SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND IMAGE OF NATIONS: APPROPRIATING THE ENERGIES OF SELECT NIGERIAN SMIS TO BOOST NIGERIA'S GLOBAL REPUTATION

INFLUENCIADORES DA MÍDIA SOCIAL E IMAGEM DAS NAÇÕES: APROPRIANDO AS ENERGIAS DE SMIS NIGERIANOS SELECIONADOS PARA IMPULSIONAR A REPUTAÇÃO GLOBAL DA NIGÉRIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigerian has been grappling with battered image since independence but more so since the return of the nation to civilian rule in 1999. The various governments, conscious of the importance of good reputation at a time interdependence among nations is a necessity, have been embarking on image laundry activities but largely, the nation is perceived as a corrupt, insecure, lawless and economically weak nation with people who are not to be trusted for serious partnership. This has worsened with the negative stereotype of developing nations by global media. But developments in the entertainment industry—music, movie, comedy and related content making enterprises—which have produced several influencers, indicate that notwithstanding negative portrayal, social media influencers have made contents that have popularized and portray them in positive ways and through that, endear themselves to global audiences, using the social media. This gives rise to the need to find out whether the visibility of Social Media Influencers could be exploited to change the negative image of the country and to find out how the social media influencers could help in this regard, among other objectives. Using the library research approach, the paper analyses the relationship between the media and national image, the role of social media in image building as well as examine how popular social media influencers through their contents can boost Nigeria's image. The SMIs analyzed were selected based on news publications of their popularities on the different social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The publications include top 10 lists of most popular people on these social media platforms and most popular viral contents by Nigerians in the past few years leading up to 2022. Supported by the precepts of perception and technological determinism theories respectively, the paper notes that updating of the perception of the country can occur through the interaction with the observed, in this case the SMIs and that technology (social media) can be leveraged upon to solve Nigeria's image problem. It concludes that if the SMIs could make positive impacts as demonstrated by their large followings at the global stage, they could deploy their energies to create positive image for Nigeria. It recommends the deliberate involvement of SMIs as forces that can cause a positive update of the perspective of the global audience about Nigeria in the effort to change the narrative that has been built around the nation and indeed change the image of the country in order to rebrand and reposition it in the comity of nations.

Keywords: SMIs. Social Media. Image. Nigeria. Reputation.

RESUMO

A Nigéria tem lutado com uma imagem abalada desde a independência, mas, ainda mais, desde o retorno da nação ao governo civil em 1999. Os vários governos, conscientes da importância da boa reputação em um momento em que a interdependência entre as nações é uma necessidade, têm embarcado em atividades para limpar sua imagem, mas, em grande parte, a nação é vista como uma nação corrupta, insegura, sem lei e economicamente fraca, com pessoas que não são confiáveis para parcerias sérias. Isso piorou com o estereótipo negativo das nações em desenvolvimento pela mídia global. Mas os desenvolvimentos na indústria

do entretenimento – música, filmes, comédias e empreendimentos de criação de conteúdo relacionados – que produziram vários influenciadores, indicam que, apesar do retrato negativo, os influenciadores de mídia social criaram conteúdos que os popularizaram e os retratam de maneiras positivas e, por meio disso, os cativam para audiências globais, usando a mídia social. Daí surge a necessidade de saber se a visibilidade dos Social Media Influencers pode ser explorada para alterar a imagem negativa do país e de que forma os social media influencers podem ajudar nesse sentido, entre outros objetivos. Usando a abordagem de pesquisa bibliográfica, o artigo analisa a relação entre a mídia e a imagem nacional, o papel da mídia social na construção da imagem, bem como examina como os influenciadores populares da mídia social, por meio de seus conteúdos, podem impulsionar a imagem da Nigéria. Os SMIs analisados foram selecionados com base em publicações de notícias de suas popularidades nas diferentes plataformas de mídia social, como TikTok, Facebook, Instagram e Twitter. As publicações incluem as 10 principais listas das pessoas mais populares nessas plataformas de mídia social e os conteúdos virais mais populares dos nigerianos nos últimos anos até 2022. Apoiado pelos preceitos das teorias de percepção e determinismo tecnológico, respectivamente, o artigo observa que a atualização da percepção do país pode ocorrer por meio da interação com o observado, neste caso os SMIs, e essa tecnologia (mídia social) pode ser aproveitada para resolver o problema de imagem da Nigéria. Conclui-se que, se os SMIs pudessem causar impactos positivos, conforme demonstrado por seus grandes seguidores no cenário global, eles poderiam empregar suas energias para criar uma imagem positiva para a Nigéria. Recomenda-se o envolvimento deliberado de SMIs como forças que podem causar uma atualização positiva da perspectiva do público global sobre a Nigéria no esforço de mudar a narrativa que foi construída em torno da nação e, de fato, mudar a imagem do país a fim de renomear e reposicioná-lo na comunidade das nações.

Palavras-chave: SMIs. Mídia social. Imagem. Nigéria. Reputação.

1 INTRODUCTION

The world has become a global village and one part is not only accessible to another within seconds, corporation has equally become both unavoidable and a necessity. National development is increasingly tied to partnership such that no single nation feels it has a good chance to forge ahead if it does not position itself well enough to derive the benefits of cooperation with their counterparts. World development according to Hanwa (2011) has not been characterized by individual state growth dynamics alone but as well, by links between nations through the process of globalization. At the same time acceptance and partnership is greatly affected by the image of the nation seeking to be part of the global village. National image is of utmost importance to nations that desire to partner for national development while image itself is related to reputation which determines how credible, reliable and believable a nation is seen to be, something that speaks of the latitude of performance by that nation in the socio-political continuum (Owuamalan, 2005). The survival of any nation in contemporary times then becomes tied to its good image.

As Somers and Blocks (2005) have argued, every nation has her own slice of history, a public narrative that helps explain and define its place in the global historical flow; something to justify that nation's innovative principles and which gives meaning to her economic principles, policies and practices. Yet, what is common is that not many nations have found it a picnic, maintaining a dent-free image at all times. While Okoli (2013) observes that the management of national reputation is a crucial task for many nations, he notes that it is even much difficult for the countries that have been grappling with unfavourable characterization and image crisis at the global level. Nigeria somehow, finds itself in this category.

Unfortunately Nigeria, a developing country that needs all the goodwill it can get from the international community and which has been surviving on international assistance for infrastructural development, education and security, among other ingredient for the survival of a nation, has suffered a great deal of deficit in her reputation. According to Onwukwe and Okugo (2011), issues ranging from corruption, drug trafficking, growing perception of mis-governance, advance fee fraud and others, have been identified as factors that have robbed negatively on the reputation of Nigeria and have punctured the image of the country in the comity of nations. When Owuamalam (in Onwukwe and Okugo, 2011) conducted a study in two African countries to find out the sources that the nationals of those countries got information about Nigeria and the image they had of the country, the outcome of the study was that the information they got was from video film, news sources and personal contact with a general picture of a corrupt and insecure country. The researcher went on to observe that "it is the anti-thesis of national

reports and indeed the provision of offensive details in some Nigerian mass media that repel international interest in anything Nigeria" (P. 268).

Nigeria went through a terrible economic experience in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the military plunged it into greater crises and made it feel the fangs of what Okoli (2013) describes as the morass of international infamy as a result of dictatorship, bad governance and economic corruption. There has not been much improvement in the third republic and in spite of uninterrupted democracy, Nigeria's image has not been remarkably better thus necessitating attempts by various democratic governments since 1999, to re-brand the nation. But Owukwe and Okugo (2001) argue that in spite of the rebranding efforts, Nigeria's image has continued to be soiled as a number of issues have remained unresolved. That resultant bad image, they further argue, has affected the performance of the nation in national development and international politics. With the poor international profile, it is not likely that Nigeria can attract enough goodwill to boost her relationship for mutual benefits with other nations of the world, something that is essential for any nation that wants to be a player in global affairs. Since the various governments have acknowledged the importance of good reputation and have initiated and pursued a number of re-branding programmes albeit with little result, the objectives of this paper were among other things, to find out whether the visibility of Social Media Influencers could be leveraged on to change the negative image of the country and to find out how the social media influencers could help in this regard.

2 METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Based on library evidence and social media followership of select SMIs, the paper analyses the relationship between the media and national image, the role of social media in image building as well as how the popularity of social media influencers can be harnessed to boost Nigeria's image. The SMIs analyzed were selected based on news publications of their popularities on the different social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The publications include top 10 lists of most popular people on these social media platforms and most popular viral contents by Nigerians in the past few years leading up till 2022. It does not however cover the analysis of the contents of the social media influencers.

3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The perception and technological determinism theories provide the theoretical support for this discourse. Perception theory which deals with the change in the belief and attitude of the audience after

exposure to certain communication, aligns with the arguments presented in this paper. According to Berelson and Steiner (in Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008), perception theory examines how people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulation into meaningful picture or message. Since perception involves learning and updating one's perspective through interaction with the observed (Anaoeto, et al 2008), the image the global audience has about Nigerian can be updated but in a desired direction if the way that audience perceives the nation is made to be influenced by the positive conversation about the nation, deliberately built into the works of SMIs.

The technological determinism theory which explains and link how developments in human society is related to the breakthroughs and application of technology and how the shape and nature of human development results from upheavals in technological advancements, also provides a support for this article. Man's growth and advancement is determined by the tools which he creates and use, and when the need arises for any society to make itself relevant and thus benefit from the global community, it can deploy technological provisions to achieve that. In proposing technological determinism theory, Marshal McLuhan saw that media technology basically shapes how humans think, feel and act thereby determining how the society is organized and operated (Asemah 2011; Anaeto, Onabajo, and Osifeso, 2008). The technological determinism theory applies to the role the social media can play in bringing the thoughts and works of SMIs to millions of people around the world thus making their voices to be heard. Having used the social media to reach millions, SMIs can as well reach the millions with the message that will change opinions about Nigeria's image.

4 LITERATURE

4.1 THE MEDIA AND NATIONAL IMAGE

The connection between the media of mass communication in any nation and the image of that nation is predicted on the central position of mass media channels in everyday contemporary existence. If individuals have had to depend on the media to guide their everyday decisions as well as shape their opinions on personal and public issues along the lines of conversation in the media, it is expected and rightly so, that affairs of the nation will equally be driven by mass media agenda. The media therefore are in a position to both influence and reflect policies and actions that also, both define and determine the image of the nation in which the media organizations operate. In fact, quoting Udeze, Onwukwe and Okugo (2011, p.265) insist that "the image of people we do not know about or have direct physical contact with are formed from media reports about them". This is also the view expressed by Hanwa (2011) who

says that there is a general belief that the mass media play the major role in the transmission of the attitude, perception and beliefs about a people. Therefore, the perceived images that the international community may have about any nation, arise from their exposure to the contents that emanate from the media about that nation.

No doubt, government is at the centre of activities and key element in policy formation which drive the activities towards the implementation of actions that add up to shape a nation's image. While government guides other players in the whole gamut of image creation for the nation through policies, development plans and the works of institutions as (Okoli, 2013), the media interpret and convey these as well as bring to bear, the deliberate and inadvertent contributions of other players including citizens and others, that end up as total component of what is needed to make up the image of a nation. It is in recognition of this fact that Onwukwe and Okugo(2011), inaiat that the mass media occupy a sensitive position in national image building, cutting across the print, broadcast and the social media, as they produce contents that affect the perception and influence as well as the attitude and impression that the international audience will have about a nation-State.

If the traditional print and broadcast media in their wakes, were able to engender the remarkable alteration of global communication, such that necessitated the call for reappraisal of the meaning and intention of such communication as well as the call for new world communication order, it can be imagined what the addition that the social media as tools of communication constitute, can do. With their speed, reach and quick feedback advantages over the traditional media of print and broadcast and having become the major force in the 21st century, the social media have held world populations awestruck. What they can and have done to image of nations is not to be argued.Whether we look at it as online platforms (websites or applications) where users share content or participate in social networking (Lutkevich, 2022), the set of interactive internet applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation and sharing of user-generated content (Davis (2016) or simply, new media forms that involve interactive participation (Manning 2014), these websites or applications which allow users generate, collaborate, and participate in content sharing have become the wave of contemporary communication.

The popularity of Facebook with over 2.9 billion active users in 2022, YouTube with over 2.5 billion active users and WhatsApp with over 2 billion active users, demonstrate the hold that the social media have on the world. We Chat, Instagram and TikTok with 1.4, 1.2 and one billion active users respectively, all contribute their impacts on the world population, connecting more than half (59% or 4.74 billion people) of that population as at 2022(Dixon, 2022, Kepios in Data Reportal, 2022). The penetration of social media may be due to the easier and more cost-effective access to smartphones and data.

The advancement and diversity in mobile and telecommunication technologies have brought about different types, kinds and categories of smartphones as well as data services to cater for the different economic statuses of users. This makes it easy to access social media. Similarly, many popular social media platforms have made it easier for user access by introducing alternate versions such as the lite versions which streamline contents to save data for users. As users access the lite versions of these apps, they expend minimal data which in turn reduces the frequency at which they purchase data. In addition to the easy accessibility, telecommunication companies and data service providers have initiated different subscription plans to suit their subscribers' economic capabilities. In Nigeria for example, data could be bought for as low as N50 Naira for daily plans. This means that users can purchase this plan to make a quick search, view notifications or create a post on their social media accounts. As a result, social media have become very accessible and have surpassed other broadcast platforms in terms of accessibility. As they present more options for content viewing without geographical limitation, social media serve as spaces to connect with global citizens to sell image, goods, or services or simply collaborate with other content creators while also accessing traditional media contents.

But because the social media have grown beyond just connecting people who know themselves to link those with no personal contact, and in the way the reach and popularity of these platforms have gone beyond traditional media in ferrying information, entertainment and education among other media services to billions of people around the world, they become even more viable tools for image building or branding.

4.2 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, SMIS AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE

Image brand or brand image refers to the general perception and feeling which consumers have about a brand which could have an influence on the consumer's behaviour towards the brand (Zhang, 2015). This means that the content shared on social media could create a perception and feeling in the minds of the viewer of the content which could in turn influence the viewer's reaction to the content. In other words, users who visit other users' social media pages regularly, would likely develop certain perceptions about them which could influence them to either patronize or scrutinize them. For example, if a viewer perceives a post as 'cool', interesting or trendy, the viewer's immediate reaction could be to follow the user, like, comment or share the post. The viewer of the post could be influenced to try or imitate what was posted and patronize what was shared. Through contents such as pictures, videos, audios, or texts, users could deliberately and consistently brand their image to whichever way they would like to be perceived. Content published on social media can shape public perception on individuals, public personalities, organizations as well as nations. On social media everyone is a brand, and everything
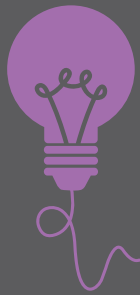
published serves as a basis for scrutiny. However, some users are more popular than others and therefore are more influential than others. They are usually marked by more followers, subscribers, views, likes, comments, and shares. Some examples include celebrities, organizations, institutions, and social media influencers.

The term influencer is not new especially in the world of marketing. Håkansson et. al. (2017) observe that before the onset of social media, companies have been using celebrities, sports stars, and leaders to promote their products. They strike partnerships with prominent people who patronize their products so as to influence their fans, followers and admirers. Dangl (2017) likens it to the two-step flow theory in which mass media messages are passed through opinion leaders who decode and relay to their respective groups. These opinion leaders are people of influence and hold the attention of and are listened to by their groups. This is quite similar to social media influencers. Using their contents shared on social media, they are able to push a certain agenda and persuade their followers and the general public alike. As Freberg, et. al (2010) see it, SMIs are the new types of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience's attitude through the use of social media. Similarly, Duffy (2020) in defining social media influencers states that they are a subset of digital content creators who are defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors. She explains that these influencers earn their income by hyping branded goods and services to their large group of followers by advising or inspiring them to use the products or services. We have seen celebrities on social media who have large followings and who promote different brands as well as shape attitudes through their posts or contents. They also earn healthy sums for it. For instance, football superstar Cristiano Ronaldo who is the most followed person on Instagram with over 480 million followers earns approximately 1.7 million pounds for a sponsored post (Cohen, 2022).

While the argument that celebrities are also social media influencers has been ongoing, Lerario (2022) however differentiates celebrity influencers from social media influencers by stating that celebrities gain following through fans who enjoy their works off social media whereas social media influencers gain following based on specific niches or interests. In differentiating influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement, Meena (2021) states 3 key areas in which they differ namely: expertise, engagement and content creation. He explains that influencers have more expertise in the type of products being marketed, and that they are more willing to engage their followers and create promotional contents that suit the product. However, influencers in recent times are not particularly versed in the product they promote. They most times use demonstration as a tool of marketing which could be used by celebrities as well.

Hasa (2020) has also attempted separating these two by arguing that celebrities are people who gained fame through traditional channels such as radio, TV and magazines whereas SMIs are strictly

famous through their social media contents. In other words, SMIs become famous strictly on social media through their content whereas celebrities become famous through other non-social media channels. In addition, Akintaro (2022) posits that a social media influencer is not only someone who has access to a huge audience and can persuade others to act based on their recommendations but must have established credibility in a specific industry. He states that the influencer community in Nigeria is dominated by entertainers who are mostly musicians and comedians.

Having said that, both celebrities and SMIs on social media could perform same functions. A typical example is the celebrity Selena Gomez who is a musician and actress but became even more famous on social media through her relatable contents through which she garnered over 400 million Instagram and Facebook followers, making her one of the most followed people on the platforms. Her rise to social media fame is quite interesting as she is not particularly one of the most famous singers or actresses in the United States or elsewhere. She has gained even more followers than the most famous contemporaries in her fields. In a study, according to Gomez (2022) it was revealed that Selena Gomez is the leading positive influencer in the world in the year 2022. She had the most positive comments with over 33%, 39% neutral and only 28% negative. It is no wonder why she has been associated with many brands such as Coca Cola, Sears, Adidas NEO, and Pantene among others, with her 2022 value of post estimated to be one million dollars (Sabharwal, 2022). Another example is the singer and business woman Rihanna who leveraged her social media to build her billion-dollar Fenty beauty empire. Aside other factors that added to the success of the beauty brand, Toigo (2020) opines that the famous influencer's social media push played a key role in the success of the brand. This means that in the hierarchy of social media influencers, celebrities still hold the top spots. In concurrence, Winston (2022) argues that the more social media followers a person has, the more reach and influence they have. In other words, the number of social media followers is directly proportional to influence.

Nigeria as a significant contributor to the global numbers of social media users having over 32.9 million as at January of 2022 also has a number of players who have significant followers. The most followed Nigerians on social media are celebrities (Akintaro, 2022). As at July 2022, the top 10 most followed Nigerians on Instagram were either in the movie or music industries. Davido (24m), Yemi Alade (17m), Funke Akindele (15.5m), Tiwa Savage (15.3m) and Wizkid (15m) were the most followed Nigerians on Instagram (Winston, 2022).Others are: Mavins record label boss Don Jazzy (13.8m), Mercy Johnson (12.9m), Ini Edo (12.7m), comedian and actor AY (12.4m) and one half of the group Psquare, Peter Okoye (11.9m) completed the top 10 list of most followed Nigerians on Instagram. It could be said that these are the most influential Nigerians on Instagram.

The most followed Nigerians on Twitter as at June 2022 wereDavido (11.6m), Wizkid (10.1m), Burna Boy (6.8m), Don Jazzy (6.7m), DJ Cuppy (4.7m), Banky W (3.7m), Falz (2.7m), Ebuka (2.5m), Mr. Macaroni (2.4m), AY (2.1m), and Funke Akindele (1.7m) (Akintaro, 2022). Looking at both lists, it is observable that some celebrities appear in both. Therefore, it could be said that the likes of Davido, Wizkid, Don Jazzy, AY and Funke Akindele are the most influential Nigerian celebrities on social media and their popularity extends beyond the Nigerian shores as their followers are not strictly Nigerians. This, along with the fact that the number of active social media users in Nigeria is high, hints at their popularity.

Incidentally, among players on both lists of most followed Nigerians, only one is said to have gained fame strictly on social media. Mr Macaroni, a skit maker and content creator became famous for his skits on YouTube. His short comic skits bring laughter and relief to many Nigerians as was experienced during the Covid-19 lockdown. The skits which were widely shared on other platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, became viral contents, making him very popular on social media and in the Nigerian entertainment industry. His skits consist of four main characters, his wife (Mummy Wa), daughter (Motinde) and himself (Daddy Wa), with another character making an appearance in each episode. One of the most popular episodes in recent times was posted on the 8th of November 2022 with a special guest appearance by popular actress and influencer Mercy Johnson. In the episode, Mercy performed the role of a polite lawyer, the opposite of Mummy Wa, speaking calmly in English but quickly turned into a combative street woman, breaking out in pidgin just to drive home the fact that every human has two sides but can choose the part they want to go. The episode has seen over 1.2 million views as at January 26, 2023. Mr. Macaroni has also used his newfound fame for activism especially during the *End SARS* movement in 2020 where protests were held across Nigeria to disapprove police brutality. He became a voice for the youths, inspiring young people to take up activism and stand for their rights.

In a similar vein, Josh2Funny's Don't Leave Me challenge which took over social media with people from different parts of the world responding to the challenge and viewed more than 6 million times on his Instagram page, called the attention of the world to Nigeria. The challenge started when he posted on his Instagram, TikTok and Twitter, a short video of him standing on a heap of leaves from a tree and his friend asking him to do something but he said he couldn't because he was "on leave." As he walked away, his friend shouted: "Don't leave me." That use of pun gave birth to the challenge (Salaudeen 2020). It went completely viral with the likes of NBA star Giannis Antetokounmpo and veteran Nollywood actors Olu Jacobs and Kanayo O. Kanayo joining the challenge. The challenge had over 2 billion views on TikTok (Akinwotu, 2020). The content maker also achieved good success with his 'Fastest Reader' talent hunt skit which went viral and trended in the United States and other countries in October 2022. The skit featured a talent hunt show with judges. Josh2Funny himself played contestant Ebenezer, who claimed to be the

fastest reader in the world with the ability to read a 1679-page book in 2 seconds. When asked to start, he read in gibberish while quickly flipping through the pages to the amazement of the judges. The video on YouTube has garnered over 4 million views and over 1.2 million TikTok views.

In November 2021, singer and music executive Davido, started a N100 million challenge that called for donations for his birthday. At the end of the challenge, he raked in over 200 million Naira within a few days. He added 50 million and donated it to charities across Nigeria (Onikoyi, 2021). This exercise showed his true social media influence as it all started with a post on his Twitter handle. Similarly, music executive and leader of Mavins record label, Don Jazzy also has many instances that demonstrate his influence. He is known for his social media giveaways through which he randomly donates money to his followers. Brands capitalize on this as they use him to do their giveaways. For example, he became so influential that he began to use his platform to launch his new artists' releases. In fact, he was instrumental in launching the musical career of Ayra Starr, whose debut EP went straight to number 1 on the charts in its very first week. His introduction post about her garnered over 64 thousand views, 9 thousand likes and 2 thousand retweets (Jazzy, 2021).

Wizkid is one of Nigeria's most famous and loved artists. In 2020, he released his album *Made in Lagos* to worldwide acclaim. The album, heavily promoted on social media, included collaborations with both international and Nigerian artists with hit songs such as *Essence*, featuring Tems, *Ginger*, featuring Burna Boy and *Blessed*, featuring Damian Marley, among others. His influence saw the rise of the then new artist Tems on the international music scene. Their song *Essence* became a worldwide hit, dominating charts across the world including getting to the top ten on Billboard Hot 100 charts in the USA (Trust, 2021). This was the first time a Nigerian song got to the top ten in the United States. Consequently, Tems, a new artist who was yet to release a full LP shot to fame and became one of the most sought-after artists in the world. She has now co-written for and collaborated with top artists such as Beyonce, Drake, Rihanna and Future. The social media played a vital role in all of these, especially TikTok.

TikTok, a video-focused platform that allows users share video-based contents, has rapidly become one of the biggest social media platforms taking over from Google as the most popular site in 2021 (Arlia, 2022). With over 1 billion users, it has become a platform where both celebrities and non-celebrities have a level play field to shine. Unlike other social media platforms where celebrities are usually the most popular influencers, TikTok gives more opportunities for contents by ordinary individuals to go viral. Arlia (2022) explains that TikTok prioritizes videos from content creators who are not particularly popular. In other words, its algorithm makes for contents by non-famous and ordinary individuals to go viral. This is evident as the most popular people on TikTok became popular from creating contents on the platform. Out of the 20 most popular people on TikTok, only about 5 are known celebrities who were already popular

outside the business of social media content creation (Ceci, 2022). In Nigeria, only artiste Korede Bello as a widely known celebrity is found in the top 10 most followed Nigerian TikTokers,. Therefore, the position by scholars on separating celebrities from SMIs is more validated on the TikTok social media platform. In fact, influencers on the platform are used by celebrities to promote their new releases, products, and services. TikTok is popular for making contents go viral on a massive worldwide scale and has become a viable tool for branding and marketing.

Due to its popularity in making unknown contents go viral, TikTok has become an import vehicle for globalization. This is especially true with regards to music, comedy and film. Many songs by both popular and unpopular artistes have become worldwide hits because they were used in viral contents on TikTok. Artistes from different parts of the world have become popular in other parts of the world due to their popularity on the platform. Similarly, cultures from non-western countries are being more appreciated due to viral contents on TikTok. Nigeria is one of those countries. A typical example is Nigerian artiste Ckay, whose song *Love Nwantiti* became a global hit because it was used on TikTok, becoming one of the biggest songs of 2021. In an interview with *Rolling Stones* magazine, Ckay whose real name is Chukwuka Ekweani, stated that the song had gone viral the previous year albeit for a short period and when a friend sent him a video of his song being used in a TikTok challenge, it went completely viral with different remixes from different parts of the world (Nelson, 2021). According to Kuola (2021), over 3 million videos have been created using the sound and the song became the most Shazamed song in the world in September 2021.

With the gospel artists in Nigeria joining the league of social media influencers, the net becomes even wider for more haul. Singers such as Sinach and Mercy Chinwo became even more popular worldwide with their songs *Way Maker* and *Excess Love* respectively, which became viral hits on YouTube. They have thus become social media influencers in their own rights. *Way Maker* is the third Nigerian song to hit 100 million views on YouTube (Aribigbola, 2020) and it became even more successful when it garnered different renditions by globally acclaimed artists such as Michael W. Smith, Bethel Music and Christafari, among others. The same goes for Mercy Chinwo's *Excess Love* which became a hit worldwide, attracting over 93 million views with renditions by different acclaimed gospel artists. Similarly, #WhatGodCannotDoDoesntExist has become a worldwide trend since Pastor Jerry Eze's early morning prayer programme took over the world by storm. His New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declaration (NSPPD) sessions which holds live, across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube among other social media daily, is said to be one of the largest online prayer meetings in the world. In July 2022, Pastor Jerry Eze's programme became the number one online prayer platform and number one 'Daily Most Super Chatted Gospel Channel' in the world with a record 313,768,909 or 889,627 chats per day (Adelani, 2022). With

people from diverse backgrounds in different parts of the world joining daily, Pastor Jerry Eze has become a major influencer in the Nigerian Christian community.

5 APPROPRIATING THE ENERGIES OF SMIS FOR NIGERIA'S NATIONAL IMAGE

Many musicians, comedians and skit makers among others, have taken advantage of social media by not just promoting links to their contents but as well, creating challenges through which their works are patronized, and their songs used as sounds in the contents created. With such examples as Nigerian singer and music executive Kizz Daniel, as well as others like CKay, Wizkid, Burna Boy, Davido, Don Jazzy, Ini Edo, Funke Akindele, AY, comedy skit creator, Josh Alfred, popularly known as Josh2Funny and others in the entertainment industry generally, making monumental impacts in the global space through social media following, deliberately enlisting them and other emerging SMIs for the purpose of creating a positive image for Nigeria is a logical idea. Cashing in on the popularity, goodwill and acceptance they enjoy to rebrand a nation whose reputation has ebbed tremendously, is likely to yield a remarkable result.

With the strategy of introducing challenges as in the case of Josh2Funny's Don't Leave Me challenge taking over social media with people from different parts of the world responding to the challenge and viewing more than 6 million times on his Instagram page, it is commonsense to expect this personality to make tremendous impact if given the responsibility to create contents that aim at building a positive image for Nigeria. The challenge with over 2 billion views on TikTok (Akinwotu, 2020), hints at what could be achieved in the effort to improve the image of the nation, using this type of popularity and creativity. To think that the content maker also achieved good success with his 'Fastest Reader' talent hunt skit which went viral and trended in the United States and other countries in October 2022, further strengthens the point being made. It is an indication that the social media community has seen something useful in the content makers. The entertainment value in these contents can serve as a viable vehicle to covey positive messages about the country. The popularity and acceptance of the content makers, in confirmation of the precept of perception theory, implies that the social media community is updating the picture or image people have about Nigerians and this can help change the hitherto held negative impression. What remains is for this development to be made to serve the objective of building a positive image.

The duo of Osita Iheme and Chinedu Ikedieze popularly known as Aki and Pawpaw, having become global meme stars in recent times, have made it to global reckoning with clips from their movie circulating across social media and shared by top celebrities and influencers including Chris Brown, Snoop Dog, 50 Cent and Rihanna among others (Kogbede, 2020). Contents that involve such influential figures and tailored towards building a good image for Nigeria stand a chance of equally attracting global actors and

indeed the global audience to see the nation in good light. In the way that their comedy contents put smiles on people's faces and inadvertently shape the perception of the Nigerian people in a humorous and creative light, is also how deliberate contents with messages of positive image of Nigeria will re-shape the reputation of the nation.

What the Nigerian celebrities have done using the social media is comparable to the feats of their counterparts in UK and elsewhere. The likes of Russ Millions and Tion Wayne in the UK, as well as South Korean entertainers in music and film industries with great power of influence. The South Korean music exponents for instance, have pushed the Korean culture to the global forefront with the K-pop and Hallyu wave, making people from other parts of the world appreciate music and film from South Korea. For example, the most followed Korean, Lisa of the popular female group, Blackpink who has over 80 million followers on Instagram, is every brand's dream influencer as she steadily sells out fashion items she wears and posts on her Instagram (McDonald, 2022; Koreaboo, 2022). Such popularity which Nigerian influencers are steadily matching up is a strength that should be harnessed to sell the nation.

In another example, the popularity of BTS, an all-male music group from South Korea with average of over 40 million followers as at November 2022 has sparked a debate as to whether the members of the group should be exempted from military service in view of their global impact in the world of music and the implication of the decision to include them in the mandatory service for all men before they turn 30. This is in view of the fact that doing so may cost the South Korean economy billions as the group contributes over $3.6 billion each year as well as over 800 thousand tourists who visited the country in 2018 because of BTS (Nguyen, 2022). Like their counterparts elsewhere, many Nigerian social media influencers have made themselves into global figures in their trades, but the social media platforms have further popularized and endeared them to the world to the point that they could easily address that global audience with whatever message they may be entrusted with.

This is in line with the technological determinism theory which explains how developments in human society result from technological advancement. Because man's advancement is determined by technology which society uses to address its needs, the social media present themselves for image building communication. TikTok for instance, like other social media, is not only a pivotal platform in earning Nigeria its place on the international stage as it has become a global hub for cultural engagement, it is showcasing Nigeria's top talents and is helping the country connect to the global content creation community (Afolayan, 2022). This has confirmed that with these tools in their hands, SMIs hold a good promise in boosting the image of the nation.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Every nation derives its reputation from the image it has projected for itself. The resultant perceived opinion or belief that other nations hold about a country and its people as a product of observed attitude and behaviour of the people either through direct contact or through news and other media products, determines it image and the extent that the nation will be accepted for assistance and partnership by the rest of the world. In an era in which the media define and shape what people will know about others and determine what relationship they are willing to go into with others; an epoch in history in which the media are the rendezvous of interactions, transactions and indeed nearly all things, any nation's image is expectedly, built as the media permit. In particular, the social media as the rave of the day, have provided the opportunity for nations to tell their stories. What is left is for Nigeria to cash in on it to better its image, already thoroughly battered by narratives of corruption, failure of governance, terrorism and general insecurity; a nations perceived as one with terribly weak economy, hunger and deprivation among others. From the 1980s, Nigeria was seen as a country characterized by poverty, illiteracy, and crime. Through the decade of the 1990s and even at present, the news out of Nigeria continues to centre around these issues.

The country urgently requires a changed narrative to gain a better reputation for improved fortunes in the global community. Readily available to bring this to concrete reality are social media influencers who have already established their presence on the global stage. Social media influencers have great potential to become ambassadors for their countries and shape the image of their nations with their contents. With social media and SMIs, there is a new appreciation for other countries, cultures and peoples. There is of course, no doubt that Nigeria can benefit from this wave.

The media and the advancement in communication technology especially powered by social media and the use to which SMIs have put these technologies, resulting in their unprecedented popularity, have shown a potential for an improved reputation for Nigeria. With the appreciation of the works by stars in the music, comedy and film industries, not forgetting even influential prayer leaders, these social media influencers are at the threshold of changing the narratives for Nigeria, as the perception by big players on the world stage about the country has pointed at. The premier of the second instalment of the box office smash hit movie *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* held in Lagos with cast members, including the leads in attendance (Tartaglione, 2022) shows that the narrative of insecurity has began to change. Finding a credible venue for the event and the removal of fear about lack of fan enthusiasm are indicative that Nigeria is being perceived as a place to do business.

Although not ruling out other factors to contribute to the changing narrative, the role of Nigeria's social media influencers in selling #NaijaToTheWorld cannot be taken for granted. These top influencers are calling attention to their nation one viral content at a time. It is on the basis of this that it is recommended that Nigerian government should deliberately enlist SMIs to promote Nigeria's positives and create contents that portray the nation in good light. If they are officially enlisted as Nigeria's image ambassadors and admonished to deliberately make positive virtues of Nigerians part of their contents, the droves of social media users that follow them will be exposed to such positive messages. On the other hand, Nigeria's SMIs must realize that they owe their country a duty to promote its interest and deliberately initiate and pursue the building of positive image for the nation through their contents.

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