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E-PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: FORMULATING A CITIZENCONTENT ENGAGEMENT MODEL

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E-PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: FORMULATING A CITIZEN-CONTENT ENGAGEMENT MODEL

Research paper

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Abstract

Governments around the world are increasingly using the internet to inform, interact and communicate with their citizens, thereby fostering e-public engagement. A significant research focus has been restricted to how governments use the internet, the policies surrounding its use, and how it impacts or benefits governance and public engagement. However, there is a need for studies to investigate –from the citizens’ perspective – factors that may influence citizens’ engagement with governments’ contents on the internet. This study, therefore, investigates citizens-content engagement using a qualitative approach. Findings indicate that there are five main factors that influence such engagement: information need, attributes of the contents, the perception of the writer, trust in government, and citizens’ affinity for governments’ online platforms. With these five factors, this study formulates a citizen-content engagement (C-CE) model.

Keywords: E-Participation, E-Public Engagement, E-Government, Content Engagement, Citizen Engagement, Governments’ Contents.

1 Introduction

A significant amount of studies has focused on the use, supporting policies, impact and benefits of providing e-government services to citizens (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Bonson, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Lee & Kwak, 2012; Mickoleit, 2014; Näkki et al., 2011). Conversely, there is a dearth of research on digital contents or information provided by the government, their value to the public and their effects on e-public engagement participation (Janssen, Charalabidis, & Zuiderwijk, 2012). It is argued that since governments are increasingly using the internet to inform their citizens, there is the need to investigate citizens’ engagement with governments’ information on their online platforms. Indeed, there should be attempts at understanding factors that may affect citizens’ engagement with governments’ contents on the internet. Therefore, this study asks: What are the factors that influence citizens’ engagement with governments’ contents on the internet? The aim of this research is to develop a holistic framework that would explain citizens’ engagement with governments’ contents on the internet. The objective is to identify factors that influence citizens’ engagement with government-owned online contents.

1.1 Citizens-content engagement

Zuiderwijk, Janssen, Gil-García, and Helbig (2014) observed that citizens’ engagement with and use of government’s information is an unexplored niche topic that needs more research attention. From a review of the literature, only recently has there been a study exclusively investigating citizens’ engagement with governments’ contents on the internet (Bonson, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2014). These studies retrospectively investigated citizens’ engagement based on popularity of the contents as

determined by the number of ‘likes’ they get; the commitment of citizens to the contents as determined by the number of comments left; and the “virality” as determined by the number of times the contents were shared (Bonsón et al., 2014, p. 56). However, research has shown that likes, comments and sharing/spread of online contents are not necessarily good indicators of audience engagement with such contents as people are also known to comment on, like and/or share contents they never read (Haile, 2014; Manjoo, 2013; Mintz, 2014). Recently, an experimental research was designed to investigate the effect of participation in an online discourse on opinion change and policy preferences. Ironically, this research set out to investigate the discourse on governments’ platforms but observed that there was even a bigger problem with audience-content engagement. The researchers (Smith, John, & Sturgis, 2013, p. 727) owned up that the “most challenging” of their findings for those who wish to design effective online engagement strategies is that “there was little use of background materials among compliers” which results to uninformed contributions and participation in discourse surrounding those materials and defeats the aim of democratic deliberation.

Arnstein (1969) -in her widely-cited article – argued that information was essential for genuine public participation. Information is seen as the foundation of democracies (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014), which, in turn, determine the possible implementation, use and success of e-public engagement initiatives (Norris, 2001). Government information is at the core of e-public engagement; Mergel (2013) refers to this as government’s attempt at transparency. The process of e-participation starts from the publication of information by the government, which is then used by the citizens, who then provide feedback to the government on the use of the information (Zuiderwijk, Janssen, Choenni, Meijer, & Alibaks, 2012). Governments’ provision of online information not only facilitates better transparency and trust in the government but also encourages participatory governance and creates a “read/write” society who follow and contribute to what the government does (Open Government Data, 2015). Although governments do provide information on the internet, it is widely believed that its value - just like other internet-based artefacts - is in its spread and ‘publication’ (Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010; Goggins & Petakovic, 2014; Lerman & Hogg, 2010; Onnela & Reed-Tsochas, 2010; Ye & Wu, 2010). However, Janssen et al. (2012) and Ubaldi (2013) argue that the true value of government information can only be attained when stakeholders engage with it, use it to make better decisions about their lives and contribute/participate meaningfully in public affairs (Ubaldi, 2013). Having a presence online and providing information on the internet for citizens does not necessarily mean e-public engagement (Coursey & Norris, 2008), the citizens must be able to engage with such information. But what is engagement?

1.2 Theoretical Background

Although engagement has been of interest in studies on e-learning, e-reading, multimedia presentation (Douglas & Hargadon, 2000; Guthrie et al., 2004; Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003; Marshall, 2007) and advertising (Heath, 2007; Wang, 2006), conceptualizing and defining engagement have been contentious amongst researchers and practitioners (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). This is as a result of the subjectivity of practitioners and researchers from different fields as to what engagement means to them. However, Mollen and Wilson (2010) aggregated the conceptualization of engagement by scholars across different fields of research and opined that there are three predominant factors in its definition: that it is a mental state accompanied by active, sustained and complex cognitive processing; that it is associated with the intent to satisfy utility and relevance at the barest minimum; and that it involves emotional bonding/impact, emotional congruence, pleasure and satisfaction. Adding to the difficulty in conceptualising engagement is its close relationship with involvement, attention and experience which, according to Mollen and Wilson (2010) and Calder et al. (2009), have brought about divided opinions as to whether they are one and the same or different concepts. In defining involvement, Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park (2005) opined that it is an individual’s state of mental readiness to deploy his/her cognitive

resources to a consumable object, decision or action. Heath (2007) defined attention as a conscious rational construct that determines the amount of thought given to an advertisement, or in a general sense -a consumable object, decision or action. It can be argued then that involvement and attention are one and the same concept since they involve a conscious attempt by an individual to expend his/her mental or cognitive resources – including thinking/thoughts- in a physical or abstract element. On the other hand, experience was defined as an individual's internal and subjective response to a direct or indirect contact with an element (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000); it is an individual's belief about how an element fits into his/her life; this belief may be utilitarian or intrinsically enjoyable in nature (Calder et al., 2009). Furthermore, attention/involvement is seen as an important dimension of engagement (Mollen & Wilson, 2010) whilst experiences aggregate to form engagement (Calder et al., 2009). An element's engagement-ability is its power to hold the attention of an individual. To investigate people's engagement with online contents, it is important to understand their needs for such contents by asking why and how these contents are used and/or obtained (Bertot, Jaeger, & McClure, 2008; Davies, 2010; Davies, 2012; Eggers, 2005; Mainka, Hartmann, Stock, & Peters, 2015). Therefore, the Uses Gratification Theory (UGT), which is used to ascertain the why and the how of media use (Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009), shall be the premise for this study.

Kayahara and Wellman (2007) and Krishnatray, Singh, Raghavan, and Varma (2009) observed that there are three types of gratifications on the web: the content, process and social gratifications. Content gratification implies that web users are motivated to visit a site dependent on the interest in and attitude towards the content of the site. Process gratification is associated with the website's ease of use, and social gratification focuses on the gratification that web users derive from interacting with others.

Similarly, citizens engage with government information in two perspectives: as artefacts and/or as processes ((Davies and Bawa, 2012) cited in (Susha, Grönlund, & Janssen, 2015)). According to Susha et al. (2015), as artefacts, government information should be user-friendly by meeting citizens' information needs and must be designed and presented appropriately. As processes, every relevant stakeholder must be part of the development and implementation of policies for the use of government information (Maruyama, Douglas, & Robertson, 2013), collaborate in developing such information (Davies, 2010) and users should be able to interact with the providers and give feedback on the use of the information (Zuiderwijk et al., 2012). As artefacts, government information is related to content gratification and refers to the information types/topics and features of government's contents that can improve citizens' engagement with government contents. The processes aspect refers to those activities involving the stakeholders that could influence their engagement with government's contents and are related to both process and social gratifications.

From the theoretical background, three main questions emerged: what are citizens' information needs? What are the desirable content features? What activities can facilitate citizen-content engagement? To adequately answer these main questions, ten sub-questions (Q1-Q10) were developed as outlined in Appendix 1.

2 Research Methodology

Data was collected from Nigerians. The choice of Nigeria was based on theoretical and methodological relevance as well as for convenience sakes. In terms of theoretical relevance, data was collected from Nigerians in order to extend the limited e-participation research in developing countries (Moatshe & Mahmood, 2012; Sandoval-Almazan, Leyva, & Gil-Garcia, 2013) and to initiate such research in the Nigerian context. Focusing on just Nigerians was methodologically relevant to this exploratory study as it would allow for a more in-depth investigation that could inform future studies (Zainal, 2007). Although it was possible to collect data from other developing countries, the Researchers found it more convenient to collect data from Nigerians based on already existing links.

The Researchers ensured that this study recruited only participants who can provide information about the target issue (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and can articulate their thoughts in speech and/or in writing (Strickland et al., 2003). Since this research is in the Nigerian context, the Researcher recruited participants who are between the ages of 18 and 49 and who have gained University degrees. This is because studies have shown that Internet use is high amongst people in that age bracket and that the level of education had the strongest positive influence on interest in politics and government-related issues (Pew Research Centre, 2014a, 2014b). To ensure that quality data is gathered from participants that would be interviewed, the Researcher focused on observable characteristics that could improve the level of critical thinking and contribution in this phase. Participants' level of educational qualification was used as a yardstick for selection. To recruit the participants, an online questionnaire was designed on Survey Monkey and sent to people in the Researchers' immediate social circle between the ages of 18 and 49. They, in turn, forwarded it to other people. Everyone who completed the survey was a potential participant for the interview study and data collated from this survey helped in the recruitment of the best possible participants for the study. 51 people completed the survey which asked for names, age, gender, the level of education, and interest in being interviewed; 26 were from the Researcher's immediate social circle while 25 were external. Of the 51 respondents, 38 were willing to be interviewed, 10 were undecided, and three declined. Of the 38 respondents who were willing to be interviewed, only 26 eventually participated. The Respondents were aged between 21 and 42, with a majority of them aged 30-39 (73%); 88.4% were male, and 73% had postgraduate degrees. 15 of the respondents were from the Researchers' immediate social circle. All respondents were Nigerians, 14 were resident in Nigeria, five in the United Kingdom, three in the United States, two in South Africa, and one each in Kenya and Thailand.

According to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), qualitative research is concerned with gaining in-depth understanding and meaning about a given phenomenon and not making generalised hypothesis; therefore, frequencies and statistics are rarely important. The guiding principle in qualitative research as it concerns sample size is the concept of saturation (Mason, 2010) which refers to the point when there is no new data emerging from the data collection process (Francis et al., 2010) or the point where the emerging data becomes counter-productive and adds nothing to the overall study (Dey, 1999). This concept of saturation has been contentious. Some researchers rightly point out that most qualitative researchers do not realistically have the resources it requires to keep collecting data until point of saturation (Green & Thorogood, 2013); while others argue that some studies claim to have reached saturation without a proof of what it means and how it was achieved (Mason, 2010) and that there is no framework or set of principles to guide and report saturation in qualitative studies (Francis et al., 2010). However, this study adopted Francis et al. (2010, p. 1234)'s principles for specifying data saturation which state that (1) Researchers should specify an initial sample size from which to collect data. The defined sample size for this study was 20, which is in agreement with common practice in qualitative research (Green & Thorogood, 2013; Mason, 2010). This sample size may well increase if new data keep emerging. (2) Researchers should specify an additional number of interviews to conduct following a point when saturation is reached. For this study, five more participants were interviewed following any point of saturation. Saturation was reached at the 21st interview and five more people were interviewed with no new data/theme emerging, resulting in a total sample size of 26 participants.

Data was collected using the interview technique which is a popular qualitative research technique in information systems research (Schultze & Avital, 2011). The interview was semi-structured and started with ten questions, but there were 15 questions altogether as data collection progressed. This was necessitated by the emergence of themes and areas of interest during data collection and analysis. The interview was conducted face-to-face (four sessions), over the telephone/Skype calls (13 sessions), and via Facebook chat

(nine sessions). The oral interviews lasted an average of 43 minutes and the textual interviews took four days (multiple sessions) on the average. Data collection took seven weeks.

Thematic analysis method was used to code and analyse the qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method through which themes within a qualitative data corpus are identified, analysed and reported. Thematic analysis is predominant in qualitative research (Guest, 2012), and its fundamental and underlying principles are found in other qualitative data analysis methods like content analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory analysis; but there are nuances. This study adopted Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six-phase approach to thematic analysis. In the first phase, each textual data item was imported into the Nvivo software, which is a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) developed by QSR. The verbal data were first transcribed verbatim and also imported into NVIVO. Each of the 26 data items was read thrice after being imported into Nvivo and important/interesting segments of data were highlighted and noted. In the second and third phases, which Srnka and Koeszegi (2007) referred to these phases as unitisation (phase 2) and categorisation (phase 3), the data were divided into units of analysis (coding) and a category scheme was also developed. At the fourth reading of each data item, important and interesting segments of the data were coded. The note-taking in the previous phase made this easier. Interesting segments of the data corpus were collated into appropriate codes. These codes were determined deductively by the main questions derived from the theoretical background (information need, content features and activities), and inductively by the emergence of other relevant categories that explain citizens' engagement with governments' online contents (Srnka & Koeszegi, 2007). In the fourth and fifth phases, we conducted an iterative process of changing, eliminating, adding and re-categorising the data set to capture the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. This process went on even as findings from the interview data corpus were documented until a perfect fit for all categories/themes, sub-themes/sub-categories and codes were ascertained (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After this refinement, five themes were identified: information needs, the attributes of the contents, the perception of writers' credibility, citizens' affinity for governments' online platforms, and trust in government/agency. These five themes make up the variables that directly impact on citizen-content engagement. The sixth phase presents the findings as is seen below.

3 Findings and Discussions

From the qualitative analysis, this study found that six factors directly influence citizens' engagement with governments' contents on the internet (CE); these include the information needs of the citizens (IN), visual attributes of the contents (VAC), perceived content quality (PCQ), perceived writer's credibility (PWC), citizens' affinity for governments' online platforms (IVP) and citizens' trust in the government/agency (TGA). VAC and PCQ were collectively classed as content attributes. This study also found that CE, through IVP, would be indirectly influenced by TGA, and attributes of the platform which include its similarity with the public sphere, and its hedonic/persuasive features (HF). The platform's similarity with the public sphere includes its accessibility (FA), the possibility of collaborative content creation (CC), and the possibility for interaction and deliberation (IDelib). The findings also suggest that governments' choice of platforms would have an effect on the influence of TGA, FA, CC and IDelib on IVP, with the use of social media likely to have more positive effect than websites (this is described by PC). Finally, the study suggests citizens' level of awareness about the government/agency and their platforms would have an effect on the influence of IVP on CE, with an optimal level of awareness more likely to have more positive effect than a poor level of awareness (this is described by VP). These findings are explained in detail below.

In this section, we present the factors identified by the respondents as being influential in their engagement with governments' online contents. Interestingly, all the respondents reported that the best indicator of

engagement with governments' contents on the internet is reading the contents completely (without abandoning it before the end). For example, a respondent said:

If it's interesting, what I do is read through without abandoning it. Sometimes I get discouraged if the person is coming from a biased point of view. Sometimes when I read through the first paragraph and see the person's line of argument. And if it is an area I'm well informed about, I'd see that there is already some bias in the person's analysis then, I quit.

This is in contrast with Bonson et al. (2015)'s focus on the number of shares, likes and comments as proof for citizens' engagement with governments' contents. Indeed, a significant number of studies have relied on the spread (Cha et al., 2010; Goggins & Petakovic, 2014; Lerman & Hogg, 2010; Onnela & Reed-Tsochas, 2010; Ye & Wu, 2010) of and discourse that follow governments' online contents (De Cindio, De Marco, & Grew, 2007; Jensen, 2003; Sack, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007) as adequate proof of audience-content engagement. However, in agreement with our finding, previous studies have found that there is really no correlation between spread of online contents and audience engagement with such contents, and that comments left on online contents can sometimes be outside the context of the information provided (Haile, 2014; Manjoo, 2013; Mintz, 2014). For factors that influence engagement with contents, the respondents identified: information needs, the attributes of the contents, the perception of writers' credibility, citizens' affinity for governments' online platforms, and trust in the government/agency.

3.1 Information need

For all the participants, a key deciding factor for their engagement with governments' online contents was how the said contents meet their information needs. For example, a respondent said:

I have to say this, even as individuals, there are areas of interest. For instance, if you open a web page, and there is a kind of story, if it is an area that you are interested in...for instance, I am more into government, politics, economics, sports. So as much as possible I do not miss those stories, especially if they are interesting stories

This opinion was shared by another respondent who indicated that he is more interested in national issues:

It will only put me off if the information contained therein is not of interest to me. It all depends on the topic of interest. For instance, national issues that deal with youth empowerment, jobs and economy are issues of interest to me. These I read from beginning to the end.

This finding is in support of previous studies in the literature that observed that each individual will have his/her own subjects of interest which may yet be dependent on the type of activity which s/he is engaged with at a given moment (Faibisoff & Ely, 1974; Mai, Case, & Given, 2016; Weller, 2014). This makes it very difficult to determine the information an individual may need for personal use. In the context of governance, the difficulty to understand citizens' personal needs for information is compounded with the current era of individualised access to the government where citizens deal with the government as an individual customer instead of being part of an organised public (Crenson & Ginsberg, 2003). A possible implication would be the need for governments to create an avenue for information provision on demand. Furthermore, this finding is not surprising and has also been observed by previous studies which found that providing the needed information to citizens enhances their engagement with governments' online contents and facilitate e-public engagement (Davies, 2014; Susha et al., 2015). The respondents mentioned three key categories of information they want from the government which account for three out of the ten types of citizen information needs identified by Johannessen, Flak, and Sæbø (2012, p. 30). These include (1) Information for personal use and benefits which include information on employment and empowerment of citizens, access to government's interventions, and citizens' rights. This also includes knowledge-enriching

information for professional and academic reasons. (2) Information for political participation, which refers to information that could help them judge government's performance, make political decisions and participate in the political activities of the country. (3) Information on trending socio-political events, which was seen as 'local information' by Johannessen et al. (2012) and Bonson et al. (2015) and contains trending information from the political scenery, local events and projects, etc.

3.2 Content attributes

The respondents described a number of the inherent attributes of contents that can influence their engagement with such contents; these can be categorised into the visual attributes and perceived information quality of the contents. These two categories represent the hedonic and utilitarian appeals of information as observed by Sussha et al. (2015).

The visual attributes of the contents refer to the presentation of the content especially in terms of length, and the use of relevant pictures and/or videos. The effect of an online content's length has been discussed in the literature by researchers and practitioners. For example, Haile (2014), Manjoo (2013) and Mintz (2014) suggest that the more that people read contents online the more they tune off or disengage. This may be because the audience does not have enough time to delve into details of the information on the content (Zuiderwijk et al., 2012). Similarly, Morkes and Nielsen (1997) recommended that online contents should have concise texts as a majority of the audience would want the content to fit on a single screen. Following a study of online readers, Nielsen (2008) suggested that by default, online contents should be strictly restricted to around 500 words unless they are meant for a targeted elite readership. Furthermore, a study by Bonson et al. (2015) found that pictures improve citizens' reaction to governments' posts on Facebook. This agrees with our finding about the importance of pictures and videos in influencing citizens' engagement with governments' contents. Renowned web-usability researcher and expert –Jakob Nielsen- suggests that graphics and texts should complement each other (Morkes & Nielsen, 1997).

The perceived information quality refers to the contents' timeliness, relevance to the audience, 'informativeness', accuracy, simplicity and story-like presentation where possible. These factors have been discussed in the literature (Chen, Clifford, & Wells, 2002; Nardi & O'Day, 1999; O'Brien & Toms, 2008; Peng, Fan, & Hsu, 2004; Shedroff, 1999). Previous researchers have observed that citizens' engagement with governments' content is negatively impacted when the information is obsolete (Janssen et al., 2012; Lee & Kwak, 2012). Davies (2012) and Sussha et al. (2015) also posit that citizens would engage with government information that is relevant to them, which in turn, engenders e-participation. According to Janssen et al. (2012) and O'Riain, Curry, and Harth (2012), the lack of authenticity, accuracy of government information and concerns over the trustworthiness of the source mitigate citizens' engagement with the content. As it concerns simplicity, Morkes and Nielsen (1997) suggest that on the internet, simple and informal writing are preferred. Janssen et al. (2012) observed that governments make the mistake of assuming that citizens have the capabilities and knowledge levels required to use government information. They noted that governments would normally apply statistical techniques in collecting, analysing, interpreting and presenting data even when statistical knowledge is scarce. This results in a situation where the content is not understandable to the general public, and where citizens and users of the content find it difficult to use the information because they are unfamiliar with the definitions and categories that were used to present the data (Zuiderwijk et al., 2012). The story-like presentation of the content, where possible, facilitates the media immersion, engagement, participation and experience of users (Nardi & O'Day, 1999; O'Brien & Toms, 2008; Shedroff, 1999). To achieve these is the aim of information design which is the art and science of preparing information so that they can be used by human beings with efficiency and effectiveness. It is to designing interactions that are easy, natural and as pleasant as possible (Horn, 2000).

3.3 Citizens' perception of the writer

The respondents described the influence of their judgement about a content's writer on engagement with the said content. This phenomenon is not new in research and is referred to as evaluative feedback through which an audience judges a message sender as it concerns his/her ethos or credibility. The readers judge the "appropriateness, effectiveness or correctness" of the message source's opinions, thoughts, feelings or behaviour (Capps, 2001, p. 59). As it concerns textual communication, the audience judges the writer's language for professionalism, grammar for correctness and spelling for errors or lack thereof (McLean, 2014).

3.4 Affinity for governments' online platforms

The respondents highlighted the impact which governments' online platforms can have on citizens' engagement with the hosted contents. There is abundant literature especially in the field of e-marketing which show the impact of media vehicles/platforms on customers' engagement with adverts placed on the platforms (Calder et al., 2009; Chen & Wells, 1999; Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Peng et al., 2004). Findings from these studies basically suggest that it is more likely that customers would engage with adverts placed on their platform of choice than on others (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013). This also agrees with Matuszak (2007) who advised businesses to reach their audience on the online platform they visit most. Succinctly put, if the citizens do not visit government platforms, then they would not see the contents and therefore citizen-content engagement would never take place. The respondents discussed a number of factors that could influence their affinity for and intent to visit governments' platforms, these include: trust in government and the platform attributes.

3.4.1 Trust in government and agencies

Findings from a study by Carter and Bélanger (2005) showed that trustworthiness influences citizens' intention to adopt and use e-government initiatives. Trustworthiness refers to users' perception of confidence in an electronic marketer's reliability and integrity (Belanger, Hiller, & Smith, 2002). Citizens must have the trust and confidence in both the government and the technologies used for service or information delivery. Citizens' affinity for governments' platforms is impacted by their perception of the government, and the scepticism that government may be manipulating the information on their online platforms. The Respondents discussed how citizens' perception of confidence and trust in the government in power could influence their affinity for to visit government's platforms on the internet. For example:

What may discourage citizens from visiting government's website is if there is a failure of governance. When there is a failure of governance in such a way that citizens are not happy the way government is going about things, there is massive unemployment, there is poverty all over the land, things are not going on well, workers are not being paid salaries, roads are not fixed, people now get angry with government so anything that concerns government people develop apathy for it. They don't want to know, they don't want to hear about it, essentially, when such a situation arises, it will discourage the citizens from going to government's websites.

Trust in government also directly influences citizens' engagement with governments' online contents. This has been observed by previous studies that pointed out the ease of propaganda proliferation by governments as aided by advances in technology, and the negative impact it has on citizens' engagement with government information (Baldino & Goold, 2014; Janssen et al., 2012; Lee, 2005). According to a respondent:

Government in general, everywhere in the world -but it has to do with degrees now- tries to promote itself in what they are doing and play less on the areas that they are not doing well. So,

there are some elements of emotions and sentiments that go on in that projection for whatever they are writing and whatever they are giving to us...in areas which they are not achieving they play less on it, and begin to highlight more on the areas they are doing well. So, when you take it back to most of the 3rd world countries like in Nigeria, the level of corruption makes it impossible for the government to be very sincere in giving information pertaining to her daily activities. When you don't trust the people who are there, I mean who are in governance...so whatever comes forth from them you might not be interested in going through.

3.4.2 Platform attributes

The respondents described two attributes of governments' platforms that would influence their affinity for such platforms, these are the platform(s) similarity with the public sphere, and its hedonic features.

Habermas (1964, p. 49) defined the public sphere as a realm of our social life in which something approximate to public opinions can be formed, where the public opinion refers to a collection of different individual views and beliefs (Herbst, 1993). A public sphere must be independent of the state and should have no restriction as it concerns assembly and the expression of opinions. Every citizen should be allowed access, be free to put forward individual views and opinions and be free to contest the views and opinions of other citizens in the discourse of issues of general interest (Hauser, 1998; Pusey, 1987). Habermas went further to suggest that a public sphere exists when private citizens assemble to converse in an unrestricted manner. The respondents highlighted three factors that would influence their affinity for government's platforms and which are similar to the characteristics of the public sphere. These include (1) *free, easy and unrestricted access to government's online platforms*. This finding is corroborated by Carter and Belanger (2012) who found that perceived access to the internet had an influence on citizens' adoption and use of governments' online platforms and services. Similarly, Lin and Lu (2000)'s study showed that the ease or difficulty in accessing a website affects users' belief in it. (2) *The ability for citizens to post their own contents on the platform*. Bonson et al. (2015) found that there were greater signs of engagement on governments' Facebook pages when citizens are allowed to post contents on the wall. This ensures that citizens are not just mere recipients of government services and information but collaborate amongst themselves and the government to provide the needed services and information (Bason, 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011) in what is called co-production. The respondents showed interest in being able to also create and publish information on government's online platforms in agreement with Zuiderwijk et al. (2012) who observed that limitation of information provision on governments' platforms to a minority of researchers affects its use by citizens. (3) *The ability to interact and deliberate with other citizens and government officials*. This is closely related to the need for co-production. According to Mahrer and Krimmer (2005) and Oktem, Demirhan, and Demirhan (2014), such capabilities will encourage dialogue between citizens and governments on governments' platforms and encourage a read-and-write society with meaningful input in public policies (Open Government Data, 2015; Ubaldi, 2013)

The use of interesting activities on an online platform as a way of attracting visitors and developing loyalty to the platform has been discussed by previous researchers (Chen et al., 2002; Chen & Wells, 1999; Peng et al., 2004); they suggested that online platforms should be entertaining, fun and imaginative. Weiksner, Fogg, and Liu (2008) observed that an online platform's hedonic and persuasive features include activities that can cause provocation and retaliation, instigate revelation and comparison, cause competition, and encourage self-expression and group exchange. The respondents discussed the need for governments' platforms to host challenges and activities that can attract the youth; these should be interesting and fun. The respondents also highlighted the importance of getting notification about new contents and activities on government's platforms; Andrew, Borriello, and Fogarty (2007, p. 262) referred to this suggestion

technology and defined it as “one that incorporates active notifications that contain information that allows someone to do something they might not otherwise have done”. The persuasive capability of the suggestion technology has been studied in online platforms, especially the social media (Andrew et al., 2007; Fogg & Iizawa, 2008; Weiksner et al., 2008).

3.5 Effects of platform types and citizens’ level of political awareness

The findings also suggest that governments’ choice of platforms (PC) would have an impact on citizens’ affinity for the platforms (IVP) by moderating the influence of trust in government/agency (TGA) and the similarity of the platform to the public sphere. As opposed to traditional websites, the respondents discussed the need for governments to improve their use of social media as it helps build trust especially with the younger generation, helps improve access to governments’ contents, helps facilitate collaborative content creation on governments’ platforms, and also facilitates interaction and deliberation between and amongst citizens and government officials. In the literature, governments’ use of social media has been observed to facilitate transparency and trust (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Bertot et al., 2012; Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012). Bertot et al. (2010) observed that social media has four key strengths: collaboration, participation, empowerment, and time. It provides the opportunity for remote users to connect, socialise, form communities, share information and work towards achieving a common goal. In a study by Bonson et al. (2015), it was found that citizens were more active on government’s Facebook accounts which allowed the posting of contents on their wall. Social media allows the creation and exchange of user-generated contents (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012); this is not possible with traditional websites which are characterised by unidirectional communication (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008).

Finally, the findings suggest that citizens’ level of political awareness have an impact on citizens’ engagement with government’ contents by moderating the influence of their affinity for governments’ platforms. The findings suggest that the more politically aware the citizens are, the more their affinity for governments’ online platforms, and thence engagement with governments’ contents. Political awareness refers to a citizen’s sensitivity to and interest in government and public policies and “affects virtually every aspect of citizens’ political attitudes” (Zaller, 1990, p. 1). The respondents discussed this phenomenon in two kinds: awareness/interest in government/agency and in their online platforms. According to the respondents, the level of political awareness is determined by the citizens’ political efficacy and the government/agency’s effort to be visible or prominent to the public. Rogers (2003) referred to the latter as observability in his Diffusion of Innovation theory; Moore and Benbasat (1991) termed it visibility. According to Rogers, it is the degree to which product usage and impact are visible to people. Users' affinity for and intent to use a system increases with the awareness that others are using it (Carter & Bélanger, 2005; Moore & Benbasat, 1991; Rogers, 2003). The respondents highlighted the need for governments and agencies to create awareness about what they do and about their online platforms too. This points towards the principles of marketing and advertisement which basically entails promoting the concerned agencies and their online platforms (Grow & Altstiel, 2005; Panopoulou, Tambouris, & Tarabanis, 2014). A respondent said:

Government's online platforms are not properly advertised...there is a total lack of awareness. If you don't know that a government agency exists, why would you want to visit their platform? Government agencies should start by letting Nigerians know that (they) exist... So, the first thing they should do is let Nigerians know of their presence both online and offline.

4 Conclusion, Limitation and Recommendation

This study makes a number of contribution to digital government research. First, this work is among the first to focus on the info-centric aspect of e-participation vis-à-vis citizens' engagement with government online contents. E-participation involves communication, interaction and collaboration between and among citizens and governments in States' decision-making processes. Therefore, we believe that for governments interested in improving the digital participation of their citizens must understand that information is key. Such governments must also ensure that citizens engage with such information as this will form the basis for and improve the quality of subsequent exchanges and interactions and citizens' contribution to States' decision-making process.

Second, this study introduces of citizen-content engagement (C-CE) model as shown in Figure 1, which was developed through a qualitative inquiry. The model shows the various factors that may contribute to citizens' engagement with contents on governments' online platforms as a facilitator for optimal e-public engagement. This model illustrates that there are five main factors that influence such engagement: information need, attributes of the contents which may be visual or perceived, the perception of the writer, trust in government, and citizens' affinity for governments' online platforms. The findings go further to indicate that citizens' affinity for governments' online platforms could be influenced by their trust in government and the attributes of the platforms which may be the public sphere and/or the hedonic attributes. The findings also indicate the individual moderating effects of the types of platforms used by governments and the citizens' level of political awareness.

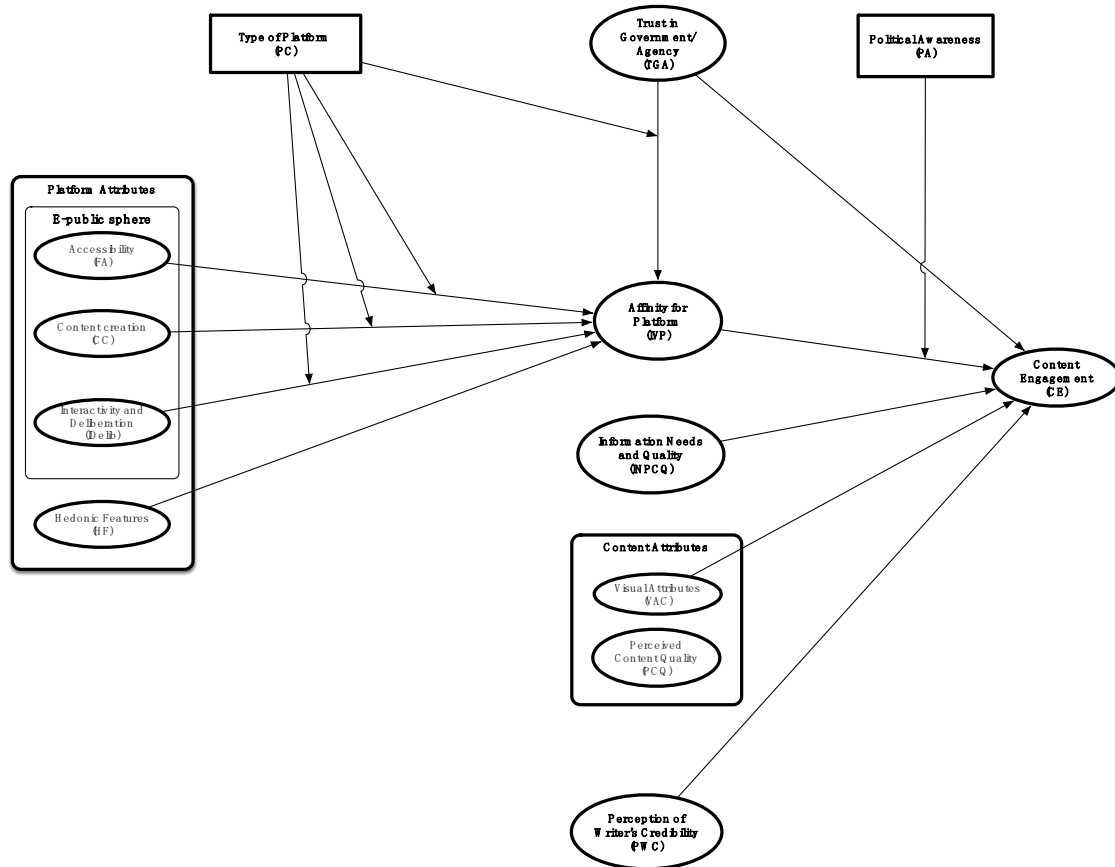


Figure 1. Citizens-content engagement (C-CE) model

The findings of our research suffer from the usual limitations of qualitative studies as it concerns generalisation; obviously, sampling the opinions of twenty-six citizens of a single country are not enough to produce a definitive generalisation about factors that influence citizens' engagement with governments' online contents around the world. The sample size is, also, not representative of the Nigerian population that have access to the internet and are interested in government information. This study is also no different from other empirical investigations with their inherent methodological weaknesses. One major weakness of this research is the collection of data exclusively from 'ordinary' citizens and not from other stakeholders like businesses and civil society organisations who also use government information. Another weakness is the loose theoretical base of this research, which is mainly because the Researchers aimed at developing a framework in a research area in which there has been little prior research. It is, therefore, appropriate to consider our findings with some scepticism. However, this study has succeeded in proffering a framework that may increase citizens' engagement with governments' contents, and also in initiating a discourse in that regard for future studies to participate in. The Researchers recommend further quantitative studies to test and possibly refine this model.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Why do you visit your government's online platforms?
2. What are your main reasons for seeking government information?
3. What types of information would you want your government to make available online?
4. What are the features/qualities of government's online contents that you find interesting?
5. What qualities of government's online contents do you consider a turn-off?
6. What activities on or features of government's platforms do you think would encourage you to engage with the contents?
7. What activities on or features of government's platforms do you think may discourage you/Nigerians from visiting the platforms?
8. What features do you think may help attract you/Nigerians to government's platforms?
9. How could you tell if one is engaged with an online article?
10. How do you relate with online contents that you find interesting?
11. *What do you expect from the government on the internet?*
12. *How will you describe your government's use of the internet to achieve its objectives?*
13. *On what Platform/s will you want the government to provide information to you and to get feedbacks from you?*
14. *What effect will interactions with government officials have on your interest in government's contents?*
15. *Would you want information government's platform to be solely from the government or would you want members of the public to also make information available on NOA's platforms?*
 - a. *Why do you say so?*
 - b. *If yes, how do you suggest that this be done to ensure that it isn't' misused?*
 - c. *What effect do you think this may have on Nigerians visiting and reading articles on NOA's platforms?*

Note* Questions 11 -15 (in italics) were not part of the original questions. They were added as data was collected.

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