwa (2016), the emergence of social media platforms, particularly Twitter, has provided several opportunities which include improved access to online resources and information sharing, instantaneous dissemination of information, among others. Moreover, Twitter as a free social networking micro-blogging website, allows registered users to broadcast brief posts known as *tweets* (Odutola, 2021). Hence, it users can utilize a variety of platforms and devices to broadcast tweets and follow other users’ tweets. Also, tweets and replies to tweets can be transmitted by text message on a cell phone, a desktop client, or the Twitter.com website. As of the year 2021, Twitter had over 500 million monthly active users, and it was ranked as the most popular site for political communication (Golubski, 2021).

Owing to the proliferation of new media platforms and it usage, today, most people in Nigeria and across the globe own and operate Twitter handles which they use in engaging the public. Twitter as a social networking site, has become a pervasive tool in public communication among top government officials, politicians, journalists, non-governmental organizations, social influencers and individuals (Jungherr, 2016, p. 55). Moreover, an increasing share of the public is using Twitter to comment on, interact around, and research public reactions to politics. There is no gainsaying that the use of twitter and mobile web applications has grown in recent times, particularly among young adults (Rainie, 2012; Smith & Duggan, 2012). Of significance for this age group is the rise in the use of twitter and mobile devices for obtaining political information, creating user-generated political contents, expressing political views and opinion, as well as criticizing people especially public figures. Surveys by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2017)indicates the increasing popularity of twitter use, led by users between age 18 and 29, for political activities such as posting views regarding political and social issues, sharing news articles, following political figures, and watching political videos (Rainie, 2012).

However, in the process of using Twitter as a means of sharing and dissemination of information, as well as criticizing government officials, the Nigerian first lady Aisha Buhari was offended as a result of a tweet posted by Aminu Mohammed a student of the Federal University Dutse, accusing the Nigerian first lady of feeding fat on the poor people’s money. The undergraduate tweeted thus “Su mama anchi kudi talakawa ankoshi” (roughly translated to English language to mean ‘mama has embezzled monies meant for the poor to satisfaction) in which the first lady considered offensive. It was not clear whether he had intended to make a joke or to accuse her of corruption. The ambiguity of the sentence was not only elusive but also semantical. The 24-year old man was subsequently picked up by security operatives around 12 noon on November 8, 2022 and taken to the presidential villa where he was allegedly brutalized and humiliated, and subsequently arraigned at the FCT High Court for cyber stalking (Punch Newspaper, 2022). This incident further raised posers on the practicability of freedom of expression and exercising of individual’s right to information in the country. On the other hand, technology has also presented challenges of freedom of expression. Government and organisations may use technology to monitor and track the online activities of individuals, potentially leading to censorship or the suppression of certain viewpoints. There is no gainsaying that overwhelming degree of literature reinforces the relevance of information freedom in anywhere democracy exists, and this includes Nigeria. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights both state that everyone has the right to freedom of speech and the right to seek and transmit information. Similarly, section 35 of the Nigerian 1999 constitution as amended grants individuals the right to freedom of expression. Thus, several criticisms and outrage from citizens and stakeholders followed the arrest of Aminu Mohammed, amidst the constitutional rights of every citizen to freedom of expression. Therefore, this paper seeks to interrogate the literature on access, usage and dependency of Twitter as a means of freedom of expression, using the Aisha Buhari and Aminu Mohammed saga as a case study.

1. Undoubtedly, language is an arbitrary vocal symbol that could mean many things to different people and tribe. If Mohammed had uttered that the first lady was corrupt in English language the word “corrupt”, would not to have meant a specific thing or idea as it was understood in Hausa language.

Those things and ideas expressed in Hausa language have an in-depth meaning to the communities where the first lady belong. Nevertheless, if a language had not been arbitrary, there would have been just a single language that remained throughout the world.

2. Invariably, because language is a social phenomenon, Aminu Mohammed never considered the implication of his utterances on social media jut just wanted to socialize and reach out to the larger society that he was aware of the ongoing in the Buhari’s administration. Again, Mohammed’s enthusiasm was to nourish, fairish ad establish a kind of human relations with his northern families. The fact remains that as a member of particular social group, we human beings interact with each another, allowing us to identify with one another; and also connect and co-ordinate with one another. But we need to be more careful in the use of our language which is obviously part and parcel of our society and yardstick to our integrity. Hence, the purity and wholesomeness of the first lady had been altered by those utterances of Aminu Mohammed in her very domains.

3. Perhaps we should look at it from this point of view; Language as a symbolic system signifies a whole lot in its expressed meaning. Since language consists of different sound symbols for concepts, things ideas and objects, “Su mama” in Hausa language symbolizes the “first lady” and no other person. More so, the idea that a woman of her calibre could stoop so low to embezzle the poor masses monies is a symbol of no empathy to the entire nation.

4. Again, the systematic arrangement of language is a pointer to the fact that the relationship which exists between a language signifier and the signified may have nothing to do with semantic logicality. “Kudi talakawa ankoshi” signifies the masses monies and ankoshi express the idea of feeding fat. The simple arrangement points to the first lady being corrupt and prodigal.

5. In addition, one may not likely blame Aminu Mohammed wholly for his Hausa tweet since language is a non-instinctive and conventional. His tweet was taken as a multicultural manner. For instance, Mohammed’s friends said he made the post because he was frustrated by the prolonged strike of Academic Staff of University Union (ASUU) across the country. The strike which started in February, 2022 and ended in October, 2022 imagining eight months of idleness, hopelessness and futurelessness. It is also worthy to note that language pass on, develop and extends i.e. has a circulation in a particular community and even around the globe. Therefore, since language is naturally acquired by us, Aminu was expected to calm down in the selection of his diction realising the weight of his target personality.

6. In furtherance to this explanation, since language is productive and creative, it has its efficiency and innovativeness. In view of this, if Aminu had tweeted in English, it might not have weight to attract the wrath of the first lady compare to Hausa language that has with no iota of ambiguity. The boy is question is an undergraduate and apparently could have tweeted in English but wanted to be well understood by his listeners. The auxiliary components of choice of diction are joined to create colloquialism that characterizes an ordinary and familiar conversation or communication as opposed to the formal, official or serious speech or writing. Hence, colloquialism does not necessarily mean incorrectness, rather, it refers to familiarity or a level of informality in the language Aminu expressed.

7. Having being frustrated according to Aminu’s friends, he thought of expressing his desires, emotions, feeling and thoughts about the challenges he faced by communicating it in his mother tongue. After all language is a system of communication which is strong, convenient and the best way to express every situation. Good enough, Aminu Muhammed was able to interact with the first lady through the welfare of language which we may say is the best communication system around the world.

8. On a final note, may I conclude that because language is unique, complex and modifiable, Hausa language was preferred by Aminu Muhammed to prevent the vagueness of the intent meaning of his tweet and also to remove the complexity that could be attached to any other language but rather tried to exhibit the uniqueness of Hausa language with its distinctive features. Through his language, Aminu had been able to deliver/expose Aishat Buhari awesomeness and extravagance.

**Theoretical Framework**

However**,** this study is anchored on two communication theories, which are: Technology Determinism and Uses and Gratification theory

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) proposed by Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz in 1974 assumed that media users are goal-oriented. The theory rests on the proposition that audience selectively chooses, listen to, perceive and retain the media messages on the basis of their needs, beliefs and more. The core assumptions of this theory as enunciated by McQuail, cited in Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-uwaoma (2017) are:

1. The audience actively seeks out specific media and content to achieve certain results or gratifications that satisfy their personal needs.
2. Recipients actively influence the effect process, as they selectively choose, attend to, perceive and retain media messages on the basis of their needs, beliefs, among others.
3. What people do with communication content, instead of what the communication content does to them should be prioritized.
4. Under certain condition and for certain reasons people use media contents.
5. There is a kind of reciprocal gesture between the media and media consumers (society).
6. The media are useful to the society and the society is also useful to the media.

Furthermore, the Uses and Gratification Theory explains the use to which the audience members put the mass media which to a very large extent, depend on the social and psychological needs of the audience which generate different patterns of media exposure and results to needs gratification and other consequences, some unintended. According to Asemah, et al. (2017), several factors influence people's choices and behaviours, especially as to why people use the media. Also, the uses and gratifications theory is grounded in the idea that users have numerous media options to choose from and the reasons and motivations for selecting a specific media will vary from user to user (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974).

McQuail (cited in Asemah et al., 2017) averred that users choose the media based on personal preferences and motivations, and that media are simply a means to achieve an end goal.

However, this theory is a classic explanation of how and why users choose *Twitter* for interaction and as well as information source. Katz and Elihu (cited in David, 2021) declared that diverging from other media effect theories that question, "what does media do to people?", Uses and Gratification focuses on "what do people do with media?”. He postulated that media is a highly available product and the audiences are the consumers of the same product. In the light of this theory, the traditional media platforms such as radio, television and the likes in the era of the Internet and the new media have ceased to be the sole producer and distributor of mass mediated messages. The advent of social networking sites such as *Twitter, Facebook* and other social networking sites, have provided alternatives and catapulted the audience from being mere consumers of media products, to becoming producers and distributors of information.

**Technology Determinism Theory**

The technological determinism theory states that media technologies shape how individuals I a society think, feel, act, and how a society operates as we move from one technological age to another (Griffin 2000), corroborating McLuhan’s theory, that we learn, feel, and think the way we do because of the message we receive through the current technology that is available (McLuhan 1962)

The theory basically explains the fact that changes in communication technology produce profound change in our societal order. Here communication technology is seen to have the power to transform the sensory capacity and therefore transform the way we live our life.

The theory questions the degree to which human thought or action is influenced by technological factors

The ‘technological determinism’ was coined by Thorstein Veblen and this theory revolves around the proportion that technology in any given society defines its nature. Technology is viewed as the driving force of culture in a society and it determines its course of history.

Karl Marx believed that technological progress lead to newer ways of production in a society and this ultimately influenced the cultural, political and economic aspects of a society thereby inevitably changing society itself. This theory is relevant to this study because it explains how Twitter as one of the technologies used influence how Aminu thinks and how Aisha Buhari acts on the tweet. Ordinarily, it may not be easy for Aminu to approach the presidential villa (Aso-Rock) to express what he feels or thinks about the first lady as touching her present appearance compare to her past appearance but technology through Twitter afforded him the opportunity to express himself freely.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Research Design

The research design that was adopted for this paper is discourse analysis, which entails examination of language beyond the sentence to understand how it functions in a social context.

Discourse analysis is blanket term for a range of qualitative research approaches used in analyzing the use of language social contexts. The techniques is employ to understand the world by investigating the underlying meaning of what people say whether in conversation, interaction, documents or images.

This paper examined different tweets in different languages in the past especially the ones tweeted in English language and discovered that there were no instant reaction compared to the one tweeted in Hausa language by Aminu on the first lady, because the first lady understand the language beyond the sentence ad its function in a social context, meaning that almost everyone who understand Hausa get the plight of the boy (Aminu) beyond just reading.

**Conclusion**

The power of Twitter as a platform for sending and receiving of feedback on social and political issues among users cannot be overemphasized. Statistical records showed that majority of active Twitter users in Nigeria digital space today are of young age between 18 and 40. This age category is mostly constituted by students and young people with various intents for the use of Twitter; ranging from social, political, connections, societal integration, among others, as their level of usage, access, dependency and addiction cannot be quantified.

The entrenchment of freedom of speech in Nigeria’s 1999 constitution and the right to seek and transmit information is expected to be in guarded use but not to disrespect and dishonor the elderly and or public figure and the powers that be. There ought to be moderacy and careful selection of diction at the point of airing our views or opinion.

However, there is need for the Nigerian society to decipher the systems of government it is operating. One of the tenets of a democratic society is freedom; hence, a democracy operating nation like Nigeria should desist from denying people the freedom, especially freedom of expression and freedom to criticize public figures. Indigenous Language should be given prominence to air our views in order to give it genuine and in-depth meaning like Adamu used Hausa language to express his views about the first lady Moreover, the access and unrestrictive nature of social networking sites should not be abused by users. There is need to engage people, especially public figures and political office holders on constructive criticism and discussions that are relevant to the development/advancement of the society, not the other way round.

Whatever, connotative Aminu Mohammed might sound, the figure, personality and position he targeted is in meaning suggestive to be insolent.

The Nigerian first lady, Aisha Buhari only thought about the affective meaning of Aminu Mohammed’s tweet; she felt ridicule by the boy’s tweet that was punctuated with sarcasm but she failed to realize that her position as the mother of all, requires tranquility, steadfastness and tolerance.

Again, power is transcend, hence should not but drunk and misused. The alleged brutalization and humiliation of the boy according to Punch newspaper is uncalled-for, unexpected and quite unjustifiable.

Of course, social media platforms should be seen generally as a blessing to humanity, as they provide people with ease of accessibility, ability to connect and link up with people, engaging people on certain issues, to express one’s view among other benefits.

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