



Research article

Predictors of audience engagement among Nigerian journalists

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Abstract

This paper examined the factors that predicted audience engagement in Nigeria. We surveyed 308 Nigerian journalists. Using the questionnaire as our research instrument, data gathered were analysed using frequency and percentage as well as linear and multiple regression analyses. The study was grounded in Bourdieu's field theory. The results indicated a moderate relationship between the attitude of Nigerian journalists and audience engagement while a high correlation between Nigerian journalists' role conception and audience engagement on social media was observed. The three hypotheses (the degree to which journalists' attitude; role conception; and perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality predicted audience engagement was significant) raised in the study were supported by our findings. Implications of this study were discussed in light of the objective of audience engagement.

Keywords: Nigeria, journalists; audience engagement, perceived audience rationality; role conception.

Introduction

Audience engagement relates generally to the interactions between the audience and journalists (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2018). Interaction can be either offline or online. Prior to the digital era, journalists' interaction with the audience was mainly offline made possible through a letter to the editor or ombudsman hired by the news media to interface with the public as well as events organised by a news medium like open houses and in-person contacts (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Soffer & Gordon, 2017). However, the advent of digital technologies, especially, social media provides newsrooms with new means of engaging with the audience. In interacting with the audience in the digital era, journalists employ a range of apparatuses and avenues to engage with audiences, such as online tests, comment sections, discussion fora, social networks, and audience analytics (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson & Lewis, 2018; Usher, 2016). Assman and

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Diakopoulos (2017) explain that audience engagement is not an appendage to traditional journalism; rather, it alters journalism's contributions to public dialogue, the planned goals of media outlets, as well as how journalists describe their job and the image of the profession.

There is an acknowledgement that the audience can contribute meaningfully to the newsmaking process. This has resulted in various newsrooms embracing audience interaction as a mechanism for building loyal readership, enhancing a medium's trustworthiness, and guaranteeing the economic survival of media outfit (Curry & Stroud, 2021; Nelson, 2019; Mustafa & Adnan, 2017; Meier, Kraus & Michaeler, 2018; Belair-Gagnon, Nelson & Lewis, 2018). Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis' (2018) study assessed how two American public broadcasters engage with the audience. Accordingly, numerous media houses are investing in audience engagement efforts. For instance, in the United States, many media outfits are employing engagement editors (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Powers, 2015). Though numerous media houses consider audience engagement important, the integration of the audience in the process of making news is structured by organisational, business, and cultural factors (Lawrence, Radcliffe & Schmidt, 2018). Beyond these factors, research has shown that journalists differ in the way they engage with the audience. For instance, a study in the U.S. by Holton, Lewis, and Coddington (2016) showed that the role conception of journalists determined their disposition to audience engagement. Again, the engagement of journalists with the audience is also affected by the former's attitude to engagement. Extant literature has demonstrated that journalists are hesitant to interact with the audience due to uncivil comments online (Santana, 2011; Singer, 2011). For instance, Santana investigated journalists in the largest U.S. newspapers on their disposition to audience comments and found that they held a dim view of online reader comments. This was reflected in their reluctance to engage with the audience. Neilson (2016) argues that journalists in New Zealand have to walk through the expectations of owners, contemporaries, and audiences when making a determination on the degree to which they may or may not engage. This is because the task of engaging with the audience adds additional workload to journalists, who are already overstretched with a shrinking workforce. Other respondents were compelled to interact with the audience owing to the organisational policy in which they work. While these studies have been conducted in the West with advanced democracies, there is a paucity of literature on factors that predict audience engagement among journalists in Nigeria. Given the central role of audience engagement in various newsrooms around the globe, it is important to examine factors that predict audience engagement. Such an inquiry is worthwhile as it seeks to provide useful insight into the variable that enables or inhibit engagement and by extension, facilitates the realisation of the objective of audience engagement in the newsrooms. The current research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on journalists' engagement with the audience in the context of the developing world with a young democratic experience. In what follows, we discuss the concept of audience engagement, then we examine factors affecting audience engagement. We outline the methodology, present the data and discuss the findings of the study.

Field Theory

This study is anchored on the field theory by Pierre Bourdieu. Field theory aims to understand the journalistic field by examining the relations between agents in the field and relationships with other fields (2004). Journalism practitioners always contest the "transformation or preservation of their field" (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 40-41). Bourdieu (2005, p. 30) conceives a field as:

a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the position that they will take with respect to the field, these position-takings are either conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field.

Bourdieu argues that structural transformations in a social field are expected to take place once the inner force for change is strengthened by "pressure from neighbouring fields" (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 6). Scholars contend that the momentous alterations in the balance of power in the journalism domain have been triggered by disruptive technologies (Vos et al., 2011; Singer, 2010). The rising focus of the news media on audience engagement is precipitated by the increased role of the audience in the newsmaking process as well as the economic benefits such engagement holds for the media. From the peripheral role audiences played in the past by way of letters-to-the-editor, they have amassed much capital in the form of audience metrics, which are described as the "next media regime" (Nelson, 2019, p. 5). Within several domains, incumbents struggle to transform or preserve their field (Bourdieu, 1998), and this is witnessed in the journalism profession as digitally-enabled practices are usually perceived with a doubtful gaze (Tandoc & Foo, 2018).

Bourdieu (2005) explains that social fields set their own internal rules of organisation. Thus, social agents who make an entry into the field must operate by the independent dictates of the game. Within the field of journalism, the kind of storytelling and newsgathering shape the rules of the journalistic game. However, this independence is, in itself, relational and should be thought of as dependent on the players' place with regard to a field's 'heteronomous' and 'autonomous' poles. These poles, it should be noted, are made up of the economic and political (heteronomous) power outside a field and the cultural (autonomous) power peculiar to a field (Compton & Benedetti 2010). The autonomy of the journalistic field is being eroded due to economic dependence and political restrictions affecting cultural production (Benson, 1998). Bourdieu (2005, p. 43) avers that "[T]o understand what is happening in the journalistic field.... one has to understand the degree of autonomy of the field and, within the field, the degree of autonomy of the publication that a journalist writes for." To put it differently, it should be understood the degree to which influences outside the social fields such as politics and economy encroach on the journalistic field. This theory makes for the assessment of the effect of fresh participants in a social field.

Field theory consists of numerous ideas, with *field*, *forms of capital*, *habitus* and *doxa* the most recognisable ones. Fields enable us to spatially plot actors' societal locations and the qualified forces at work between them and are determined through the forms of capital they possess (Bourdieu, 1993). These allow the agency and constitute diverse tangible and intangible possessions – *economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital* (see Bourdieu, 1986). The idea of *habitus* links the individual-level (agency) and the societal-level (structure), by harnessing taken on views and attitudes that people obtain via their socialisation and accumulated capital. Habitus is "the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations," that represents "the systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring practices and representations" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72).

Habitus is understood as an accumulation of experiences in the field that produce a profound appreciation of the "journalistic game" (Willig, 2013, p. 8). The habitus is so entrenched that people usually misconstrue the feel of the game as natural when it is, in reality, structured by culture. Professionals appear to form a predilection of what the expectations of the field are as they grow in their careers. As journalists garner more experience, the more skilled journalists appear to be "incorporating previous experiences" as a context of observations, understandings, and engagements that are deployed in each period and enable the attainment of largely varied jobs (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus demonstrates the extent to which journalists have a guideline they adopt; immediately they master the script, they possess the potential to extemporise on reportorial judgements in a second. It is a product of both primary socialisation (by means of journalism education) and secondary socialisation (via training while on the job) (Neveu, 2007).

Apart from the habitus, Bourdieu talks about the doxa. Defined as the "universe of tacit presuppositions that we accept as the natives of a certain society" (Bourdieu, 2005, p.37), doxa helps to create an internal homogeneity within the field (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017). In the field of journalism, the doxa may be thought of as the "rules of the game" (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017, p.13). Journalism practitioners always struggle for the "transformation or preservation of their field" (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 40-41). Journalists, for instance, strive towards the maintenance of traditional news values and practices, that comprise the journalistic doxa (Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012, p. 852). Field theory offers a useful lens through which one can interrogate the transformation in journalism practice, in which there seems to be an increased focus on audience engagement.

Approaching Engagement in Journalism

Engagement is an interdisciplinary term used in marketing communication, advertising, and journalism, with its conceptual approaches differing markedly from one another (Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018). Reputed as a broad term, Corner (2017) suggests that engagement can be *with* the media or *through* the media, that is, additional engagement with something outside the media. The present research is focused on engagement *with* the media as it aims at investigating predictors of audience engagement among Nigerian journalists. Within journalism practice, engagement is frequently deployed by journalists to describe and maintain boundaries in their routines, employing social networks, online readers' comment sections, and other types of digitally-enabled communication (Neilson, 2016). For instance, Neilson's (2016) study explored how the notion of interaction is deployed by journalists to construct their duties in digitally facilitated work. The study demonstrated that the push towards journalists' engagement with the audience is passed down from superiors and is witnessed by comparing with rivals and colleagues. The study suggests that discourses of engagement offer an avenue for reporters, associations, and the news media to realise the right roles, strategies, and the apportionment of capital.

Being a share of the larger discourse around journalism, engagement is discussed alongside notions such as participatory, conversational, and reciprocal journalism (Lawrence, Radcliffe, & Schmidt, 2018; Lewis, Holton & Coddington, 2014; Goode, 2009; Domingo et al., 2008). The incorporation of social networks into the news media has altered the dynamics of the interaction between gatekeepers and the audience (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Nelson (2019) opines that audience engagement is seen as a panacea that can salvage the journalism profession from both economic woes and irrelevance. According to Nelson (2019), it is the contention of the proponents

of audience engagement that journalists should recognize and interact with the audience to have a clearer understanding of them and satisfy their information needs. This, they suggest, will result in the production of more cooperative news drawn from an array of perspectives, which will, in turn, lead audiences to consider the news credible, thereby deserving of their loyalty (Nelson, 2019). However, there is a wide gap between what proponents of audience engagement envision and what is obtainable in practice. For instance, a study of news outlets across the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria by Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt (2018) found that few media outlets are using engagement as a means of including users in producing news, while the majority of the media outfits largely restricted users' engagement to reaction and response to medium's content.

Engagement is assuming a central role in the digital journalism environment. Apart from being fundamental to the monetary survival of the media and promoters, reporters use engagement to facilitate political debate. It is no surprise that Nelson and Webster (2016) likened audience analytics to currencies that flow within the media marketplace. In digital journalism, the audience is thought of as an economic and symbolic capital (Tandoc, 2014). Due to social media features such as easy entree to, virtual activities, virtual fora, and up-to-date statistics, social media engagement is regarded as a monetary power (Johnson & Hyysala, 2012). In light of the above, different newsrooms are encouraging journalists to engage with the audience. Beyond the economic imperatives of engagement, it is a step towards ensuring the news-making process is more transparent by permitting audiences to gain an understanding of the process of making news to improve trust and credibility (Hellmueller, Vos & Poepsel, 2013). In the United States, Zahay, Jensen, Xia, and Robinson (2020) interrogated how contemporary media workers conceive their role in the social order and the manner such understanding plays out in the task of building trust with their audiences, particularly for those who do their job online. The study found a growing journalistic routine where public trust stemmed from steady co-operative exchanges and the obligation to operate from within the community instead of maintaining distance from it. In the new audience engagement paradigm, journalists work with communities as "discussion facilitators, conversation shapers, community builders, and public partners" (Zahay, Jensen, Xia & Robinson, 2020, p. 15).

Though Allan Rusbridger (2009) argues that digitized journalism would result in the mutualisation of journalism by enabling audiences to be part of the news-making process, journalists' engagement with the audience has been met with some challenges. In a study that cut across several states, including the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Israel, etc. on audience engagement, journalists were found to prefer to be in charge of audience engagement within clearly defined boundaries, defining audience as dynamic recipients who offer original item from real-time proceedings or respond to the stories manufactured by reporters (Hermida, 2011). Close to a decade after Hermida's (2011) study, journalists' engagement with the audience has continued to attract scholarly attention. Xia, Robinson, Zaha, and Freelon (2020) investigated how political journalists interact with the audience on social networks in the U. S. The result of the study indicated that though journalists are assuming new forms of functions in the digital environment in the title of engagement, the interaction is not usually with the audience but with the content. The level of engagement is contingent on the platform and its affordance. In a related study, Bruns and Nuernbegk (2019) examined how journalists who cover politics and their

audiences engaged on Twitter in Germany and Australia and how the differing status of Twitter in their respective nation's media landscape is evidenced in goings-on and system exchanges. Using tweets by and aimed at political reporters covering the respective national assemblies during 2017, the research demonstrated that Twitter has been integrated into the domain of political reporting in Australia more widely than in Germany. The study attributed this to media use and news consumption patterns in each country: The German media landscape is dominated by traditional media with older journalists, while in Australia; the pressure of economic survival has forced its journalists to embrace the social media logic of audience engagement largely driven by younger journalists.

Factors affecting journalists' audience engagement

Research has found that several factors affect journalists' audience engagement. Some of these factors include how journalists conceive their role, journalists' attitudes towards audience engagement, their perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality.

Perceived audience rationality

Extant literature holds the view that closer exchanges between journalists and audiences would potentially result in improved mutual trust and understanding, as well as mutual benefit sharing and the formation of the community (Borger, van Hoof & Sanders, 2013; Lewis, Holton, & Coddington 2014). Such optimistic thinking is currently being reassessed in light of dangerous dynamics online, particularly online harassment of journalists (Lewis, Zamith, & Coddington, 2020). In line with the notion of reciprocity in journalism, if a journalist is harassed online by the audience, it is believed that he or she may not be willing to make himself or herself accessible on such a platform (Coddington, Lewis & Holton, 2018). Wahl-Jorgensen (2002, p. 192) states that there is an inclination among journalists dealing with "cranks," "nut cases" and "crazy bastards." In questioning the rationality of the audience, journalists prefer to close the door to their involvement in the newsmaking process against them (Nelson, 2018). A study of journalists in the U. S. by Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020) found that online harassment negatively predicted perceived audience rationality. Related to the above, journalists' perceived audience rationality is a precursor to perceived audience interaction quality. When journalists question the rationality of the audience, it affects how much they are willing to engage with them.

Perceived audience interaction quality

As Lawrence Radcliffe and Schmidt (2018) observe, there seems to be a noticeable departure from the idea that the work of the journalist is complete immediately after a news story is published. At a few news media outfits, there is a reasonable willingness to accommodate an increased participatory form of journalistic work. Despite the facilitation of interaction between journalists and audiences through social media, Nelson (2018) suggests that those exchanges have largely been complex and sometimes unprofitable, given the increasing spate of harassment and hostility expressed online. Besides the uncivil behaviour of the audience online, the nature and structure of engagement by any media outlet are determined by their organisational ideology (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson & Lewis, 2018). Belair-Gagnon and her colleagues found that the quality and extent of engagement with the audience were dependent on whether the medium depends on access gained through payment or makes its content freely available. Similarly, methods of

audience engagement differed between legacy news media and digital start-ups with the latter more disposed to the notion of the audience as co-participants in the production of news (Lawrence, Lewis & Coddington, 2016). Recently, several news organisations are abandoning the online comment approach due, in part, to low quality content (WAN-IFRA, 2016). Journalists appear to be worried that low-quality commentaries and personal attacks on journalists will drive readers away from news stories and also harm the reputability of respectable organisations (Singer, 2011). In an ethnographic study at a midwestern news outlet in the U.S., Wolfgang (2018) notes that journalists believe that audience comments were not a quality contribution to the conversation and took measures to restrict their participation instead of shaping the site to encourage their participation.

Journalistic role conception

Studying journalistic roles is important to understanding journalism's uniqueness and standing in society (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). Similarly, Holton, Lewis, and Coddington (2016) contend that journalists' conception of their professional role in society is vital to the study of journalism. Though it has seen stability with respect to the question scales employed in surveys (Hanitzsch 2011; Hanitzsch et al., 2019), the role conception of the journalist is equally open to change, especially in the online media landscape. Journalists' role has increasingly shifted from gatekeeping (Vos & Finneman, 2017) to gatewatching (Bruns, 2005). The potential for interaction between journalists and their audiences has been extended due to digital technologies. Thus, journalistic role conceptions are changing to reflect the new roles (Loosen, Remer & Holig, 2020). The main argument for journalists' role conception is that journalists are likely to perform the role they believe is important to them (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). While this may be true in some contexts, we are aware that there are structural factors (editorial policy, organisational structure, media law, the level of autonomy the journalist enjoys, etc.) that could make this impossible. A study by Holton, Lewis, and Coddington (2016) showed that journalists who identified with Populist Mobilizer and Entertainer roles were more open to digital audience engagement whereas Loyal Support and Public Service roles were more disposed to offline interaction.

Journalists' attitude to audience engagement

Within the online environment, engagement is thought of as the exchange between journalists and the audience enabled by digital technologies, which requires active commitment from reporters (Nelson, 2016). Hence, journalists' disposition is vital to successful audience engagement efforts. So, it is essential to examine the attitude of journalists towards audience engagement. Attitude is generally conceived as "an evaluative disposition towards the behaviour as a function of its determinant personal consequences" (d' Astous, Colbert & Montpetit, 2005, p. 292) meaning that the possible advantages and disadvantages of electing a given behaviour motivate attitude. Journalists' attitude to audience engagement is a product of several factors. Meyer and Carey's (2014) study showed that journalists' disposition toward the audience and the possibility of forming an online community were negatively affected by the increased audience comments a newspaper received daily. Tandoc and Ferrucci (2017) discovered that journalists' attitude was a predictor of their intent on including audience comment in their news work. A study conducted by Neilson (2016) showed that journalists have different attitudes toward audience engagement. While some journalists consider audience engagement as belonging to the extension of and

strengthening of their work, others see it as part of their daily social routine. Robinson (2010) discusses the tension in the newsroom in which the traditionalists want to retain the hierarchical relations between journalists and the audiences, the convergers, on their part, believe that the audience should be afforded more freedom in the news media. We suggest that the divergence of approaches to audience engagement will be expressed by the journalists. We suggest that the combination of the above shapes the attitude of journalists toward audience engagement. Hence, we raise these research questions and hypotheses:

RQ 1: To what extent does the attitude of Nigerian journalists predict the nature of their engagement with the audience on social media?

RQ 2: To what extent do Nigerian journalists' role conceptions predict their audience engagement activities on social media?

H1: The degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts audience engagement on social media is statistically significant.

H2: The extent to which Nigerian journalists' role conception predicts their audience engagement activities on social media is statistically significant.

H3: The extent to which journalistic role conceptions, attitude, perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality combine to predict audience engagement is statistically significant.

Method

Sample

To answer the central question of this investigation, we surveyed members of Nigerian journalists from August 1 - 30, 2021. Six chapters of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), with each chapter representing the six geo-political zones in Nigeria, were purposively selected. The chapters included Enugu, Rivers, Kaduna, Sokoto, Abuja, and Lagos states. Lagos was chosen because it has a high concentration of media firms, while Abuja was selected because it is the nation's seat of power. The choice of Sokoto was due to its relative peace, which we believe would afford journalists working in the zone the stability to operate. Enugu, Rivers, and Kaduna were selected because they are media hubs in their respective geopolitical zones. The population of the study was 4,299, with the population of each chapter represented in this order: Lagos State = 2236; Abuja = 1267; Enugu State = 192; Rivers State = 202; Kaduna State = 221; Sokoto State = 181 journalists. Through the Wimmer and Dominick online sample size calculator set at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, we obtained a sample size of 353 journalists. We used Bowley's sampling technique (a sampling approach in which, a questionnaire is allocated according to the size of each cluster) in allocating questionnaires to the selected chapters. Further, the availability sampling technique (a sample selection approach based on the accessibility of the population) was used in the administration of the questionnaire to the respondents. A total of 308 questionnaires were completed and found useful for analysis, representing an 87.2% return rate. The high return rate is attributable to the fact that questionnaires were distributed at each congress meeting. Again, the time of the distribution coincided with the period before the national

convention, which resulted in a high turnout of members (Ochiaka 2021, personal communication).

Measures

This study is guided by three research questions, which included examining journalists' attitudes towards audience engagement; journalists' role conception, and how journalistic role conception, attitude, perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality combine to predict audience engagement.

Journalistic role conception: To measure journalistic role conception, a 20-item statement comprising 10 items from the Worlds of Journalism Study and 10 items identified as potential new roles in journalism relating to audience engagement was adapted from Loosen, Reimer, and Holig (2020). The respondents were asked to indicate how important each of the roles is to them using a 5-point rating scale: (1) unimportant (2) less important (3) partially important (4) very important; (5) extremely important.

Journalistic attitude towards audience engagement: This was measured through a 4-item statement on a four-point agreement scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items were drawn from Holton, Lewis, and Coddington's (2016) study and adapted to suit the current study.

Perceived Audience Rationality: To measure perceived audience rationality, a four-item statement on a four-point agreement scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was used. Adapted from Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020), the variable looks at the audience's intelligence, rationality, reasonability, and thoughtfulness.

Perceived Audience Interaction Quality: This was measured using a four-item on a 4-point agreement scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This was drawn from Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020) and relates to statements about the positivity, civility, and productiveness of the respondent's interactions with their audience.

Method of Data Analysis

Data obtained from the field were sorted, coded, and screened on SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) computer-based statistical software, version 26.0. The data were then analysed on the software using frequency and percentage as well as linear and multiple regression analyses. The demographic variables were analysed using frequency and percentage. The correlation coefficient (R) and the coefficient of determination (R^2) obtained from linear and multiple regression analyses were used in answering the research questions, while the regression ANOVA F statistics were used in testing the hypothesis at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants

Characteristics of Study Participants	Number of Participants (N = 308)
Gender	
Male	184(59.7%)
Female	124(40.3%)
Age range (years)	
20-29yrs	42(13.6%)
30-39yrs	73(23.7%)
40-49yrs	99(32.1%)
50-59yrs	63(20.5%)
60yrs and above	31(10.1%)
Marital Status	
Single	73(23.7%)
Married	208(67.5%)
Divorced	14(4.5%)
Widowed	7(2.3%)
Separated	6(1.9%)
Which medium do you work for?	
Television	87(28.2%)
Radio	64(20.8%)
Newspaper	51(16.6%)
Magazine	28(9.1%)
Online	78(25.3%)
Area of journalism specialization?	
Generalist	54(17.5%)
Entertainment journalist	80(20.0%)
Sport journalist	34(11.0%)
Health journalist	14(4.5%)
Tech journalist	43(14.0%)
Investigative journalist	35(11.4%)
Political journalist	48(15.6%)
Years of experience/Length of service	
1-5yrs	59(19.2%)
6-10yrs	152(49.4%)
11-15yrs	48(15.6%)
16-20yrs and above	49(15.9%)
Educational Qualification	
OND	44(14.3%)
HND/B.A/B.SC	141(45.8%)
MA/M.Sc	109(35.4%)
Ph.D.	14(4.5%)

RQ 1: What is the degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts audience engagement on social media?

Table 2: Regression Analysis of the degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predict audience engagement on social media

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	R ²
Attitude of Nigerian journalists	308	13.19	1.78	0.41	0.17
Audience engagement on social media		22.92	2.41		

KEY: N = Number of respondents, SD = Standard Deviation, R = Correlation coefficient, R² = Coefficient of determination

The result in Table 2 shows that the responses of the respondents (journalists) on the attitude of Nigerian journalists and audience engagement on social media were correlated. The correlation coefficient (R) obtained was 0.41. This coefficient depicts that there is a moderate relationship between the attitude of Nigerian journalists and audience engagement on social media. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (R²) associated with the correlation coefficient of 0.41 was 0.17, which implies that 17% of changes in journalists' audience engagement on social media are attributable to the attitude of Nigerian journalists.

H1: The degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts audience engagement on social media is statistically significant.

Table 3: Regression ANOVA test of significance of the degree to which attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts audience engagement on social media

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	82.514	1	82.514	14.891	.000
Residual	1695.616	306	5.541		
Total	1778.130	307			

a. Dependent Variable: Audience engagement roles

b. Predictors: (Constant), Attitude toward audience engagement

The result in Table 3 shows that an f-ratio of ($F(1, 307) = 14.891, p = .000$) was obtained for the degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts audience engagement on social media. Since the associated probability (p) value of .000 is less than the 0.05 level of significance at which the result is being tested, the hypothesis, which stated that the degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicted audience engagement on social media is statistically significant, is therefore upheld. Hence, the inference drawn is that the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts their audience engagement on social media substantially.

RQ 2: What is the extent to which Nigerian journalists' role conception predicts their audience engagement activities on social media?

Table 4: Regression Analysis of the extent to which Nigerian journalists' role conception predicts their audience engagement on social media

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	R ²
Nigerian journalists' role conception	308	66.85	8.61	0.60	0.34
Audience engagement activities		22.92	2.41		

KEY: N = Number of respondents, SD = Standard Deviation, R = Correlation coefficient, R² = Coefficient of determination

The result in Table 4 shows that the responses of the respondents (journalists) on their role conception and audience engagement activities on social media were correlated, which gave a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.60. This coefficient indicates that there is a high correlation between Nigerian journalists' role conception and audience engagement activities on social media. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (R²) associated with the correlation coefficient of 0.60 was 0.34, which means that a 34% variation in journalists' audience engagement activities on social media is due to their journalistic role conception.

H2: The extent to which Nigerian journalists' role conception predicts their audience engagement activities on social media is statistically significant.

Table 5: Regression ANOVA test of the significance of the extent to which Nigerian journalists' conception of audience engagement predicts their journalistic roles on social media

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	8079.978	1	8079.978	168.182	.000
Residual	14701.152	306	48.043		
Total	22781.130	307			

a. Dependent Variable: Role conceptions

b. Predictors: (Constant), Audience engagement Roles

The result in Table 5 shows that an f-ratio of ($F(1, 307) = 168.182, p = .000$) was obtained for the extent to which Nigerian journalists' role conception predicts their audience engagement activities on social media. Due to the fact that the associated probability (p) value of .000 is less than 0.05 level of significance at which the result is being tested, the hypothesis stated that the extent to which Nigerian journalists' role conception predicts their audience engagement activities on social media is supported. Therefore, the inference drawn is that the extent to which Nigerian journalists'

role conception predicts their audience engagement activities on social media is statistically significant.

H3: The extent to which journalistic role conceptions, attitude toward audience engagement, perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality combine to predict audience engagement is statistically significant.

Table 6: Regression ANOVA test of significance of the extent to which journalistic role conceptions, attitude, perceived audience rationality and perceived audience interaction quality combine to predict audience engagement

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1020.277	4	255.069	101.980	.000
Residual	757.853	303	2.501		
Total	1778.130	307			

a. Dependent Variable: Audience engagement Roles

b. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Audience Interaction Quality, Attitude towards audience Engagement, Role conceptions, Perceived Audience rationality

The result in Table 6 shows that an f-ratio of ($F(1, 307) = 101.980, p = .000$) was obtained for the extent to which journalistic role conceptions, attitude, perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality combine to predict audience engagement. Given that the associated probability (p) value of .000 is less than the 0.05 level of significance at which the result is being tested, hypothesis three was therefore upheld. Hence, the inference drawn is that journalistic role conceptions, attitude to audience engagement, perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality combine to predict audience engagement to a significant extent.

Discussion of findings

Extant literature shows that many factors predict journalists' audience engagement. However, due to the dearth of literature, it is unclear which of these factors predicts audience engagement by Nigerian journalists. Therefore, the main purpose of the current paper was to investigate the variables that predict audience engagement.

First, the study examined the degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts audience engagement. The result of our study showed that there was a moderate relationship between the attitude of Nigerian journalists and audience engagement on social media. Similarly, the hypothesis, which states that the degree to which the attitude of Nigerian journalists predicts audience engagement on social media is statistically significant, was supported by our finding. This result echoed Tandoc and Ferrucci's (2017) study, in which the attitude of journalists was found to be a predictor of intention to use audience comments in journalism practice. The decision to engage with the audience is informed by journalists' attitudes. As Robinson's (2010) study demonstrates, convergers are believed to have a more positive disposition to audience

engagement than traditionalists. The result of this study should be understood in the framework of the understanding that journalists, as people, are involved in both individual and organisational levels of making decisions in their daily routine. While they (journalists) exert some measure of freedom in deciding how they engage with the audience, they are equally constrained by the organisational ideology governing their engagement with the audience. Within the framework of field theory, such tension is indicative of the place occupied by the journalist within the journalistic field's heteronomous and autonomous poles. As pointed out earlier, the increased focus of journalists on audience engagement is, in part, borne out of economic reasons (Curry & Stroud, 2020; Nelson, 2019; Meier, Kraus & Michaeler, 2018). In such a context, the journalist could be said to be closer to the heteronomous pole. This finds expression in Benson's (1998) view that the autonomy of the journalistic field was being eroded on account of economic dependence on advertising, corporate ownership, etc. Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt (2018) submit that the degree and nature of audience engagement performed by any media outfit are determined by its organisational culture. However, while we acknowledge the structuring role of organisational ideology in journalists' audience engagement, this study highlights the importance of attitude in the implementation of any organisational innovation. To this end, "attempts to introduce new technology and routines in newsrooms should begin with a process of re-socialization focused on addressing journalists' attitudes towards these innovations" (Tandoc & Ferrucci 2017, p. 155). In the Bourdieusian perspective, this entails the transformation of the habitus. Bourdieu (2005) explains that the habitus is both shaped by a specific social context and also shapes the social context in that it aids in replicating and increasingly altering the social order by affording social agents a hands-on sense of how to behave, that is, a feel of the game. As such, a news medium whose economic survival is predicated on audience engagement would have a journalistic habitus that values audience engagement. Not only does this shape journalists' role conception, but it also affects their attitude toward audience engagement.

Secondly, we examined the degree to which Nigerian journalists' role conception predicted their audience engagement activities on social media. The findings revealed a high correlation between Nigerian journalists' role conception and audience engagement on social media. Thirty-four percent of changes in journalists' audience engagement activities on social media were attributable to their journalistic role conception. This result mirrored that of Holton, Lewis, and Coddington (2016), wherein how journalists conceived of their role influenced their disposition to audience engagement. Again, some studies have shown that journalists' role conception has significant predictive power for role performance. For instance, a study conducted by Starck and Soloski (1977) indicated that participant role conceptions predict more interpretation in articles in comparison to neutral journalists. Skovsgaard et al (2013) found that journalists' role perception has significant explanatory power concerning journalists carrying out objectivity norms. Though there is abundant evidence that links journalists' role conception to role performance, there is also research that points to the incongruence between role conception and role performance (see Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014). In accounting for the lack of fit between the two, this study takes counsel from Hellmeuller and Mellado (2015), who advocate for situating journalistic role research in media sociology by connecting it to other layers of influence. In the context of the present study, there has been a pull and push in newsrooms regarding audience engagement with organizational philosophy and journalists' routine playing pivotal roles. Such

tension has implications for the journalistic habitus. In the event that a media outfit has fully embraced audience engagement, it is likely to affect how they conceive their role. An extreme example of this is that of an audience engagement editor. In the study by Assman and Diakopolous (2017, p. 36), some audience engagement editors, in narrativizing their role, broadened "the traditional role of the journalist to include the search for an audience." Similarly, a study by Neilson and Gibson (2022) showed that audience engagement editors defined their roles as simply the pursuit of an audience for their publication. Though many of the respondents are willing to acknowledge the influence of economic consideration in the articulation of their roles, the blurring line between the editorial department and that of business in several newsrooms (George, Zeng & Mazumdar, 2021; Bogart, 2017; Carlson, 2015) makes this effort unsustainable. An empirical study has shown that audience engagement is a priority if it is central to their business model (Lawrence, Radcliffe & Schmidt, 2018). It is our contention; therefore, that the contribution of role conception to audience engagement may be accentuated or weakened by other influences in the newsroom. It is interesting to note that the observation of Borger et al (2013, p. 128) that professional journalism offers "participatory opportunities from a strategic-economic perspective rather than a democracy-enhancing one" continues to hold sway.

The hypothesis that journalistic role conception, attitude to audience engagement, perceived audience rationality, and perceived audience interaction quality combine to predict audience engagement is statistically significant was upheld. This result is consistent with previous studies (Lewis, Zamit & Coddington, 2020; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). As earlier discussed, attitude to audience engagement and the role conception of journalists were found to predict audience engagement on social media. With regard to perceived audience rationality and perceived interaction quality, an existing study shows that when journalists doubt the rationality of the audience, they limit their interaction with them (Nelson 2018). Beyond that, the perceived interaction quality is equally affected by the estimation of the rationality of the audience. Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington's (2020) study showed that the more a journalist experiences online harassment, the more he/she is likely to view audiences as less rational and consider an exchange with an audience less profitable. Though the focus of the current study is not on online harassment, it is worth stressing that journalists' perceptions of the rationality of the audience is largely shaped by the audience's uncivil behaviours. Little wonder Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) observed that there is a penchant among journalists dealing with audience comments for designating them as "cranks" "nut cases." Wolfgang (2018) showed that journalists acknowledged that comments did not amount to quality contributions to public discussion and employed steps to restrict their involvement instead of shaping the website to facilitate deliberation. As Wolfgang (2018) found, in their exercise of editorial authority, journalists set new standards that were unattainable by commenters, depicted the latter as failed participants, and consequently justified the avoidance of their comments. This holds serious implications for the democracy-enhancing goal of audience engagement, given that the many perspectives that could enrich news reports will be left out. Similarly, the news media will continue to suffer from low loyalty and credibility concerns. Again, the counsel of Tando and Ferrucci (2017) for the process of re-socialisation of journalists aimed at addressing their attitude towards these innovations holds. Efforts at re-orienting journalists in their interaction with the audience will provide journalists with a more

realistic expectation of the audience and inculcate in them the attitude of seeing the audience as useful partners in the process of newsmaking.

Conclusion

This study has examined the predictors of audience engagement on social media among Nigerian journalists. This inquiry is pertinent given the increasing role of the audience in the realisation of the media's strategic goals. The study showed that the attitude of journalists predicted their audience engagement. From a media sociology perspective, journalists' attitude toward audience engagement is partly influenced by the journalistic habitus in which they operate. The growing role of the audience in the process of making news is capable of altering the balance of power and by extension, is likely to affect the attitude of journalists towards audience engagement. Similarly, the study found that the role conception of journalists is a predictor of their audience engagement activities in social media. We note in the newsroom that the changing newsrooms in which the audience is assuming an important position or, what could be said in Bourdieusian terms taking more position in the journalistic field could potentially affect how journalists conceive their role and how they engage with the audience on social media. With new job designations in the newsrooms, as social media editors become a common feature in many newsrooms, the role conception of some journalists would reflect this reality. The study found a high correlation between attitude to audience engagement, journalistic role conception, perceived audience rationality, perceived interaction quality, and audience engagement. In line with the ideals of media sociology, we considered other factors that may intervene in journalists' engagement with the audience via social networks. The study also highlighted the value of re-socialising journalists for the smooth implementation of any intervention. What is clear is that journalism is witnessing change or transformation in Bourdieu's term and it is imperative to recognise how this change is impacting the field and the social agents occupying different positions in the field. The current study has examined the factors that predict audience engagement activities on social media, Further studies can investigate how different demographics of journalists behave in terms of attitude toward audience engagement, role conception, their perception of audience rationality, and their perception of audience interaction quality. Such endeavour will shed light on the understanding of audience engagement among journalists.

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