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Acerbity via Cybernames: A Correlating Analysis of Nigerian News Sites

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Abstract:

Online comment section is one of the most popular forms of user participation in online newspaper. It has been called space for public engagement created for commenters to improve discussion by sharing views, ideas and opinions freely thereby enhancing democratic ideals. Sadly, the constant occurrence of acerbic comments in this space tend to devalue the intentions of its creation. Anecdotal evidence points to anonymity as the reason for this acerbity. Under the framework of the theory of deindividuation on which this research hinged on, this study a.) sought to identify the nature of the dominant comment found in the comment section of political news stories of selected online Nigerian newspapers. b.) investigated the correlation between the use of cybernames and acerbity in the comment section of political news stores of selected online Nigerian newspapers. Content analysis method was used in analysing 4,548 comments emanating from the comment section of three online Nigerian newspapers. The result revealed that anonymous/pseudonymous and identified commenters have almost same level of tendency to be acerbic in online space. This implies that in Nigerian online newspapers, anonymity/pseudonymity is not solely linked to acerbity in the comment section but might be due to socio-cultural variations.

Keywords: Online newspaper, comment section, acerbity, anonymity, pseudonymity

1. Introduction

One of the participatory features brought by the advent of web 2.0 to print media is the comment section. Comment sections, referred to as the space below a story, where consumers comment on stories written on online section of newspapers. It provides comments and debate spaces that can enhance deliberation amongst readers drawn from diverse background. These online reader comments are toady seen as the most popular form of user-generated content in online newspapers followed by surveys and forum. As a platform, it offered something different when it comes to the consumption of information. News no longer needed to be a passive experience; ideas could be developed and exchanged by content consumers. By designing the comment forum as a platform for constructive dialogue and debate, the media embraced a more participatory journalism. Readers are empowered as secondary gatekeepers that decide what content appears alongside the news story and offers an avenue to participate in online discourse about the news topic at hand. Readers virtually from everywhere, through this forum, register their views on the affairs of the day, which can communicate collectively important issues to mass audience thereby facilitating the formation of public opinion.

Unfortunately, the observed rate of acerbic comments in this section seems to negate the deliberative participatory function offered by this platform producing a process of diminishing returns. This development has had many scholars agonized and polarized over the value of the conversations that rage in the space below a story, generating a lot of debate and discourse over the issue. The debates although seemingly divisive revolves around; the value of anonymity among commenters, and in some cases, the legal issues that arise from what is said in the comments and increasing use of acerbic words. Looking at the debates and discourses surrounding the comment sections, dominant stream of argument centred on the possible connection in the high use of acerbic comments and the anonymity of commenters that threatens the deliberative purpose of this section. While, the democratic theory perspective envisions posting comments as well as reading the contributions of other users as a positive development, the deliberate use of troll language, unrelated comments and vitriolic attacks on others in this section have somehow seemed to negatively affect the intended positive effect of this section as well as causing some legal issues for the newspapers. Anonymity and pseudonyms as argued afford an individual with positions of invisibility which could lead to negative practices such as hate acerbic speeches including trolling, flaming, vulgarity, aspersions, name calling, and other forms of hateful expressions directed at a person, news or personality in a news content. Though there is an avalanche of research in this new area from developed countries (see; McCluskey and Hmielowski, 2012; Singer, 2009; Karlson, 2010, Lee and Jang,

2010; Diakopoulus and Naman, 2011; Hmielowski, Hutchens & Cicchiri, 2014), few of such research is evident in Nigeria, necessitating the need for an empirical enquiry. The aim of this study therefore is to:

- Examine The Nature Of The Dominant Comment Found In The Comment Section Of Three Selected Online Nigerian Newspapers.
- Investigate The Correlation Between The Use Of Cybernames And Acerbity In The Comments Section Of Political News Story Of Three Selected Online Nigerian Newspapers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Anonymity / Pseudonymity through 'Cybernames'

The concept of 'cybernames' in this study refers to anonymous and pseudonymous identity used in online space. A lot of studies have been done on the behavioral model of anonymity (Burkell, 2006; Marx, 1999; Allen, 1999) including as it applies to communication. This concept of anonymity is a study that has drawn much attention to social psychologist, media organization and the rest of social scientist. Anonymity has been proposed as the inability of persons to identify an individual or for individuals to identify oneself.

The recent event of the use of web 2.0 has drawn the attention of scholars to the effect of anonymity in online space. Research has shown that a lot of online commenting platforms are plagued with profanity and personal attacks which has being linked with invincibility in online space. With the protection of anonymity and distance, online users let out hostility towards other individuals with little risk of being traced or made to account for their actions (Nemes, 2002).

Although most studies tend to focus on the negative effects of anonymity, there has also being research investigating the positive effects of anonymity. One of the outstanding positive effects is the issue of privacy on psychological wellbeing. For instance, a study by McKenna & Bargh (1998) investigated the effect of anonymity in a gay/lesbianism membership online platform. They discovered that being anonymous led to the member's acceptance of their status which promoted their coming out publicly as gay/lesbian. They further found out that shroud of anonymity made it possible for the members to identify with others without the fear of reprimands and in addition, the access to share one's experiences and feelings could be huge relief to these people. This nonetheless does not mean that an individual must remove oneself from others, presence. It implies the use of one's skill to draw a borderline on others access to oneself (Pedersen, 1997).

2.2. Acerbity in Discourse

Acerbity in discourse has being studied for the part it plays in discourse most importantly its consequences on peoples' inclination to weigh and accept one another's opinion. Uncivil (acerbic) discourse according to Hwang (2008), refers to a statement or demonstration of disagreement which does not revere and accept others point of view. It's an assault on a person that tends to move outside the ideas, views and differences of the discourse degenerating into name-calling, disdain and ridicule. Researches done by other scholars arrived at related deduction of which they opined that acerbity disrupts free expression which can deter meaningful deliberation unless participants become respectful, unbiased towards another. Hwang who studied the psychological process of aggression in political discussion and investigated the degree to which difference of opinion might result to hostile debate when incivility is incorporated, discovered that incivility in discussion incites bitter and defensive response instead of dialoguing. He experimented using online discussion to manipulate messages that participants thought they were having with other persons around the globe on the issue of withdrawing troops from Iraq. His findings showed that acerbic utterance not only heighten moral resentment but that it also has a negative outcome on being open minded. Davis (1999) also discovered in his work that online interaction was filled with energetic attack and degradation. According to him, discussion on politics mostly favors those who are fiercely loud and disrespectful. Conclusively, when acerbity enters into discussion, individuals tend to firm up in their idea which hinders debate.

3. Review of Empirical Literature

Currently, some researchers are paying much attention to the emergence of user generated content and its varied potentials. A wide range of scholars studied the effects of user generated content on mass media, national discourse, journalism and effects of anonymity in computer mediated communication. Thus, in order to provide empirical evidence of the effects of anonymity on the civility of user comments, Santana (2014) carried out a study evaluating civility in the comment section of online newspapers that disallows anonymity and online newspapers that allows anonymity. The news stories from these online newspapers were based on two topics; immigration (racialized topic) and tea party movement (non-racialized topic). The result of the analysis depicts uncivil and emotionally filled comments on news about immigration from online newspapers that allow anonymity. On the other hand, comments from online newspapers that disallowed anonymity showed comments emotionally laden yet, civil. A racialized topic as this study demonstrated, is bound to attract more uncivil comments when commenters are in anonymous state when compared to non-racialized topic. The research summary shows that anonymity and topic of news stories is important in measuring civility in comment forums of online newspapers, adding that user's expression in online space is related to these two factors. Akin to this study, is the research of Coe, Kensi and Rains (2014) which aimed at understanding the effects of political results of incivility by looking at the extent and texture of political incivility on its own. Their research examined the patterns and determinant of incivility in discussion among the populace. The study examined incivility around four key objectives; to find out how much incivility exists, to find out if incivility is primarily habitual in online discussions, to find out whether

incivility is popular or unpopular when it appears online discussions and finally to examine if the quality of discussion is affected by the presence of incivility. Their findings very clearly showed that incivility is common characteristics of public deliberations, of most prominence is name calling. The study revealed also that the occurrences of incivility had no link with the number of comments generated in a discussion, rather the context of news was as discovered to determine the presence of incivility.

Rowe (2013) carried out a research focused on comparing online platform that permit high level of anonymity and one which offer less anonymity. He conducted a quantitative analysis of online comment beneath articles posted on Washington post Facebook page and news site. Rowe's study made two significant findings: Firstly, uncivil interactive occurrences in the comment section was much more on the Washington post news site (where anonymity is allowed) compared to Washington post Facebook page (where commenters are identified). Secondly, it revealed that the occurrences of incivility found on Washington post news site was directed at other commenters. On the hand, instances of incivility found in the Washington post Facebook page was most likely less interpersonal, rather it was directed at individuals not participating in the discussion or it were used in fostering an argument but not offending others.

In addition to anonymity and topic of news stories as the reasons for incivility in the comment section, environmental characteristics of the online newspaper should also be considered. This boils down to asking pertinent questions like, what are the consequences of interface design choices have on the content generation in a news site? An example of such interface design can be in the area of a site allowing or disallowing anonymous comments. To determine the effects of the interface design choices of a site, Omernick and Sood (2013) conducted a study that compared the comment section of TechCrunch before and after their shift from anonymous to real identity platform (through the Disqus and Facebook comment platform). The result revealed there were more relevant comments, less swearing, more positive and affect word, more participation on their Facebook platform as opposed to their Disqus platform. This result geared towards the support of real identity platforms to anonymous platform but however, advised that knowledge of the community and political consequences of adopting a design choice should be put into considered.

Much studies have been done about the effects of anonymity in online space by foreign authors on their online newspapers, nonetheless, it appears there are scarcity of studies relating to the link between anonymity and incivility in online Nigerian newspapers. This study serves to bridge the gap and adds to the growing body of literature on anonymity in computer mediated communication by providing empirical evidence on the correlation between the use of cybernames in form of anonymous and pseudonymous identity and acerbity in the comment section of online Nigerian Newspapers.

3.1. The Theory of Deindividuation

To understand anonymity as it affects behavior, the theory of deindividuation was adopted. The key concept of this theory describes the effect of a crowd or group on the behavior of an individual. This theory claimed that an individual indulges in behavior which when alone would not indulge in due to a restrain on an individual's usual behavior. It also states that there is a loss of identity when an individual is immersed in a group. The Proponents of this theory argued that anonymity in online communication is linked with a varied behavioral outcome that differs from face-to-face communication. These consist of the tendency for users with cybernetic names to put on hold their awareness of consequences and thereby adopting a sense of being less inhibited in their attitudes thus, leading to deindividuation.

The biggest faction of the social psychological research on the issue of deindividuation consists of test of hypothesis that a loss of identity is the incentive that unleashed, impulsive and unrestrained behavior (Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb 1952) by individuals in a group. The source of this view can be linked to the crowd theorist like Le Bon (1986), Sighale (1901) and Mc Dougall (1920) who stated that in a crowd, 'group mind' originates in which the attitudes and views of all individuals in the assembly adopt one and the same track and their sentiment personality disappears (Ross, 1959). The removal of identity in its own acts as an activator for the unrestrained and thoughtless attitude in the crowd. Mann, Newton and Innes (1982) furthermore, posit that anonymity offer a person with shield from the social disapproval or rejection likely to follow from non- adherence to the norm. Using computer mediated communication (CMC), Douglas and McGarty (2001) studied how people communicated with each other through the internet when anonymous. They discovered that those whose identity were anonymous geared towards flaming behavior in their communication. There is a sense of safety from being monitored and criticized when people interact online which reduces social identity. The sense of having a privacy gears them towards being less inhibited with others thus leading them to confront, disagree, and take exception easily to others opinion. Therefore, the choice of deindividuation theory for this research in hinged on its capacity to provide theoretical explanation to the role of deindividuation effects on online behavior.

4. Methodology

For this research, Content Analysis was adopted as a technique for the methodical categorization and explanation of communication content according to predetermined categories. It was used to investigate the relationship between the use of cyber names and acerbity in the comment section of three selected online Nigerian newspapers. Additionally, it investigated the dominant comment found in the comment section of three selected online Nigerian newspapers. These comments are specifically the ones emerging from the political section of three selected online Nigerian newspapers which are; vanguardngr.com, dailytrust.com.ng and guardian.ng. The news site was selected based on the following reasons; a) they deploy Disqus as its commenting platform and have archiving features b) these newspapers are ranked among the major national newspapers in the country with national circulations, wide national readership across the country and a broad online followership which they have consistently maintained since they became visible online (Amobi, 2010).

4.1. Data Collection

This study which covered a period of four months that commenced from December 1st 2018 to March 31st of 2019 to guarantee a wide variety of topics on political news stories. The four-month period spanned the flag off of election campaigns and election days in Nigeria which increased the dominance of political news stories in the mainstream news.

Two constructed week sampling technique was used to derive the sampling frame. Thus, each day of the two weeks must be represented in a two constructed week sample. This procedure was conducted in stages;

- For this study, five news stories written each constructed two were identified and sampled.
- A total of 280 news stories were generated from these three online Nigerian newspapers over a period of four months starting from 1st December 2018- 31st March 2019.
- All Comments which is the unit of analysis, emanating from these five articles, generated in each of the two constructed weeks over a period of four months were captured online using a feature of Nvivo software known as *Ncapture* and totalled 4,448 comments.

The comments were categorized based upon the attributes that would be found in a rational, logical and informed discourse. These attributes can be arguments, opinions, questions, responses to other comments, information sharing. The aforementioned were deployed towards constructing comment categories and acted as a gauge in measuring comment quality. As found in the study of Rowe (2013) which analysed uncivil behaviour found in Washington Post comment section by adopting a coding scheme. The comment categories drawn for this study are listed as following: a) *Debativ comments* b) *Informational comments* c) *Interrogative comments* d) *Hilarious comments* e) *Opinions* f) *Random comments* g) *Acerbic comments*.

4.2. Data Presentation and Analysis

The comments analyzed in this research were drawn from three online Nigerian newspapers namely: *vanguardngr.com*, *guardian.ng*, and *dailytrust.com.ng*. These three news sites generated a total of 4,584 comments used for this analysis. The analysis covered a span of four months starting from December 1st 2018 to March 31st 2019. The analysis done in this section followed this pattern; tables showing the dominant comment category over a period of four months for each news site and an aggregate of the three news sites showing the dominant comment category within the stipulated four months represented in table and chart. Through this aggregate table, the correlation between cybernames and acerbic comments was generated.

Types of Comment	Total	%
Acerbic Anonymous/Pseudonyms	646	17.39
Acerbic Identified	321	8.64
Debativ	46	1.24
Hilarious	127	3.42
Random	100	2.69
Interrogative	311	8.37
Opinions	2074	55.84
Informational	89	2.40
Total	3714	100.00

Table 1: Dominant Comment Category in Vanguardngr.Com

Table 1 shows a chart and statistical representation of information about analyzed comments from *vanguardngr.com*. These comments were collected over a period of four months using constructed week sampling. As seen in this figure, out of the eight comment categories, the comment category with the highest number of frequency is the opinion which is at 55.84%, followed by acerbic anonymous/pseudonymous with 17.39% frequency while debative comment garnered the least of the appearance with 1.24% representation. The rest of the comment categories; acerbic identified, hilarious, random, interrogative and informational comments stand at 8.6%, 3.4%, 2.69%, 8.37% and 2.40% respectively.

Dominant Comment Category	Total	%
Acerbic Anonymous/Pseudonyms	106	21.86
Acerbic Identified	39	8.04
Debativ	18	3.71
Hilarious	20	4.12
Random	47	9.69
Interrogative	37	7.63
Opinions	159	32.78
Informational	59	12.16
Total	485	100.00

Table 2: Dominant Comment Category in Guardianng.Com

From this table representing data from guardian.ng, it can be observed that over the period of four months, Opinion as one of the comment categories, just like in vanguardngr.com, registered the highest number of occurrence with 159 comments followed by acerbic anonymous/pseudonyms with 106 comments. This is followed by informational comments at 12.16% and acerbic identified comments at 8.04%.

Types of Comment	Total	%
Acerbic Anonymous/Pseudonyms	78	22.35
Acerbic Identified	49	14.04
Debative	32	9.17
Hilarious	43	12.32
Random	11	3.15
Interrogative	34	9.74
Opinions	63	18.05
Informational	39	11.17
Total	349	100.00

Table 3: Dominant Comment Category in Dailytrust.com.ng

This data obtained in dailytrust.com shows a deviation from the similar trend with the two previously analyzed comments with acerbic anonymous/pseudonyms having the highest frequency with a total of 78 comments showing a 22.35% occurrence. This is followed by Opinion with 18% occurrence. Acerbic identified comment had 14.04% representation, hilarious comments came up with 12.32%, interrogative comments with 9.74%, Informational comments at 11.17% and random comments 3.5%.

It is worthwhile to note that the visual representation of the three news sites above and the frequency of its comment categories is geared toward answering the first research question. Research question one aims at identifying the nature of the dominant comment found in the comment section of the selected online Nigerian newspapers.

Types of Comment	% Vanguard	% Guardian	% Daily Trust	Aggregate
Acerbic Anony/Pseud	17.39	21.86	22.35	61.6
Acerbic Identified	8.64	8.04	14.04	30.72
Debative	1.24	3.71	9.17	14.12
Hilarious	3.42	4.12	12.32	19.86
Random	2.69	9.69	3.15	15.53
Interrogative	8.37	7.63	9.74	25.74
Opinions	55.84	32.78	18.05	106.67
Informational	2.4	12.16	11.17	25.73
Total	100	100	100	300

Table 4: News Sites Comment Category Aggregate
Vanguardngr.Com, Guardian.Ng and Dailytrust.Com.Ng

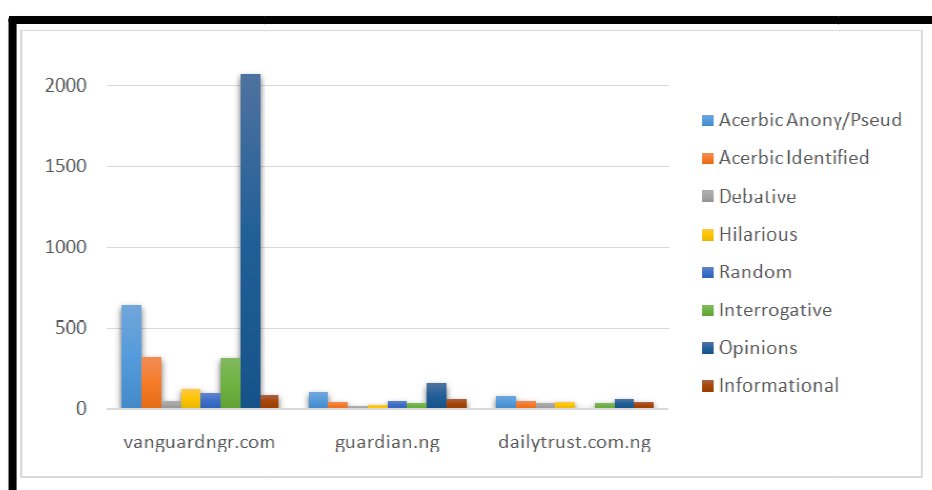


Figure 1: News Sites Comment Category Aggregate
Vanguardngr.com, Guardian.ng and Dailytrust.com.ng

The first research question sought to identify the nature of the dominant comment found in the comment section of selected online Nigerian newspapers. This aggregate combined the frequencies of the comment categories in these three news sites namely vanguardngr.com, guardian.ng and dailytrust.com.ng to ascertain the dominant comment found in them. As the table depicts, Opinion had the highest number of comments with an aggregate of 106.6. This is followed by

acerbic anonymous/pseudonymous comments with an aggregate of 61.6. The data provided by the table showed that 'Opinion' comment category is the dominant comment found in the comment section of online Nigerian newspapers.

	Acerbic Anony/Pseud	Acerbic Identified	Debative	Hilarious	Random	Interrogative	Opinions	Informational
Acerbic Anony/Pseud	1.00							
Acerbic Identified	0.50	1.00						
Debative	0.80	0.92	1.00					
Hilarious	0.63	0.99	0.97	1.00				
Random	0.47	-0.53	-0.15	-0.38	1.00			
Interrogative	0.26	0.97	0.79	0.91	-0.73	1.00		
Opinions	-0.95	-0.74	-0.94	-0.84	-0.18	-0.54	1.00	
Informational	0.98	0.33	0.68	0.48	0.62	0.08	- 0.88	1.00

Table 5: Correlation between Acerbic Anonymous/Pseudonymous Comments and Acerbic Identified Comments

To determine the correlation between acerbity in the comment section and the use of cybernames, Pearson correlation was adopted and two variables were correlated. The two variables correlated are acerbic anonymous/pseudonymous comments and acerbic identified comments (marked in red). It showed a correlation of 0.5 to +1 signifying a moderate positive correlation. This implies that the users of cybernames in online space and real identity users in online space have an almost the same tendency to be acerbic in the comment section. This implies that acerbity in the comment section is not greatly generated by only those with cybernames.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings emanating from research question one which sought to find out nature of the dominant comment found in the comment section of political news stories of selected online Nigerian newspapers showed that 'Opinion' comment category dominates in the comment section of Nigerian newspapers. The data revealed that majority of the comments making up 2,296 out of 4,548 of the comment aggregates are Opinions. This finding is similar to the research findings of Knustad (2018) which through the use of content analysis compared Norwegian national news site and their Facebook page. This research and Knustad findings showed that even though there are presence of incivility on the comment section, other comment categories are well represented, showing that the comment sections of news site are more interactive, engaging, participatory and can form the basis for gauging public opinions on issues.

This study aimed to find out the correlation between the use of cybernames and acerbic comments in the comment section. From the data generated, the result explains the fact that users of cybernames in online space are not strictly those who are acerbic in the comment section. The correlation of 0.5 to +1 between acerbic anonymous/pseudonymous and acerbic identified shows a positive relationship, indicating that both comment categories have almost the same tendency to be acerbic in the comment section. This finding seems in to be in contrast with various works on anonymity and incivility in cyber space. (see: Santana 2014; Rowe 2013; Omernick&Sood 2013 etc.). It showed that identified commenters exhibited acerbity as much as anonymous commenters, suggesting that anonymity alone cannot be used as an explanatory factor for why there are uncivil comments in the comment sections of online Nigerian newspapers.

6. Conclusion

Recent years have witnessed the democratic potential of the comment sections. This research intended to move forward the role anonymity play in the online space especially as it pertains to the comment section. In the doing so, it categorized and discovered the dominant comment type found in the comment section of online newspaper. It analyzed the comments left on the political section of three selected online Nigerian newspapers by investigating the relationship between anonymity/pseudonymity and acerbity in the comment section. A critical appraisal of deindividuation theory used in this study also further explained the concept of anonymity and incivility in online space. The theory of deindividuation for instance, basically explains the process of loss of identity when an individual is immersed in a crowd. In computer mediated communication, it leads to release of aggressive behaviors. In advanced democracy, the literature tends to suggest that anonymity in online space is the reason for incivility in the comment section. The major findings in this study seems to negate this popular assumption as results revealed that both anonymous/pseudonymous commenters and identified commenters have an almost same tendency to be acerbic in the comment section. This suggests that

anonymity cannot be used as a single factor for incivility online. This variation in findings from Nigerian Online newspapers as compared to their foreign counterparts can be attributed to cultural differences, societal factors or it might be that Nigerians are bold and outspoken. Analyzing users comment and most especially the presence of incivility in them is vital, as it is one way to measure the efficacy of the comment section in the context of their contribution to constructive discussion and debate as news organizations increasingly depend on them in their bid to increase public engagement.

7. Recommendation

As the study findings have revealed that acerbity abounds both with anonymous/pseudonymous and identified commenters, it is recommended that a culture of respect be fostered within a news site as opposed to ban to anonymity as various studies suggested. In addition, building efficient user regulating policies that inspire accountability among users without suppression on discourses.

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