Exploring the Impact of Social and Source Cues on News Selection

AWOBAMISE Ayodeji O. & JARRAR Yosra

The current reality in Nigeria is that media houses choose news and the way events are covered based on their ideological or political leanings. At the same time, audience members appear to also choose news contents that reinforce their pre-existing perceptions or views while avoiding those that go against these views. Based on Sears and Freedman's (1967) review of selective exposure or information utility, this experimental study set out to examine the possible influence of online news social endorsements on news selectivity in Nigeria. Findings reveal that the selective choices news consumers make with regard to consuming and disseminating news on the Internet are significantly influenced by online social endorsements such as Likes and recommendations. Findings also show that the effect of social endorsement is stronger among partisan respondents selecting articles from an ideologically misaligned source and that the presence of social endorsements significantly reduce partisan selectivity.

Keywords: selective exposure, polarization, social media, Internet

Nigeria is a country in West Africa and the most populous country on the continent with a population of over 170,000,000 people. The country is a melting pot of different cultures and ethnic groups that were brought together by the 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates during colonial rule (Omu, 1978). In 1960, Nigeria gained independence. The northern region is mostly Islamic, and the southern part of the country is more liberal and exposed to western education. These differences resulted in distrust amongst the various tribes and ethnic groups in the country that culminated in a deadly civil war that started in 1966 (Omu, 1978).

According to Reuben Abati (2000), the Nigerian press is affected by the regional, ethnic, and political contestations for resources and power. Such contestations in the political scene are also reflected in the press industry, and the rivalry and ethnic affiliations are also seen in the way news is reported (Abati, 2000). Over 42 newspapers are published in Nigeria and the vast majority are published in the southwestern region of the country and owned by or affiliated to past or present political leaders and businessmen in the

country. According to Ralph Akinfeleye (2011), the ownership structures of Nigerian newspapers reflect the ethnic rivalry and plurality of Nigeria. For Frederick Mordi and Silk Ugwu (2017), newspaper ownership in Nigeria strongly determines how the news is reported. Newspapers owned by politicians are usually biased, and the owners, not the journalists, are the main gatekeepers, i.e., they determine what is newsworthy and what should be published.

Traditionally, people accessed the news through newspapers, radio or TV news programs, and, since the mid-1990s, news website. News media houses exploited these news sources to market their content by establishing a brand that people could be loyal to. Feedback on the information contained in these media was then still limited to interpersonal and mediated interpersonal communication such as discussing with friends and writing comments on news websites.

The late 1990s witnessed news media houses, both big and small, leveraging the power of the internet to market their brand. They attempted to build attractive and compelling websites that involved users by letting them browse through hyperlinks in order to increase online traffic. But at that time, this was not a convenient, pleasurable experience. The first Nigerian newspaper to fully migrate its services online was the *Post Express* under the leadership of Dr. Stanley Macebuh (Kperogi, 2011). In the early years, like most of the other media houses that had fully or partially migrated online, the *Post Express* simply recycled its offline print contents for their online subscribers. In other words, the online version of the newspaper was not a complementary platform for the offline print version but just an alternative medium for reading the exact same content.

But the emergence of Web 2.0 brought a lot of changes to the Internet. Web 2.0, the current state of online technology, refers to the migration from static HTML web pages to a more dynamic web (Marness, 2016). It allows users to participate in the process of creating content. Its emphases are user-generated contents or UGCs and interoperability or the ability of websites to operate on different devices such as computers, mobile phones, and tablets (Wilson, Lin, Longstreet, & Sarker, 2011).

According to Axel Bruns (2016), UGCs are a range of creative media content types that are created or mostly co-created by users or contributors. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in a report released in 2007, gave the three characteristics of a UGC:

1) UGC must be publicly available over the Internet
2) Must reflect a certain amount of creative effort
3) Must have been created outside of professional routines and practices (p. 4).

UGCs include images, texts, videos and audios that are posted or uploaded by Internet users on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Examples are reviews and aggregated popularity ratings (O'Reilly, 2007).

Because of Web 2.0, online media took over the news media. By the 2000s, almost all the major newspaper houses in Nigeria had an online presence, and there was an increase in popularity of citizen journalism. These online newspapers and blogs, which were not necessarily run by professional journalists, offered a level of interactivity and feedback that was unprecedented in the country and as such quickly became popular. Sites like *Linda Ikeji blog*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *Premium Times* quickly became household names in the country. Currently, Nigeria has over 50 professional online news sites and countless blogs. Most of the online news sites are actually online platforms of professional print newspapers, but some are exclusively online, while others are online platforms of TV stations in the country (Kperogi, 2011). The introduction of social networking sites in the middle to late 2000s saw online media houses start to integrate their services with sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which effectively ensured a high level of connectedness with their readers that only such platforms could provide. Since then, people have been able to see the news articles their friends like, read, and comment on, as well as tag friends and colleagues to read a particular article. These aggregated social endorsements marked the beginning of the efforts to socialize the news reading experience of Internet users.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and their tools have made it a lot easier to endorse news stories or information. The big "share" button is practically in all online newspaper sites, magazines, and even random blogs, either at the beginning or at the end of a story. With just the click of a button, a user's friends on social media can see the same messages or information he or she had just viewed. A recent study by Adweek showed that Facebook is the most popular source of referrals to major news sites (Morrison, 2015).

Traditional media's role in the dissemination of news appears to be on a steady decline as social media and online news sites now account for the bulk of information source for Nigerians (Statista, 2018). The online version of the *Vanguard* newspaper has 1,365,171 daily page views and 325,505 daily unique visitors, while its offline version only has a combined daily sales of 120,000 copies (Vanguardngr.com, 2019). Its online version has a significant social media presence, with over 700,000 Facebook likes and over 1.9 million Twitter followers (Vanguardngr.com, 2019). Based on

a search by the authors on the website aggregating site – Alexa.com, on 24 April 2019, Nigeria had over 50 professional online news sites and over 100 news blogs.

According to Solomon Messing and Sean Westwood (2014), social media influences the news media environment in two ways. First, because of social media's ability to display different contents from different news vendors in the same location, users no longer have to select a news source in order to access news information, as was the case before the advent of the Internet. Instead, users can now select the story itself based on their personal preferences or based on recommendations or social endorsements from friends and family through likes, shares, and re-tweets. This suggests that habitual de facto selective exposure is substantially less common in the context of social media. Habitual de facto selective exposure is the selection of news information or source because it is readily available. So in the context of this study, this kind of exposure occurs in a situation whereby the user has easier access to certain types of information or news source.

Second, the ubiquity of social media and the benefits it avails us have made it possible for people to utilize social endorsements when trying to select content. Because news sites have integrated personal websites within their social media account, people can see the endorsements of their friends and other connections on these news sites and decide based on what they see. Most news websites like *Punchng.com* and *Vanguard.com* have a section for most-read articles and articles with the most comments. These kinds of information guide users in selecting what news to consume and thus enhance and facilitate the consumers' ability to select socially relevant news content (Messing and Westwood, 2014).

Selective Exposure in the Context of Online News

Selective exposure theories promote the idea that consumers of news favor news information that reinforces their preexisting views and avoid information that goes against these (Coe, Tewksbury, Bond, Drogos, Porter, Yahn, & Zhang, Y., 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). Such selectivity is said to result in increased political polarization (Stroud, 2010). The concept of selective exposure can be traced to the study of Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet (1948), which found that partisan individuals encounter agreeable news messages more often than disagreeable ones.

In the same vein, fragmentation of the media environment limits the amount of information made available to people as it increases ideological homogeneity among party members or supporters that further encourages the spread and support of false or intentionally misleading information.

Since a lot of media houses have become increasingly partisan, only reporting news that favor their biases, Lance Bennet and Shanto Iyengar (2008) stressed the importance of people getting information from multiple news sources in order to have a fuller grasp of an issue.

Modernization has transformed how news is delivered. From simply being read on print and being broadcast live through television cable, news today is accessed through online media platforms, which have now become the major news sources. Online media has made it easier for individuals to select their news source based on their own personal ideologies or preferences. However, research also shows how the Internet has been the main catalyst of the fragmentation of the news media and its audience (Kyu, Seungjin, & Sungjin, 2015; Roncallo-Dow, 2017). Most of these previous studies, though, fail to consider the changes in the way people use the Internet and consume news (Morris, 2007). This study, therefore, builds on existing theories of selective exposure and focuses on information utility as proposed by David Sears and Jonathan Freedman (1967). It presents some hypotheses on how social media's distinctive feature and social endorsements trigger several heuristic decisions that influence information utility. And to test these hypotheses, two experiments had been conducted to determine the probability of heavy social endorsement increasing information selection by citizens and the effect of social endorsements in reducing political selectivity to insignificant levels.

Previous work on selective exposure suggests that people are not exposed to information that challenges their beliefs because of their habits, the lack of perceived benefits in seeking out this kind of information, and their limited social environment (Sears & Freedman, 1967). According to Diana Mutz (2004), it is rare to find people having a face-to-face discussion on issues that might challenge or change their attitudes, as people would rather interact with such issues on mass media. Because of these de facto limits on exposure to information that might challenge their attitudes, combined with constant reinforcements from a fragmented media, there is a concern that people are now unable to engage in meaningful discourse (Sunstein, 2002).

It was easier pre-Internet age to select news based on personal beliefs or attitudes. For instance, a Democrat could easily decide to watch only CNN, since it was more progressive and is more likely to reinforce one's progressive views. However, with the growth of the Internet and the wide acceptance of social media, it has become increasingly difficult to isolate oneself from certain types of information. Most aggregate sites do not consider things like political orientation when selecting contents. Facebook and other social media sites encourage users to maintain wide and diverse

online relationships (Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009). In Nigeria, aggregate sites like Flipboard, Reddit, and Feedly are not very popular, and as such, most Nigerians rely heavily on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to connect them to professional news sites for their news content. It is quite possible that de facto limits in news exposure is relatively higher than those of foreign counterparts, but it still will be significantly lower than when Nigeria could only choose among traditional media platforms (newspaper, TV, and Radio).

The cause of political selectivity goes beyond de facto differences, though. Research suggests that it is purposively undertaken as a way to select opinion and attitude-reinforcing news information (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Messing & Westwood, 2014). Research also shows that people tend to disagree more with their online connections than with their friends (Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010). From the foregoing, it is clear that although social media provides a lot of options for people to easily select news from diverse sources, it is still possible for online users to select news based on their attitudes and beliefs. So it is important to find out whether people actually do select a more diverse content or not.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on the concept of selective exposure as advanced by Sears and Freedman in 1967. Selective exposure, according to them, is "any systematic bias in audience composition" (p. 195). The general idea of the theory is that whenever the audience is biased, selective exposure occurs. The theory also suggests that people select news and other information based on their personal preferences and that they seek out information that is socially relevant, valuable, and interesting. Such information tends to reinforce a person's preexisting beliefs or views.

According to Sears and Freedman (1967), research on selective exposure has focused more on "retrospective self-reports" and not on direct and immediate observation. Therefore this study applies the theory in a real life simulation to show the immediate and direct effect of social endorsements and social cues on news selectivity.

Social Endorsements vs. Source

This section seeks to address the question "Which is more influential in impacting news selectivity: social endorsements or news source?" And it proceeds by discussing selection decision as it relates to social media. We argue here that source labels and social endorsements constitute heuristic cues that people are likely to make use of when trying to select news stories.

Consumers are exposed to multiple news stories at once—some news websites show close to 100 stories on their front page—and as such, they attempt to identity an interesting and worthy story to read based on certain criteria, including topical interest, immediacy, proximity, and prominence. This selection process makes the task of choosing what is worth reading somewhat difficult. Because of this difficulty, it is assumed that some heuristic factors come into play in order for consumers to decide on which news source to use or which news story to read. While the use of heuristic when selecting a source might lead to cognitive biases (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), a recent work by Messing and Westwood (2014) showed that heuristic processing is an important tool in the contexts of trading goods, making profits, negotiating status, and reproducing. It allows people to adjust their thinking process in response to the changes in the environment. Based on this, we posit that the cues conveying the most pertinent information are used more by consumers.

News consumption models generally propose that people make use of heuristic based on the source, the presence/position of photographs, story placement, and author to help them determine the relevance, importance, and credibility of the news story (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Hastall, 2007). In the context of aggregated social media environment, editorial cues are completely absent, which leaves the source as the only decision criterion from past models of news consumption. Therefore it is our assumption that in the absence of other selection criteria apart from the source and story title, news readers consider other factors such as the extent to which the source is likely to provide news information that reinforces their attitudes or beliefs. This therefore leads us to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Biased consumers of news content select content based on anticipated agreement as indicated by the source cues.

There are good reasons to assume that social endorsement cues in social media are a dominant factor when selecting news stories. According to Messing and Westwood (2014), well-documented social heuristic yields more important information than decision-relevant cues. When dealing with popularity cues, the bandwagon heuristic predicts that people are likely to assume that the support of others predicts personal utility and relevance, i.e., if other people like it, then it is possible that one will also like it (Sundar & Nass, 2001). The bandwagon heuristic also predicts that other people's attitudes are important in forming or arriving at an opinion and that once a large number of people endorse a certain object or attitude (or in this case, a news article), it is important to do likewise (Sunstein, 2009). There

is also evidence that points to the fact that people make use of these same heuristic when browsing the Internet trying to get information or news—it helps them in determining or assessing information credibility (Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006). This leads us to hypothesize that;

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2): Social media users select news content based on social endorsement.*

The influence of social endorsement on news consumption has become more relevant compared to news sources, especially when we consider the fact that most people now rely on social media as their primary news source. The researchers therefore posit that not only do people utilize social endorsement when selecting news stories and sources but also the presence of social endorsement shifts their attention away from source cues. When people are overwhelmed with so many options to choose from, they are expected to make use of social endorsements, choosing stories based on what conveys the most information about the value of the story, which could be the headline or title and the social endorsement it received.

> *Hypothesis 3 (H3): In the context of selective news exposure to online users, the tendency to make use of social endorsement is higher than using perceived political alignment of the source.*

> *Hypothesis 4 (H4): Presence of source cues is ineffective when social endorsement is present.*

The cause-and-benefits analysis of social endorsement and social cue has implication not only to news consumption but also to other fields of social science studies. It is widely accepted that the presence of both source and social endorsement cues affects audience behavior, but there is a dearth of literature in the social sciences that compares these two variables. Confirming whether the presence of social endorsements erases any effect of source cues is important in improving the theoretical understanding of these concepts.

Study 1:
Effect of Social Endorsement on Partisan Selective Exposure

The effect of social endorsement on partisan selective exposure was examined using Messing and Westwood's (2014) method. Participants were asked to browse through a web page created by Pheegoh Communications in Lagos that had an interface similar to Facebook's. The only difference was that it was not connected to the Internet—it made use of an intranet network. The reason for this was to make sure the participants were not influenced by external factors that may impact the findings.

Participants could click on links in the web page for the purpose of the study. The available articles fell into two "hard" categories, Local News and Business, and two "soft" categories, Sports and Health. The participants were asked to select one article from each of the categories by clicking on the title of the selected article. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the three categories as seen in Table 1. The first category displayed only the source label and the title; the second showed the number of social endorsements (i.e., how many recommendations each title had) but not the source label; and the third showed both the source labels and the number of social endorsements.

Every participant viewed each headline. The headlines were accompanied by news source symbols, which were assigned cues. In each subcategory, a low level of endorsement for three of the four news reports was given, with a randomly generated range between 0 and 1,000 recommendations. One news report was given a high level of endorsement with over 10,000 recommendations. The number of recommendations was based on the study of Messing and Westwood (2014), who determined such numbers by monitoring the typical weekly level of recommendations by social media users for the top-rated stories on CNN and FOX News.

Half of the articles in our study were randomly assigned partisan source labels: *Punch Newspaper* was anti-government while the *Daily Post* was pro-government. There is no credible research that categorically states these media houses' leanings, but these are general sentiments because *Punch* has ties to the opposition party while the *Daily Post* has ties to the ruling party. After the experiment had been completed, a questionnaire was given to the participants. The questionnaire made use of short, close-ended questions. Section 1 of the questionnaire simply collected demographic data. Section 2 aimed to find out the participants' political affiliation and their level of commitment to the party they support. And section 3 aimed to find out the reasons behind the participants' choice of articles and the factors that might make them choose otherwise. One question asked under section 3, for example, was "Did the number of likes the post you viewed had influence your decision to select the news story?"

Table 1. Participant distribution.

CATEGORY	NEWS REPORTS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
A) Business	1) *Punch*: FG pays N23bn to pensioners in three months 2) *Daily Post*: Nigeria online business faces integrity threat 3) *Channels*: Multiple taxation hindering small businesses-SMEDAN 4) *The Vanguard*: Nigeria is ready for digital economy	245

B) Business	1) FG pays N23bn to pensioners in three month
	     0 (Zero) Facebook interactions on the post
	2) Nigeria online business faces integrity threat
	     83 people interacted with this post on Facebook
	3) Multiple taxation hindering small businesses-SMEDAN
	     121 people interacted with this post on Facebook
	4) Nigeria is ready for digital economy
	     20,441 people interacted with this post on Facebook
		246

C) Business	1) Punch: FG pays N23bn to pensioners in three month
	     0 (Zero) Facebook interactions on the post
	2) Daily Post: Nigeria online business faces integrity threat
	     83 people interacted with this post on Facebook
	3) Channels: Multiple taxation hindering small businesses-SMEDAN
	     121 people interacted with this post on Facebook
	4) The Vanguard: Nigeria is ready for digital economy
	     20,441 people interacted with this post on Facebook
		248

Rationale Behind the Selection of News Media Organizations. This study selected four major online news platforms: *Punch*, *Daily Post*, *Channels* and *The Vanguard*. These media organizations are the most popular news platforms in Nigeria. *Punch* is the highest selling print newspaper in the country. Their online platform is the second most popular Internet news site owned by a professional media outlet in the country. Based on data collected by Alexa.com, on 24 April 2019, *Vanguard Newspaper* (online) was the 3rd most popular Nigerian-owned website. *Channels* is also one of the most popular media houses in the country and was the most viewed platform during the 2015 elections in the country. *The Daily Post* is also published online and in print. It was nominated for the website/blog of the year in 2016 and is one of the most popular news sites in the country. These media houses are commonly referred to as "hybrid newspapers" because they produce online content and also publish in print form (Kuttner, 2007). We selected these media organizations because they are easily identifiable, very popular, owned and managed by professional media houses, and hybrid. These characteristics ensure that they are at least conscious of their role as journalists and are governed by the ethics of the profession.

Sampling. Messing and Westwood (2014), in a similar study, suggested that crowdsourcing service would be appropriate for this sort of research because the sample would be more representative of the national demographics. However, crowdsourcing such as the one run by Amazon Mechanical Turk is not fully functional in Nigeria, and thus we chose to place adverts on campuses and shopping malls to get volunteers who could participate in the research. Interested citizens were given a task and later screened based on their knowledge of social media usage, and those with lower exposure to Internet were screened out. A total of 739 participants were eventually selected. The participants volunteered for the study and as such were not paid for the service.

The participants' demographic data confirm that the sample group was representative of the national demographics. There was at least one participant from every geopolitical zone in the country. With respect to tribe, the Yorubas (80%) were overrepresented, which was understandable since the research was conducted in the south-western part of the country. Females were slightly overrepresented (58%). The sample was slightly pro-government, with 42% of respondents identifying as All Progressive Congress (APC), 14% leaning toward the Labour Party, 19% identifying as PDP supporters, and 17% identifying as "others." Eight percent said they were not interested in politics. The 18 to 34 demographic was slightly overrepresented: 25% of respondents were between the ages 18 to 24, and

35% were between 25 and 34. Thirty-one percent fell in the 35 to 54 group and 9% in the 55 and older age group.

External and Ecological Validity. This study was specifically designed to present realistic visual cues. Actual news stories were selected and presented in an environment that mirrored real news aggregators and other social media websites. The stories were all taken from the *Punch* website, and care was taken to ensure that they were all very new stories that might not necessarily be viral to ensure that the participant pool had not already been exposed to the story before the study commenced. The designed website for this study allowed for authentic feedback mechanisms, making it more realistic and believable. The website functioned as a typical social media page but was not connected to the Internet. The page had clickable links, and users could click on a headline and be directed to the main story, but it all worked based on the intranet network. This ensured that what the participants saw was very similar to what they would see on real social media sites.

Analysis. Selection of one out of four news reports was our dependent measure, which constituted a choice between multiple "unordered" alternatives. The researchers included both alternative-specific predictors and individual-level predictors to capture the participants' partisan identity based on their choice of news source and their use of the social endorsement cue. Data was modeled for unordered choice using a regression analysis model called "conditional logit" (McFadden, 1974).

Consider participant f with g choices: this model estimates the latent utility of the gth choice by $U_{fg} = \alpha_f + \beta x_{fg} + Z_{fg}$ where the x_{fg} are alternative-specific variables, and the z_f are individual-specific variables. When an individual makes the choice among alternatives, we can model this choice as the latent utility for g over all other alternatives (Croissant, 2011). Thus, we were interested in the difference between the utility of one alternative over another: $Ufg - Ufh = (\alpha_g - \alpha_h) + \beta (x_{fi} - x_{fh}) + (\gamma_g - \gamma_h)Zf$. Given the respondent's utility function, the probability of selecting alternative q is simply $P_q = P(U_q > Ul,..., U_q > U_g)$. Because the participants were asked to choose stories multiple times, we indexed over the individual respondent (f), the item set (h) and the alternative (l), they chose out of g possible alternatives. We thus estimate the probability for each choice via the following joint probabilistic model:

$$p_{fhl}^{r} = \frac{\exp(\alpha_l^r + \beta_i x_{fhl} + \gamma_l z_{fh})}{\sum_{g=1}^{G} \exp(\alpha_g^r + \beta_i x_{fhl} + \gamma_l z_{fh})}$$

Superscript *r* above α represents normally distributed random effect. Coefficients for individual-specific variables, including the intercepts, are alternative-specific. We estimated the model by simulating the random parameters then estimating the model via Newton-Ralphson maximum likelihood optimization as implemented in the "mlogit" R package (Croissant, 2011).

Results. It was found that 144 of 326 APC supporters selected an article from the *Daily Post*, and 74 out of 147 PDP users selected news from *Punch*. A mean selection data was computed based on conditions of the survey on the four news headlines to avoid any human factor influencing the decision.

As stated in hypothesis H1, the partisan condition without endorsements clearly shows evidence of political selectivity, with PDP selecting *Punch* content at a very high rate while APC supporters revealed an interest in *Daily Post* more than other sources. Using a statistical tool of *t* test, it was shown that PDP selected Punch ($M = 0.4$, $SD = 0.26$) at a significantly level higher than APC ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.21$), t (77) = 4.14, p < .001, one-tailed, Cohen's *d* =.72. APC supporters chose Daily Post ($M = 0.20$, $SD = 0.25$) at higher rate than PDP ($M = 0.20$, $SD = 0.22$), $t(118) = 2.44$, $p = .008$, one-tailed, Cohen's *d* = .36. In the condition where the participants were shown articles with both source and social endorsement, the mean selection rates were very close and almost identical for both PDP and APC supporters, thereby supporting hypotheses H3 and H4.

To further prove hypotheses H3 and H4, the researchers compared the selection rates for partisan identifiers between conditions. Comparing the Daily Post mean selection rate for PDP supporters revealed that partisan selectivity had higher significant difference to partisan condition ($M = 0.38$, $SD = 0.27$) and social endorsements ($M = 0.25$, $SD = 0.22$), $t(97) = 2.95$, $p = .002$, one-tailed, Cohen's *d* =.55, and the *Punch* selection rate for APC supporters did not show a significant difference between the partisan condition ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.27$) and social endorsements cues ($M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.21$), conditions $t(234) = .92$, $p = .18$, one-tailed, Cohen's *d* = .57. Hence, the wave of this discussion had been predicted. This, therefore, partially supports hypotheses H3 and H4—the effect of source cues on APC supporters is reduced when social endorsements are present.

To properly understand how the presence of social endorsement cues might be mitigating the effects of source cues, the researchers also examined the behavior patterns of partisan identifiers in the condition that had both source cues and social endorsement cues. To be more specific, the researchers examined the effect of social endorsement cues on the rate of selection when the partisanship of the source labels and the participants

corresponded (i.e., PDP supporters and *Punch*, APC supporters and the *Daily Post*) and also when they did not correspond (e.g., APC supporters and *Punch*, and PDP and the *Daily Post*). Based on how the respondents and the cues were distributed in Table 1, it is obvious that participants selected articles with low level of endorsements 75% of the time and 25% of the time selected an article with a high level of social endorsement, because only one out of the four selected articles had a high level of social endorsement. Findings from the retrieved data showed that partisan respondents were more than two times likely to select an article with high levels of social endorsement from a dissonant source compared to chance and were 18% less likely to select such an article with fewer endorsement or very low endorsement, x^2(1, N=187) = 15.10, p < .001, φ = 0.15. The impact of high social endorsements also applied to sources that also corresponded with the respondents' political affiliation: partisan respondents selected stories from their corresponding sources at a rate of 76% higher than chance while selecting articles with weaker or low endorsements at a rate of about 1% lower than chance χ^2(1, N = 187) = 1.71, p = .20, φ = .15. These findings further support hypotheses H2 and H3.

Study 2: How Social Cues Influenced Partisans

Having established the influence of social endorsement on political selectivity, it is therefore necessary to provide evidence on the impact of social cues influence or control on partisan cues. Looking at both social and partisan cues, we observed how both selection rate and chance rate provide a stronger influence only if they operate at equal levels of social endorsement. Those who participated in social endorsement stories were more affected as compared to chance at 17% because of strong endorsement, and weaker endorsement gave 5% lower than chance X^2(1, N = 111) = 3.90, p = 0.04, φ = .20. The significant difference in the condition of social cues and partisan cues was high. Those who participated in the survey with stronger levels of stories selection in terms of social endorsement were rated 24% higher than chance, and weaker level was rated at 8% lesser than chance X^2(1, N = 299) =23.15, p <0.001, φ = 0.11. These results further established a convincing support for hypotheses H2 and H3, as social media users embrace social endorsements when selecting an article even without partisan source cues.

Our study has provided enough evidence to support the hypotheses on social cue and political selectivity. It is now imperative to evaluate the model above. The Mixed Logit Regression helped us to ascertain story selection based on the relationship between users' political beliefs and news source labels as seen in Table 2. The *Daily Post* and PDP partisan give

more convincing evidence of partisan selectivity. The result obtained from partisan label condition provides evidence of partisan selectivity from the news source of *Daily Post* and PDP partisans. The trend of expression of all coefficients showed no significant difference in partisan condition. There was a significant difference in social endorsement condition coefficients in the partisan alignment sources. The effect of social endorsement cues on political selection showed no significant difference, which further supports hypotheses H3 and H4.

Table 2. Mixed Logit Model of Article Choice, by Condition

FIXED EFFECT	PARTISAN	ENDORSEMENT	BOTH
Social endorsement		0.215 0.105	0.332 0.065
APC × Punch	-0.239 (0.188)		-0.111 (0.191)
APC× Daily Post	-0.267 (0.182)		-0.280 (0.188)
APC × The Vanguard	0.093 (0.185)		-0.272 (0.179)
PDP × Punch	0.560* (0.236)		0.296 (0.235)
PDP× Daily Post	-0.239 (0.251)		0.110 (0.235)
PDP × TheVanguard	-0.141 (0.258)		0.101 (0.225)
Order	-0.140*** (0.026)	-0.168*** (0.041)	-0.129*** (0.025)
Random effects	Partisan	Endorsement	Both
ἀdaily-post	-0.007 (0.143)	0.092 (0.147)	-0.130 (0.146)
σdaily-post	0.346 (0.308)	0.004 (32.557)	0.148 (0.701)
αthevanguard	-0.007 (0.140)	0.135 (0.218)	0.238 (0.242)
σthevangaurd	0.585** (0.200)	0.013 (8.278)	-0.014 (6.438)
σpunch	0.143 (0.135)	0.160 (0.157)	0.045 (0.138)
σpunch	0.231 (0.453)	0.423 (0.416)	0.332 (0.298)
Log-likelihood	-1632.232	-604.657	-1626.685
McFadden R2	0.019	0.016	0.016
LRT χ2	61.532	19.958	53.532

FIXED EFFECT	PARTISAN	ENDORSEMENT	BOTH
LRT p	0.000	0.001	0.000
AIC	3290.464	1225.314	3281.370
BIC	3356.635	1258.081	3352.585
N	1,200	444	1,196
Alternatives	4	4	4
N$_{subjects}$	300	111	299

***$p<$.001; **$p<$.01; *$p<$.05

Conclusion

This study has to a large extent effectively established the fact that social endorsements such as likes and recommendations have a significant impact on the way we consume and share news online. The study also shows that the effect of social endorsement is stronger among partisan respondents selecting articles from an ideological misaligned source (e.g., PDP selecting news from the *Daily Post*). It has been well proven that the presence of social endorsement significantly reduces partisan selectivity.

Because of the diversity of players in a typical social media network, this study suggests that social media should increase exposure for a variety of news and politically diverse stories. The evidence of this study, when combined with the well-known and empirically studied fact that social media helps drive traffic to news sites, suggests that social media might actually be a catalyst that drives users to read headlines and possibly even the news at the very least. This study, however, does not assume that the effects of social endorsements always lead to more diverse selection of news. This is only true when social media users make an effort to expose themselves to other news sources apart from those that reinforce their behaviors or beliefs. When one has a diverse social, political, work, and intergenerational family ties, there is a high tendency that one would be exposed to counter attitudinal information than if one maintained homogenous networks.

This study also highlights the need for social media companies such as Google and Facebook to reconsider their algorithm for suggesting what people should read, buy, or watch. Facebook or Google make suggestions based on what their "friends" or Internet connections like. The problem with this is that those who have only like-minded friends in their connections will never be exposed to counter-attitudinal messages and information. They might never get the chance to access news that might be contrary to their beliefs or ideologies since they only get information from sources they endorse and from friends who share similar ideologies.

By using respondents selected form registered party members of political parties in Nigeria, the study helps prove that de facto selectivity does exist, as people are more likely to select the news information that best aligns with their ideologies or preexisting beliefs—in this case their political agenda. This study also has implications for agenda setting. The public views the world through their Facebook newsfeeds and not just the front pages of newspapers. Thus, the power to set the agenda is no longer monopolized by traditional news rooms but has spread into social networks. People are increasingly looking to Facebook for news information or referrals to news sites, and this is truer for the 18-30 years old demographic. This begs the question "Can social media become so powerful that it can influence public discourse just by limiting the information online citizens have access to?"

This study did not consider individual-level social endorsements like direct messages and email messages and how this might affect news selectivity. We believe that it would be a worthwhile undertaking for future researchers to examine this area.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research has focused on how social endorsements, including likes, comments, and shares, influence news selection. However, it is possible that this phenomenon is applicable to other situations such as how social endorsements and social cues might influence audience perception about a product or service advertising. We therefore suggest future studies to focus on social endorsements and how they might influence audience perception of the quality of a product or service on social media.

Also this particular study made use of selective exposure theory as advanced by Sears and Freedman (1967) and has further substantiated the model by proving that audience members do in fact intentionally seek out news sources and information that substantiate their preexisting beliefs and perceptions. However, we recommend that other theories such as the socio-emotional selectivity theory by Laura Carstensen (2006) be considered as a backdrop for future research. It will be interesting to see how this theory could be adapted to this kind of study as it posits that people become more selective when making choices as they advance in age. Moreover, they invest more resources in emotionally meaningful activities and goals, and this might influence how they view the news or even select the products or services they buy or support.

This study was not without its limitations, one of which was the fact that we focused on Facebook when in fact Nigerians are also very active on Twitter and other social networking sites. So further research that combines Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram might be beneficial in helping

the academic community further understand how social endorsement on social media influences news selectivity.

References

Abati, R. (2000). The press, politics and society in Nigeria. In T. Oseni & L. Idowu (Eds.), *Hosting the 140th anniversary of the Nigerian press.* Lagos: Tosen Consult.

Akinfeleye, A. (2011). *Essentials of journalism: An introductory text.* Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited.

Bennett, W. L., & Iyengar, S. (2008). A new era of minimal effects? The changing foundations of political communication. *Journal of Communication*, *58*(4), 707-731. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00410

Bennett, W. L., & Manheim, J. B. (2006). The one-step flow of communication. The *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 608*(1)*, 213–232.

Bruns, A. (2016). User-generated content. In Jensen, K.J. & Robert, T. (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of communication theory and philosophy.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Carstensen, L. L. (2006). The influence of a sense of time on human development. *Science, 312* (5782), 1913-1915. doi: 10.1126/science.1127488

Coe, K., Tewksbury, D., Bond, B. J., Drogos, K. L., Porter, R. W., Yahn, A., & Zhang, Y. (2008). Hostile news: Partisan use and perceptions of cable news programming. *Journal of Communication*, *58*(2), 201-219. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00381.x

Croissant, Y. (2011). *Estimation of multinomial logit models in R: The mlogit package*. Retrieved from http://cran.r project.org/web/packages/mlogit/vignettes/mlogit.pdf

Goel, S., Mason, W., & Watts, D. J. (2010). Real and perceived attitude agreement in social networks. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *99*(4), 611-321. doi:10.1037/a0020697

Hampton, K.N., Sessions, L.F., Her, E.J., & Raine, L. (2009, November 4). *Social isolation and new technology*. Retrieved from www.pewinternet.org/2009/11/04/social-isolation-and-new-technology/

Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of Communication*, *59*(1), 19-39. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x

Kperogi, F. A. (2011). *Webs of resistance: The citizen online journalism of the Nigerian digital diaspora* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from the Department of Communication, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Communication Dissertations (Paper 27).

Kyu, S. H., Seungjin, R., & Sungjin, P. (2015). Fragmentation in the Twitter following of news outlets: The representation of South Korean users' ideological and generational cleavage. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 92*(1), 56–76. doi:10.1177/1077699014559499

Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential election.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Messing, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2014). Selective exposure in the age of social media: Endorsements Trump partisan source affiliation when selecting news online. *Communication Research, 41*(8), 1042-1063. doi:10.1177/0093650212466406

Mordi, F. & Ugwu, S. (2017). The influence of newspaper ownership on the objectivity of the coverage of Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. *European Scientific Journal, 13*(32), 286-302. doi:10.19044/esj.2017.v13n32p286

Morris, J. S. (2007). Slanted objectivity? Perceived media bias, cable news exposure, and political attitudes. *Social Science Quarterly, 88,* 707-728. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2007.00479.x

Morrison, K. (2015). Facebook, not Google, is now the top referral source for digital publishers. Retrieved from www.adweek.com/digital/facebook-is-now-the-top-referral-source-for-digital-publishers.

Multiple taxation hindering small businesses – SMEDAN. (2018). Retrieved from www.punchng.com/ multiple-taxation-hindering-small-businesses-smedan.

Mutz, D. C. (2004). Cross-cutting social networks: Testing democratic theory in practice. *American Political Science Review*, *96*, 111-126. doi:10.1017/S0003055402004264

Omu, F. (1978). *Press and politics in Nigeria 1880-1937*. New Jersey, NJ: Atlantic Highlanders

O'Reilly, T. (2007). What is Web 2.0: Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software. *Communications & Strategies, 17* (1), 17-37.

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2007, April 12). *Participative web: User-created content*. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/sti/38393115.pdf

Roncallo-Dow, S. (2017). Introducing three dimensions of audience fragmentation. *Signo y Pensamiento, 36*(70), 74-90. doi:10.11144/Javeriana.syp36-70.idaf

Sears, D. O., & Freedman, J. L. (1967). Selective exposure to information: A critical review. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 31(2),* 194-213.

Stroud, N. J. (2008). Media use and political predispositions: Revisiting the concept of selective exposure. *Political Behavior*, *30*(3), 341-366. doi:10.1007/s11109-007-9050-9.

Stroud, N. J. (2010). Polarization and partisan selective exposure. *Journal of Communication*, *60*(3), 556-576. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01497.x

Sundar, S. S., & Nass, C. (2001). Conceptualizing sources in online news. *Journal of Communication*, *51*(1), 52-72. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2001.tb02872.x

Sundar, S. S., Knobloch-Westerwick, S., & Hastall, M. R. (2007). News cues: Information scent and cognitive heuristics. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, *58*(3), 366-378. doi:10.1002/asi.20511

Sunstein, C. R. (2002). *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Vanguardngr.com (2019). Retrieved from https://www.vanguardngr.com/about/ https://www.vanguardngr.com/about/

Wilson, D.W., Lin, X., Longstreet, P., & Sarker, S. (2011, August 4*). Web 2.0: A definition, literature, review, and directions for future research*. Paper presented at the 17th Americas Conference on Information Systems: A Renaissance of Information Technology for Sustainable and Global Competitiveness, Detroit, Michigan, USA.

AYODEJI O AWOBAMISE obtained his doctorate in Communication and Media Management from Girne American University, TRNC in 2016 and is now a Senior Lecturer in the department of Journalism and Media Studies at Victoria University, Kampala, Uganda. His research interest lie within the field of digital media, media effects and Integrated Marketing Communications (corresponding author, ayodeji.awobamise@gmail.com).

YOSRA JARRAR is currently the Head of Digital Marketing and Social Media Department at the Girne American University, Cyprus. Her research interests lie within the field of news media, media ethics, media effects, and public relations.