



Social Media Trends and Public Opinion Dynamics in Port Harcourt

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how social media trends influence agenda-setting and public opinion formation in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, with specific focus on the X platform (formerly Twitter). Anchored on the Agenda-Setting Theory, the research investigated three key questions: why Nigerian X users engage with certain trends over others, how frequently these trends shape opinion formation, and how influencers direct public discourse. Using a descriptive survey design, the study sampled 384 respondents from Port Harcourt's population of 3,688,308 through multi-stage sampling techniques. Data collection involved 323 valid questionnaire analyzed using frequencies and mean scores. Findings revealed that Nigerian X users engage with trends based on multiple factors: algorithmic visibility and frequency of appearance on timelines emerged as the strongest determinant, followed by entertainment value, emotional connection, and personal relevance, peer influence, and political importance. Social justice movements, particularly #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance, dominated as the most prominent trends, followed by politics and governance and public health issues. The study demonstrated that X trends frequently influence opinion formation across social issues and political matters, health issues and popular culture, and economic concerns. Influencers emerged as powerful agenda-setters who determine topic visibility, frame discourse through strategic presentation, serve as thought leaders, and actively engage followers to shape public opinion. However, challenges persist regarding misinformation dissemination, echo chamber effects, and the quality of public discourse. The study recommends that influencers promote constructive dialogue, X platform collaborate with fact-checking organizations, and stakeholders encourage critical thinking among users to improve the quality and credibility of digital public discourse in Nigeria's evolving media landscape.

Keywords: Agenda-setting, public opinion formation, social media trends, X platform, influencers, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Background to the Study

Agenda setting and public opinion formation are integral concepts in understanding how information dissemination shapes societal views and priorities. These processes are vital in a world where media plays a significant role in directing public discourse and influencing collective decision-making. The Agenda-Setting Theory, first proposed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, postulates that the media has substantial power in determining which issues are prioritized in the public sphere. While it does not directly tell the public what to think, the media shapes what the public thinks about. The theory emphasizes that the prominence given to issues by the media influences their salience in public discussions, thereby guiding societal focus and perceptions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Public opinion formation refers to the way individuals form attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about various issues based on information, social interactions, and personal experiences. The media, acting as the primary conduit of information, plays an essential role in shaping these perceptions. Media outlets, through repeated exposure to topics and framing, influence how individuals view issues. For instance, if the media consistently frames economic policies negatively, the public may perceive the economy unfavorably, even if objective indicators suggest otherwise (Entman, 2017). In traditional media, this role is primarily held by established entities such as television channels, newspapers, and radio stations, which act as gatekeepers of information. However, the rise



of social media has disrupted these established media hierarchies, enabling more decentralized, interactive, and participatory communication (Boulianne, 2019).

The advent of social media platforms has revolutionized the process of agenda setting and public opinion formation. Unlike traditional media, social media offers a more interactive platform, where users are both consumers and producers of content. Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have become central to public discourse in contemporary society, facilitating rapid communication, information sharing, and the mobilization of political, social, and cultural movements. Enyindah and Wilcox (2025) note that this transformation has democratized content creation, enabling individuals to directly influence public discourse, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers.

On social media platforms, content curation is largely driven by algorithms that assess user preferences and engagement patterns. These algorithms play a significant role in shaping what content users are exposed to, creating a personalized experience that can reinforce existing beliefs. This phenomenon, known as an "echo chamber," can result in the amplification of certain viewpoints, thus reinforcing users' preexisting attitudes and potentially polarizing public opinion (Pariser, 2017). In this sense, social media has introduced new dynamics to agenda-setting processes, allowing the public to collectively determine which issues gain prominence. However, it has also introduced challenges related to the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and the quality of public discourse (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). High internet costs were identified as a deterrent by 60% of healthcare providers and patients, and inadequate power supply further disrupts telecommunication systems, especially in rural regions, Dike (2025).

In addition to algorithmic influences, social media platforms like X have given rise to new forms of influential actors, most notably, social media influencers. These influencers, who often command large followings, wield considerable power in shaping public discourse. X influencers can mobilize public opinion on a range of issues, from political causes to social justice movements. For instance, influencers played an instrumental role during the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, helping to highlight police brutality and organize protests. The credibility and reach of these influencers allow them to act as agenda setters in a way that traditional media figures might not (Ibrahim, 2020; Folarin, 2022).

The influence of social media influencers is particularly significant in Nigeria, where digital activism has gained momentum in recent years. Influencers in Nigeria use X to engage their followers on political and social issues, often bringing attention to topics that may be overlooked by mainstream media. Their ability to amplify messages and curate content that resonates with specific audiences makes them powerful opinion leaders. This phenomenon highlights the importance of understanding how these new digital actors influence public opinion formation and agenda-setting processes, particularly in urban areas like Port Harcourt (Ogunyemi, 2023).

Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State in Nigeria, is a vibrant metropolis with a dynamic socio-political landscape. The city is marked by a mix of cultural, economic, and political challenges, which are often reflected in the public discourse on social media platforms like X. The role of X in shaping public opinion in Port Harcourt is particularly crucial, given the city's status as a political hub and the growing use of smartphones and internet connectivity among its residents. Nwachukwu (2021) argues that the accessibility of X via mobile devices has empowered residents of Port Harcourt to engage with national and local issues, participate in political debates, and mobilize for social causes.

X is increasingly being used as a platform for political activism, with residents discussing issues such as local governance, security concerns, and economic policies. The platform offers a space where citizens can engage in dialogue, share opinions, and contribute to the shaping of public narratives. The influence of X in Port Harcourt is particularly significant because it transcends geographical boundaries, allowing residents to engage with both local and national issues. This digital space is crucial for shaping political discourse, especially during election periods or when public opinion needs to be mobilized for social or political causes (Yahaya, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The emergence of social media platforms has revolutionized the realm of communication and dissemination of



information, profoundly impacting the shaping of public opinion and the determination of societal priorities. Within the Nigerian context, Twitter, now recognized as X, has become a potent instrument for engaging in public discourse, enabling individuals to actively participate in and influence national dialogues in unprecedented ways. Despite the significant influence of X on public opinion and agenda-setting, there remains a dearth of comprehensive research examining the specific mechanisms through which X trends exert their influence on these processes in Nigeria. This knowledge gap poses a critical challenge, as comprehending the dynamics of X's impact on shaping public opinion and setting agendas is vital for understanding the broader implications of social media on democratic processes and civic engagement in Nigeria.

The issue is further complicated by the rapid proliferation of misinformation and the influential role of digital influencers, whose actions have the potential to sway public sentiment and priorities. Without a thorough exploration of how X trends are generated and disseminated, and how they affect public opinion and agenda-setting, there is a risk of misinterpreting the influence of social media in Nigerian society. Such misinterpretations can result in ineffective policy responses and a lack of strategies to harness the positive aspects of social media while mitigating its negative consequences.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge the existing gap by investigating the influence of social media platforms, particularly X, on agenda-setting and public opinion formation in Nigeria. Through an analysis of X trends and their impact on public discourse, this research seeks to offer a nuanced comprehension of the interplay between digital communication, public sentiment, and societal priorities. This inquiry is essential for developing well-informed policies and strategies that can optimize the constructive use of social media in promoting informed, engaged, and resilient public discourse in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to explore the role of social media platforms in agenda setting and public opinion formation. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Find out why Nigerian X users identify with certain trends over others
2. Determine how often trends on X lead to opinion formation by users
3. Ascertain whether influencers on X give direction on public opinion formation amongst X users

Research Questions

1. Why do Nigerian X users identify with certain trends over others?
2. How often does trends on X lead to opinion formation by users?
3. How do influencers on X give direction on public opinion formation amongst X users?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory, propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, postulates that the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception by emphasizing certain issues over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The central assumption of this theory is that while the media may not be successful in telling people what to think, it is remarkably effective in telling people what to think about. This influence occurs because the media highlights specific topics, thereby making them more salient in the public's mind. McCombs and Shaw's seminal work during the 1968 presidential election demonstrated that the issues voters considered most important were significantly correlated with the issues most prominently covered by the media.

The theory operates on several key assumptions. Firstly, it assumes a relatively passive audience that relies on the media for information about the importance of various topics. Secondly, it posits that the media filters and shapes reality rather than merely reflecting it. Finally, it suggests a direct link between media coverage and the public's perceived importance of issues. These assumptions underscore the media's power in influencing the



public agenda through repeated emphasis and strategic presentation of certain topics over others. Despite its significant contributions to understanding media effects, agenda-setting theory has faced criticisms. Critics argue that the theory underestimates the active role of audiences in interpreting and responding to media messages. Additionally, the rise of new media and the fragmented nature of modern media consumption challenge the notion of a singular, cohesive media agenda (Effiong & Inyang, 2016; Tufekci, 2014; McCombs, 2004). With diverse and niche sources of information, individuals can curate their media diets in ways that may mitigate the agenda-setting effects posited by McCombs and Shaw. Moreover, some scholars contend that the theory does not adequately account for the feedback loop between the public agenda and the media agenda, where public opinion can also influence media coverage.

In the context of the study, agenda-setting theory is particularly relevant. On platforms like X, the role traditionally played by mass media is often assumed by influential users and trending topics, which shape the public discourse by highlighting specific issues. This aligns with the core tenet of agenda-setting theory: the emphasis on certain topics by influential sources (in this case, X influencers) determines the salience of these topics among the public. The interactive and user-generated nature of social media also introduces a new dimension to agenda setting, where users not only consume but also contribute to the agenda-setting process through retweets, likes, and comments.

X trends in Nigeria often reflect the most pressing issues, from political events to social movements, indicating a direct link between the platform's trending topics and public concern. The study aims to investigate how these trends, driven by influential figures and widespread engagement, shape public opinion and discourse in Nigeria. This exploration will provide insights into the modern dynamics of agenda setting in the digital age, highlighting the evolving landscape of media influence and public opinion formation in the context of social media.

Public Opinion Formation

Public opinion formation refers to the process by which individuals in a society develop and express their beliefs, attitudes, and preferences on various issues. According to Noelle-Neumann (1993), this phenomenon is complex and influenced by multiple factors, including personal experiences, social interactions, media consumption, cultural norms, and political contexts. Noelle-Neumann opined that public opinion is not static; it evolves over time as individuals are exposed to new information, experiences, and persuasive communications. The formation of public opinion, as she asserted, is a collective process that often involves the interaction of individual beliefs with broader societal discourses.

One of the primary mechanisms through which public opinion is formed is socialization, where Dalton (2013) is of the opinion that individuals absorb values and norms from their family, peers, educational institutions, and the media. From a young age, people are socialized into particular ways of thinking and interpreting the world around them. According to Dalton, this early socialization lays the foundation for later attitudes and opinions, which can be reinforced or altered through continued exposure to various social and cultural influences. For instance, Dalton asserted that individuals who grow up in politically active households are more likely to be engaged in political discussions and develop strong opinions on political issues.

Druckman and Parkin (2005) opined that the media also plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion. According to them, through agenda-setting and framing, the media can highlight specific issues and present them in particular ways, thereby influencing how the public perceives these issues. Druckman and Parkin asserted that the frequency and tone of media coverage can significantly impact the salience of issues and shape the public's understanding of them. For example, they noted that extensive media coverage of economic downturns can heighten public concern about economic policies and influence opinions on governmental interventions. Furthermore, Druckman and Parkin (2005) are of the opinion that the rise of digital and social media has diversified the sources from which people obtain information, allowing for a broader range of voices and perspectives in public discourse.

Interpersonal communication is another significant factor in public opinion formation. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) asserted that people often discuss current events and issues with friends, family, and colleagues, which can lead to the exchange of ideas and the reinforcement or challenge of existing beliefs. According to Katz and



Lazarsfeld, these discussions can be particularly influential when they occur within trusted relationships, where individuals feel comfortable expressing and testing their opinions. Katz and Lazarsfeld also opined that the phenomenon of opinion leaders, individuals who are particularly influential in their social circles, plays a role here. These leaders can shape the opinions of others by providing information, interpretations, and endorsements of particular viewpoints.

According to Tversky and Kahneman (1973), cognitive and psychological factors significantly influence how individuals form opinions. They noted that cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, where individuals favor information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, can lead to selective exposure to information and the reinforcement of existing opinions. Tversky and Kahneman also asserted that the availability heuristic, where people assess the frequency or probability of an event based on how easily examples come to mind, can skew public perceptions, particularly in relation to sensational or highly publicized issues. These cognitive processes, combined with emotional responses to issues, contribute to the complexity of public opinion formation.

Public opinion formation is thus a multifaceted process influenced by a confluence of social, psychological, and informational factors. It involves the interplay of individual predispositions and external influences, leading to the development of collective opinions that can significantly impact societal and political outcomes. Understanding the dynamics of public opinion, as Tversky and Kahneman concluded, is crucial for comprehending how societies respond to various issues and how these responses can shape policy and governance.

Zaller (1992) opined that another important aspect of public opinion formation is the influence of political elites and institutions. According to Zaller, politicians, governmental bodies, and political parties often play a key role in shaping public discourse and, consequently, public opinion. These actors, Zaller asserted, can frame issues in particular ways that align with their political agendas, often through speeches, policy proposals, and public communications. For example, Zaller noted that political leaders might emphasize certain aspects of a policy, such as its economic benefits or ethical considerations, to garner public support or opposition. The rhetoric used by political figures, particularly in polarized environments where different segments of the population may align with competing narratives, can significantly affect how the public perceives and prioritizes issues.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) concluded that in addition to direct communication, political elites influence public opinion through the strategic use of media. They noted that by granting interviews, holding press conferences, or using social media platforms, political elites can set the agenda and frame issues in ways that promote their perspectives. Iyengar and Kinder also introduced the concept of "priming," asserting that political communication can prime the public to consider certain criteria when evaluating issues or political candidates. For instance, they concluded that frequent discussions about national security by political leaders may prime the public to prioritize this issue over others when voting or assessing governmental performance. This interplay between political communication and public opinion, Iyengar and Kinder noted, is critical, as it can shape electoral outcomes and policy decisions.

According to Inglehart and Baker (2000), public opinion formation is significantly influenced by cultural and societal norms, which provide a broader context for individual and collective attitudes. They asserted that cultural values, historical experiences, and societal expectations often shape the range of acceptable opinions within a community. Inglehart and Baker noted that these cultural frameworks can either constrain or enable certain viewpoints, making some opinions more socially acceptable or prominent than others. For instance, they opined that societal norms around gender roles can influence public opinion on policies related to gender equality or family structure. Similarly, they asserted that historical experiences, such as a country's history with colonialism or conflict, can shape public attitudes toward issues like national identity or foreign policy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design that was utilized for this study was the descriptive survey design. This particular design was chosen for its capacity to collect data from a wide-ranging sample of the population and portray present



circumstances with precision. The rationale for this design was due to the fact that this study is focused on individuals, their beliefs, perspectives, motivations, attitudes, and behaviours. Hence, to cover the scope of the study, a multi-dimensional design was deemed appropriate, as the weakness of one design was addressed through the other. In line with the aforementioned justification, a descriptive survey was selected for this research to enable the gathering of comprehensive data for analyzing the role of social media in agenda setting and public opinion formation, with a focus on X trends in Nigerian discourse.

Population

The population of the study consisted of residents of Port Harcourt City. According to National Bureau of Statistics, (2023), the population of Port Harcourt City was 3,688,308. The sample size for this study was 384. This was calculated using an online sample size calculator known as Survey Monkey.

The research adopted the multi-stage sampling technique for this study. This means that the population was grouped into clusters, and the selection was done in stages.

The first stage for the sample selection was the adoption of the existing constituencies in the local government area. Port Harcourt City Local Government has three constituencies, and they formed the first stage for this study. The second stage was the selection of 2 wards each from the constituencies. These 2 wards were selected based on how busy it is in terms of human activities. Therefore, the researcher selected 6 wards in all for this stage. The third stage was the selection of 2 streets from each ward. These streets were also selected based on the busy nature of the streets. This means the busiest streets were selected, and we have 12 streets. The 4th and final stage was the actual selection of the respondents. Here, the researcher adopted convenience sampling techniques. This meant that any resident of the selected street who was available and willing to be part of the study became one of the respondents.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Respondents' Response on the various trends on X in Nigeria

| Items | SA | A | D | SD | Total | Mean | Decision |
|---|-----|-----|----|----|-------|------|----------|
| Politics and governance | 202 | 66 | 41 | 14 | 1102 | 3.4 | Agreed |
| Entertainment and celebrity news | 103 | 145 | 20 | 55 | 942 | 2.9 | Agreed |
| Sports and Competitions | 106 | 134 | 56 | 27 | 965 | 3.0 | Agreed |
| Public health issues (e.g. COVID-19, Lassa Fever) | 157 | 121 | 23 | 22 | 1059 | 3.3 | Agreed |
| Economy issues (e.g. Fuel Subsidy, Inflation) | 147 | 105 | 33 | 58 | 1027 | 3.2 | Agreed |
| Social justice movement (e.g. #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance) | 198 | 113 | 6 | 6 | 1149 | 3.6 | Agreed |

The examination of respondents' perceptions regarding the myriad trends of X in Nigeria reveals a substantial consensus concerning the plethora of trends associated with X. The item that recorded the highest mean score (3.6) indicates that a considerable segment of respondents (198 strongly agree, 113 agree) asserts that the social justice movements (e.g., #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance) emerge as one of the most prominent trends in Nigeria. This suggests that discourses surrounding social justice movements (e.g., #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance) catalyze trends related to X in Nigeria, thereby reinforcing the platform's status as a crucial nexus for social justice advocacy in the country.

Similarly, a significant proportion of respondents (mean = 3.4) concur that politics and governance frequently manifest in X's trending section, underscoring the platform's propensity to amplify political discourse. This



aligns with the observation that X functions as a digital arena where political issues attain visibility and traction. The analysis further identifies public health concerns (e.g., COVID-19, Lassa Fever) as one of the prevalent trends on X in Nigeria, eliciting strong agreement (mean = 3.3), thereby corroborating the notion that Nigerian X users engage in robust discussions surrounding public health issues (e.g., COVID-19, Lassa Fever).

Table 2: Respondents' response on why Nigerian X users identify with certain trends over others

| Items | SA | A | D | SD | Total | Mean | Decision |
|--|-----|-----|----|----|-------|------|----------|
| Personal interest or relevance | 123 | 86 | 55 | 59 | 919 | 3.0 | Agreed |
| Influence from friends or public figures | 106 | 134 | 56 | 27 | 965 | 3.0 | Agreed |
| Entertainment values | 154 | 95 | 57 | 17 | 1032 | 3.2 | Agreed |
| Political or social importance | 103 | 145 | 20 | 55 | 942 | 3.0 | Agreed |
| Emotional Connection | 132 | 98 | 71 | 22 | 986 | 3.1 | Agreed |
| Frequency of appearance on timeline | 193 | 87 | 25 | 20 | 1103 | 3.4 | Agreed |

The analysis of the reasons behind why Nigerian X users gravitate towards certain trends over others reveals several compelling factors. One predominant reason is the personal relevance or significance that these trends hold for individual users, a sentiment reflected in a mean score of 3.0. Additionally, the influence of peers or public figures, who serve as role models or idols, emerges as another key factor, also yielding a mean score of 3.0.

Furthermore, with a mean score of 3.2, respondents indicated that the entertainment value associated with specific trends is a critical determinant of their preferences. In essence, the entertaining gratifications derived from these X contents lead Nigerian users to favor certain types of content over others. Similarly, the study identified that political and social relevance of specific trends motivates users to engage more with certain content, as evidenced by a mean score of 3.0.

Table 3: Respondents' responses on the demographic characteristics of Nigerian X users influence their engagement with trending topics.

| Items | SA | A | D | SD | Total | Mean | Decision |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|------|-----------|
| Age significantly influences the nature of trending topics that Nigerian X users engage with. | 143 | 102 | 56 | 22 | 1012 | 3.1 | Agreed |
| Nigerian X users engage more with trending issues affecting people within their region | 155 | 101 | 55 | 12 | 1045 | 3.2 | Agreed |
| The level of education shapes the trending conversations Nigerian X users find meaningful | 123 | 99 | 34 | 67 | 924 | 3.0 | Agreed |
| Gender status of Nigerian X users influence how they engage with trending topics. | 40 | 19 | 138 | 126 | 899 | 1.9 | Disagreed |
| Occupation or profession of Nigerians on X influence their engagement with trending topics. | 111 | 103 | 55 | 54 | 917 | 3.0 | Agreed |



The data elucidated how the demographic characteristics of Nigerian X users influence their engagement with trending topics. Here, the demographic attributes of Nigerian X users have been substantiated as a pivotal factor in shaping their interaction with trending discussions. One of the demographic features identified in the study is age. With a mean score of (3.1), it was revealed that age significantly affects the nature of trending topics that Nigerian X users engage with. The content consumed by a Gen Z individual on X markedly differs from that which a septuagenarian would engage with on the platform. In a similar vein, state of origin or ethnic nationality was delineated to ascertain whether Nigerian X users are more influenced by their geographical background or residence regarding the content they consume. With a mean score of (3.2), the study determined that a majority of Nigerian X users are more inclined to engage with trending issues pertinent to their immediate region.

Table 4: How often does trends on X lead to opinion formation by users

| Items | SA | A | D | SD | Total | Mean | Decision |
|---|-----|-----|----|----|-------|------|----------|
| Most popular opinions on social issues are often formed from trends by Nigerian X users | 157 | 111 | 26 | 29 | 1042 | 3.2 | Agreed |
| Most popular opinions on political issues are often formed from trends by Nigerian X users | 155 | 98 | 45 | 25 | 1029 | 3.2 | Agreed |
| Most prevalent opinion on economic matters are frequently shaped by trends among Nigerian X users. | 133 | 84 | 61 | 45 | 951 | 3.0 | Agreed |
| Most prevalent perceptions regarding health issues are frequently shaped by prevailing trends among Nigerian X users. | 99 | 157 | 55 | 12 | 989 | 3.1 | Agreed |
| Popular culture and lifestyles in Nigeria are frequently shaped by the prevailing trends among Nigerian X users. | 162 | 88 | 19 | 55 | 1005 | 3.1 | Agreed |

The analysis elucidated the frequency with which trends on X contribute to the formation of opinions among users. These trends, categorized in Table 4, encompass political, social, economic, entertainment, lifestyle, social justice movements, and health issues. The study illuminated the extent to which these trends on X influence the opinions formed by users in Nigeria. It was determined that the most prevalent opinions on social issues are frequently shaped by trends among Nigerian X users, with a mean score of 3.2. Similarly, the investigation revealed that popular opinions concerning political matters are also predominantly influenced by trends among Nigerian X users, again achieving a mean score of 3.2.

In parallel, the study assessed whether the predominant opinions on economic issues are regularly molded by trends within the Nigerian X user community. With a mean score of 3.0, the findings affirm that prevailing opinions on economic matters are indeed shaped by trends among Nigerian X users. Furthermore, the research examined whether the most widespread perceptions regarding health issues are frequently influenced by prevailing trends among Nigerian X users, recording a mean score of 3.1, thereby confirming that these perceptions are significantly shaped by such trends. Lastly, the study investigated whether popular culture and lifestyles in Nigeria are consistently influenced by the prevailing trends among Nigerian X users. With a mean score of 3.1, the study corroborated that popular culture and lifestyles in Nigeria are indeed shaped by the current trends among Nigerian X users.

Thematic Presentation of Qualitative Data On trends users are often exposed to:

Theme 1: Politics and governance

Blogger

Politicians and citizens alike use X to push agendas, expose scandals, and even call for reforms. It's a real-time



political barometer. In the realm of elections, X serves as a platform where candidates showcase their promises and engage with voters. For instance, during the 2023 presidential election, candidates utilized X to broadcast their campaign rallies, share their manifestos, and interact with the electorate through live Q&A sessions. This dynamic interaction not only informed voters but also allowed for real-time feedback on pressing issues (Personal Interview, Frank Ade, an X blogger).

“X has become a battleground for political narratives. During elections or major government decisions, like the removal of fuel subsidy or appointments of public officials, political hashtags trend widely.”

Social Media Influencer:

Politics trends a lot on X, especially during election seasons, debates, or controversial government actions. For instance, during the recent elections in Nigeria, hashtags like #NigeriaDecides2023 or #TinubuInauguration trended massively on social media platforms. These hashtags not only caught the attention of politicians but also resonated with everyday users, sparking discussions and debates across the online community.

“I personally leverage my platform to engage young people on voter education and civic rights, aiming to empower them with knowledge and encourage active participation in the political process (Personal Interview, Raymond Divine, An X influencer and Content Creator).”

Netizen

“I always go to X when there's a political crisis because the app provides me with updates quicker than traditional sources like newspapers or TV. For instance, during the recent elections, I diligently followed hashtags such as #NigeriaDecides2023 on social media platforms. This allowed me to stay informed in real-time as people shared live updates from various polling units across the country (Personal Interview, Henry David, An X user).”

Theme 2: Entertainment and celebrity news

X Bloggers

Entertainment is undoubtedly a dominant and ever-present force on X in Nigeria. It serves as a vibrant platform where a myriad of activities and events unfold, captivating the attention of a diverse audience. “Whether it's the celebration of celebrity birthdays, the much-anticipated release of music videos, or the exhilarating drama of reality shows like Big Brother Naija, the engagement and enthusiasm of the people know no bounds.”

Social Media Influencers

Entertainment is the heartbeat of X in Nigeria. Whenever a new song drops or there's celebrity drama, it immediately trends. For instance, when Davido released his album or when there was a feud between artists, hashtags like #Timeless or #WizkidVsDavido took over. X is the go-to space for fans to engage, argue, support, or cancel celebrities. “I gained most of my following from live-tweeting reality shows like Big Brother Naija. Hashtags like #BBNaijaAllStars or #TeamMercyEke trend daily during the show's run. Fans use X to campaign, vote, and discuss housemates.”

Netizen

I'm on X mostly for entertainment. When a celebrity gets into drama or drops a song, it's all over my timeline. I enjoyed trends like #BBNaija or when Burna Boy won his Grammy. Being on X primarily for entertainment means that my feed is often filled with updates about celebrities, whether it's about their latest controversies or new music releases. “One particular trend that caught my attention was #BBNaija, a popular reality TV show that captivated audiences with its drama and unexpected twists. Watching the contestants navigate challenges and form alliances kept me engaged and eager to see how the competition unfolded.”



Theme 3: Public Health Issues**Blogger**

X played a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent health concerns like Lassa Fever. It became a frontline tool for health communication. I used my blog and X account to share verified updates from the NCDC and WHO, and I joined conversations through hashtags like #COVID19Nigeria and #StaySafe. People asked real-time questions about symptoms, testing, and vaccinations. “The platform helped counter misinformation and promoted health-conscious behavior, especially among the youth (Personal Interview, Frank Ade, An X blogger and Content Creator).”

Social Media Influencer

During the challenging times of COVID-19 and the Lassa Fever outbreak, I couldn't help but notice the pivotal role that X played in spreading crucial awareness. Various health agencies took to social media platforms to disseminate essential guidelines to the public. For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO) regularly updated its website with detailed information on preventive measures and safety protocols. “Influencers like myself collaborated with these agencies to amplify the reach of verified information. By sharing informative posts and engaging with our followers, we contributed to combating the spread of misinformation.”

Netizen

This platform not only kept me informed about the rising case numbers but also provided crucial updates on new regulations and guidelines. For instance, it detailed the importance of social distancing, wearing masks, and practicing good hygiene to curb the spread of the virus. Moreover, X was instrumental in directing me to vaccination centers and outlining the eligibility criteria for receiving the vaccine. This was particularly helpful as it ensured that I stayed up to date with the evolving vaccination rollout plan (Personal Interview, Henry David, An X user).

“During the COVID lockdown, I heavily relied on X, a reliable source of information, for updates.”

Theme 4: Economy Issues**Blogger**

Economic issues trend frequently on X in Nigeria, especially during moments of financial instability. When the fuel subsidy was removed or inflation spiked, hashtags like #FuelSubsidyRemoval, #NairaDevaluation, and #HardshipInNigeria dominated discussions. “X reflects real economic pressure points and serves as a digital space where citizens hold policymakers accountable.”

Social Media Influencer

Economic issues often come to the forefront during times of crisis, such as when major events like the removal of fuel subsidies or the devaluation of the naira occur. This results in the emergence of popular hashtags like #NairaToDollar or #FuelSubsidy that dominate social media conversations. People express their frustrations, share relatable memes, and even exchange survival tips in response to these economic challenges. “It is a vivid portrayal of how deeply intertwined economic policies are with the fabric of daily life, impacting individuals in various ways. For instance, during the fuel subsidy removal, citizens may experience a surge in transportation costs, affecting their daily commute and overall budget.”

Netizens

The economy is a big topic on X because everyone is feeling the heat. When fuel prices went up after the subsidy removal, I saw hashtags like #SubsidyIsGone and #CostOfLiving trending. People were posting receipts, transport fare hikes, and even the price of garri. For me,



“X is where I share my frustration and learn how others are coping. It's also where we pressure the government to explain their policies (Personal Interview, Henry David, An X user).”

Theme 5: Social Justice Movement

Bloggers

Trends like #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance didn't just emerge, they exploded on X. It gave the youth a voice to demand accountability. The platform amplified real-time reports of police brutality, mobilized protests, and even influenced global media coverage. It shows the power of digital activism. These hashtags didn't simply appear; they gained massive traction and became powerful tools for advocating change.

“The emergence of hashtags such as #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance on social media platforms like X marked a significant turning point in the way the youth engaged with pressing social issues.”

Social Media Influencer

X is the birthplace of modern activism in Nigeria. The #EndSARS movement proved how powerful the platform is for mobilizing people and holding authorities accountable. “I was part of the influencers who used our platforms to amplify the voices of victims of police brutality. The hashtag #EndSARS went global because of how we consistently pushed it on X.”

Netizen

The #EndSARS protest in Nigeria marked a significant turning point for me as I witnessed the immense influence of X firsthand. It was a moment that brought together the voices and actions of young people from all corners of the country. “Through platforms like X, we were able to amplify our message and shed light on the rampant police brutality that plagued our communities. Sharing videos and personal accounts of abuse not only raised awareness but also sparked a wave of solidarity and determination among us.”

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question 1: Why do Nigerian X users identify with certain trends over others?

The analysis of the reasons behind why Nigerian X (formerly Twitter) users gravitate toward certain trends over others reveals a multi-dimensional and nuanced reality shaped by individual interests, social influences, emotional resonance, and broader socio-political contexts.

A key factor that emerged from the study is the personal relevance or interest that certain trends hold for individual users. With a mean score of 3.0, many respondents indicated that they engage with trends that directly reflect their professional or personal goals. Interviewees, such as bloggers and influencers, emphasized that alignment with their niche, whether it be finance, wellness, or technology, compels them to participate in trends like #NairaFall or #MentalHealthMatters. This finding aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that individuals actively select media that meet their specific needs (Ruggiero, 2000). Scholars such as Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) also highlight that relevance-based engagement plays a critical role in how users derive value from social media content.

Secondly, the influence of peers and public figures was also a prominent reason, scoring a mean of 3.0 in the questionnaire. Respondents indicated that when trends are amplified by celebrities, influencers, or respected voices, they are more likely to participate. This social influence dynamic was echoed in the interview data, with users referencing figures like Tunde Ednut, Bovi, Burna Boy, and Tiwa Savage as trendsetters. The social validation theory and Bandura's (2001) Social Learning Theory explain this phenomenon, where individuals model their behavior after influential others in their social environment. A recent study by Nwabueze and Okorie (2022) similarly found that celebrity endorsements significantly shape trend participation among Nigerian youth.

Another notable reason for trend identification is the entertainment value associated with the content. This factor



recorded a mean score of 3.2, showing a relatively stronger influence. Interview responses underscored the centrality of entertainment in Nigerian digital culture. Trends related to reality shows (#BBNaija), celebrity drama (#WizkidVsDavido), and viral skits provide users with amusement, escape, and communal bonding. As noted by Adekunle (2021), entertainment-based trends on Nigerian social media serve as emotional buffers in a stressful socio-economic landscape. Users reported being drawn to such content because it offered joy and distraction, consistent with findings by Obono and Madu (2021), who argue that entertainment trends often dominate due to their emotional and social appeal.

Closely related is the emotional connection users form with specific trends, which received a mean score of 3.1. Interviewees recounted how hashtags like #JusticeForMohbad and #RIPDeborah resonated with their personal feelings of grief, anger, or solidarity. These emotional drivers enhance the perceived authenticity of online discourse and often galvanize mass participation. Such trends trigger affective responses that motivate users to express empathy, share stories, and seek justice. This finding is supported by research from Iwokwagh and Edewor (2022), who argue that emotionally charged content fosters higher engagement due to its ability to connect with collective identities and shared trauma.

Additionally, political and social relevance emerged as a significant motivator, recording a mean of 3.0. Respondents and interviewees alike indicated that trends addressing issues such as police brutality (#EndSARS), elections (#Election2023), and policy decisions (#FuelSubsidyRemoval) command attention because they reflect lived realities and offer platforms for civic engagement. Nigerian users increasingly see X as a democratic space for advocacy and accountability, a finding corroborated by scholars like Ojebuyi and Salawu (2020), who noted that Twitter plays a pivotal role in digital activism in Nigeria. This aligns with Castells' (2012) theory of networked movements, which emphasizes the power of social media in catalyzing socio-political change.

Finally, the frequency and visibility of content on users' timelines was identified as the most influential factor with a mean score of 3.4. Participants consistently noted that the more a trend appears, through reposts, comments, and algorithmic amplification, the more likely they are to engage with it. Visibility thus acts as a form of passive persuasion, nudging users toward dominant conversations. Interviewees expressed that recurring exposure, even outside their areas of interest, often draws them into trending discussions. This supports the "availability heuristic" in psychology (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), where frequent exposure increases perceived importance. Empirical studies by Akinfeleye and Okoye (2022) also affirm that algorithmic exposure on social platforms significantly shapes trend uptake among Nigerian users.

Research Question 2: How often do trends on X lead to opinion formation by users?

The findings from this research reveal a significant link between trends on X (formerly Twitter) and the formation of opinions among Nigerian users across various thematic domains, including social issues, political matters, economic developments, health-related concerns, and popular culture or lifestyle. The quantitative data derived from the questionnaire highlights that opinion formation on X is frequent and robust, with users across different demographics consistently influenced by trending narratives.

The quantitative analysis showcased that the most dominant opinions on social and political issues are shaped to a great extent by trends on X, each recording a mean score of 3.2. Economic and health-related trends followed closely, with mean scores of 3.0 and 3.1 respectively, while lifestyle and popular culture trends similarly influenced user opinion with a mean of 3.1. These figures, all hovering around the midpoint of the Likert scale (with 5 indicating strong agreement), underscore the regularity and influence of X trends in shaping public consciousness in Nigeria.

The interview data further substantiate these quantitative insights. For instance, under Theme 1: Social Issues, participants such as bloggers and influencers consistently referenced the pivotal role of hashtags like #EndSARS, #JusticeForMohbad, and #ArewaMeToo in galvanizing public sentiment. These hashtags, often tied to emotive or justice-driven causes, created collective opinion clusters where users not only discussed but aligned their views with the prevailing narratives. This aligns with the arguments of scholars like Olanrewaju (2023), who assert that digital activism, particularly through trend-driven hashtags, is instrumental in shaping civic awareness and mobilizing social change in Africa.



Similarly, under Theme 2: Political Issues, the data reveal that users frequently derive their political perceptions from trending discussions on X. Hashtags such as #NigeriaDecides and #OccupyNigeria became arenas for public discourse, challenging official narratives and prompting citizens to form strong political opinions. Influencers observed rapid shifts in user sentiment during election periods, especially when scandals or new revelations gained traction online. This phenomenon echoes the findings of Okon and Bassey (2022), who argue that microblogging platforms are increasingly becoming "digital public squares" where political ideologies are debated and adopted by the populace.

The economic dimension, captured under Theme 3: Economic Matters, demonstrated how critical events like the removal of fuel subsidies and currency devaluation quickly dominate X trends, creating polarized but impactful economic discourses. Users—both financially literate and otherwise engage deeply with these issues, forming perspectives through collective dialogues facilitated by hashtags such as #SubsidyPain and #NairaCrash. This is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Eze and Adebayo (2022), who posit that social media platforms serve as influential tools in democratizing economic discussions, making them accessible and emotionally resonant to broader audiences.

In Theme 4: Health Issues, user narratives reinforced the idea that trending health conversations, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, played a crucial role in shaping opinions on vaccines, prevention strategies, and government health policies. Bloggers and netizens recalled how trending tweets not only spread awareness but also misinformation, influencing both individual behaviors and communal beliefs. This mirrors the findings of Iwuoha et al. (2023), who highlight the dual role of social media in health communication, balancing between reliable information dissemination and susceptibility to misinformation.

Under Theme 5: Popular Culture and Lifestyle, the influence of X trends was evident in how users form their views on fashion, slang, dance, and social preferences. Hashtags like #SapaLifestyle and the concept of the 'soft life' became cultural markers, shaping what is perceived as fashionable, desirable, or socially acceptable. Influencers and netizens agreed that most lifestyle decisions are indirectly guided by what gains traction online. This aligns with Adesina (2023), who argues that in a digitally connected society like Nigeria's, social media significantly affects youth identity construction and lifestyle choices.

In synthesizing these themes, it becomes clear that trends on X have a profound, recurring influence on opinion formation among users. The platform's unique design prioritizing brevity, virality, and real-time engagement facilitates the rapid diffusion of ideas, which users internalize and adopt in forming views. As Lim (2022) noted, the performative and participatory nature of platforms like X allows for the quick crystallization of public opinion, especially in environments where traditional media may be slow or biased.

Research Question 3: How do influencers on X give direction on public opinion formation amongst X users?

The analysis of the questionnaire and interview data reveals that influencers on X play a significant role in shaping public opinion among their followers. X, a prominent social media platform, has become a critical space where public opinion is formed, particularly in the context of its acquisition by Elon Musk, which has heightened its visibility. The study examined how influencers guide the direction of public discourse, focusing on their ability to determine the visibility of topics, influence the interpretation of those topics, act as thought leaders, and engage followers to steer public opinion.

A central finding of the research is that influencers significantly impact which topics gain visibility. With a mean score of 3.2, the study revealed that influencers often have the power to initiate or amplify trends. Bloggers, social media influencers, and netizens highlighted the role of influencers in determining which issues trend on the platform. As one blogger noted, "Most of the biggest trends on X in Nigeria start or blow up because an influencer tweeted about them." This aligns with scholarly work such as that of Tufekci (2014), who emphasized that influencers steer conversations and determine the prominence of topics through their large following. Similarly, Frigeri, Gan, and Klein (2014) highlighted how influencers control the spread of information, making them key players in shaping the public agenda.

The study also found that influencers shape the interpretation of topics by framing them in specific ways, with a



mean score of 3.3. Influencers do not merely present information but actively construct narratives through their language, tone, and emotional framing. This process significantly influences how their followers perceive and respond to issues. One blogger explained, "Influencers wield a powerful tool known as framing, which involves carefully choosing how they phrase or emotionally present an issue to the public." This framing effect resonates with Entman (1993), who argued that the way issues are presented can affect their interpretation. Iyengar (1991) further argued that the tone and language used to communicate a topic can shape public responses, whether through raising awareness or mobilizing action, as seen in movements like #EndSARS and #NairaCrisis.

Another significant finding is that influencers are increasingly viewed as thought leaders. The research revealed that followers not only turn to influencers for entertainment but also for insights on political, social, and economic issues. Influencers such as Ogbeni Dipo and Aisha Yesufu were identified by netizens as pivotal figures whose opinions guide public discourse. One influencer stated, "People don't just follow me for entertainment—they look to me for clarity on national issues." This mirrors the findings of Labrecque et al. (2013), who described influencers as emerging experts whose content and analysis shape the way their followers think about issues. Furthermore, Liu et al. (2015) pointed out that influencers often become trusted figures whose analysis helps followers navigate complex issues and make informed decisions.

The study also highlighted the role of engagement in shaping public opinion. Influencers who actively engage with their followers through replies, polls, and retweets create a dynamic conversation that encourages participation and deepens the impact of their posts. One blogger remarked, "Engagement is the soul of influence on X," noting that influencers who interact with their audience shape public opinion more effectively. This finding is consistent with Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) work, which highlighted the role of opinion leaders in shaping public attitudes through interpersonal communication. These opinion leaders however, need to be mindful and skillfully ensure effectiveness of their influence. In the views of (Dike 2025), key challenges such as misinformation control, delayed response time, lack of crisis communication training, inconsistent communication strategies, public skepticism, and regulatory constraints hinder communication effectiveness. Moreover, the study found that the engagement between influencers and their followers often leads to shifts in perspective, as one netizen stated, "Sometimes I change my mind after seeing how others reply to an influencer's post or poll." This interactive engagement process mirrors Hodkinson's (2017) argument that influencers, through dialogue and feedback, create spaces for public opinion to evolve and be influenced by a variety of perspectives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of social media trends on agenda-setting and public opinion formation in Port Harcourt, focusing specifically on the X platform (formerly Twitter). Through a comprehensive analysis combining quantitative survey data from 323 respondents and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, the research provided empirical evidence of X's significant role in shaping public discourse in Nigeria's socio-political landscape.

The findings conclusively demonstrated that X has emerged as a powerful platform for agenda-setting in Port Harcourt, with social justice movements, particularly #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance, leading as the most prominent trends (mean = 3.6). This underscores the platform's evolution from a mere communication tool to a critical space for civic engagement and social activism. The study revealed that Nigerian X users' engagement with trends is multifaceted, driven by algorithmic visibility (mean = 3.4), entertainment value (mean = 3.2), emotional connections (mean = 3.1), and personal relevance (mean = 3.0). This multi-dimensional engagement pattern reflects the complexity of digital behavior in contemporary Nigerian society, where users simultaneously seek information, entertainment, emotional resonance, and social validation.

A significant contribution of this research is the empirical validation of X trends' frequent and substantial influence on opinion formation across diverse thematic domains. The study established that trends on X consistently shape opinions on social issues (mean = 3.2), political matters (mean = 3.2), health concerns (mean = 3.1), economic policies (mean = 3.0), and popular culture (mean = 3.1). This pattern demonstrates that X has transcended its original function as a microblogging platform to become a comprehensive opinion-making apparatus that influences how Port Harcourt residents perceive and respond to issues affecting their daily lives.



The platform's ability to rapidly disseminate information and facilitate collective sense-making has fundamentally altered the dynamics of public discourse in the city.

The role of influencers emerged as particularly critical in the agenda-setting process. The study found that influencers function as digital gatekeepers who determine topic visibility (mean = 3.2), frame public discourse through strategic narrative construction (mean = 3.3), serve as thought leaders on complex issues, and actively engage followers to shape collective opinions. This finding extends the traditional Agenda-Setting Theory by demonstrating how power has shifted from institutional media to individual digital actors who command large followings. Influencers like Ogeni Dipo, Aisha Yesufu, and various entertainment figures have become authoritative voices whose endorsements can elevate issues to national prominence or diminish their salience through neglect.

However, the study also identified significant challenges that temper optimism about X's democratic potential. The rapid spread of misinformation, the formation of echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs, and the limited translation of online engagement into sustained offline political action represent critical concerns. The algorithmic architecture of X, which prioritizes engagement over accuracy, can amplify sensational or divisive content while marginalizing nuanced perspectives. Additionally, the concentration of influence in the hands of a relatively small number of digital elites raises questions about the democratization narrative often associated with social media platforms.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that X has become a powerful force in agenda-setting and public opinion formation in Port Harcourt, fundamentally reshaping how residents engage with political, social, economic, and cultural issues. While the platform offers unprecedented opportunities for democratic participation and civic engagement, it also presents challenges related to information quality, polarization, and equitable access. As Nigeria's digital landscape continues evolving, understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly critical for fostering informed, engaged, and resilient public discourse. The insights from this research provide a foundation for developing strategies that maximize social media's constructive potential while mitigating its risks, ultimately contributing to stronger democratic institutions and more vibrant civic life in Port Harcourt and Nigeria more broadly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The study recommends that influencers should promote topics resonating with followers' experiences while fostering constructive discussions. They should focus on societal needs like political reform or social justice, being sensitive to the emotional tone. Influencers can guide public discourse toward informed, empathetic engagement. They should address divisive topics with balanced viewpoints, avoiding polarizing narratives and encouraging critical evaluation of content.
2. The study recommends that X should collaborate with fact-checking organizations to ensure the accurate presentation of trending topics. X should improve discourse quality by providing tools for users to access multiple perspectives on trending issues. Public opinion analysts should focus on influencers' framing techniques and use this data to promote transparency in trend communication.
3. The study recommends that they should promote positive societal issues, encourage critical thinking, and empower users to take action. Influencers can support marginalized groups, political reform, and transparency in governance. Engaging with followers can provide valuable feedback on public opinion.

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