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## **Audience's Perception of X (Formerly Twitter) Trends as a Tool for the Nigerian Public Sphere**

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## Audience's Perception of X (Formerly Twitter) Trends as a Tool for the Nigerian Public Sphere

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** Unlike how we previously knew it to be, the public sphere has evolved to include digital spaces, making them metamorphose into digital public spheres. These digital spaces are more open, accessible, and void of certain bottlenecks. It is, therefore, now impossible to describe a public sphere without mentioning digital spaces. As such, this study aims to find out the audience's perception of X (formerly Twitter) trends as a tool for the Nigerian public sphere.

**Materials and Methods:** The survey research method was used to obtain responses from 200 respondents, using the purposive sampling technique of selecting only X (formerly Twitter) users.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that most X (formerly Twitter) users often utilise X (formerly Twitter) trends to some extent; X (formerly Twitter) trends influence the content of some users but not the majority of them, even if the majority use the feature. In addition, X (formerly Twitter) Trends highlight significant content for X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria.

**Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Some of the recommendations of the study include the following: the government should pay closer attention to relevant public conversations on the X (formerly Twitter) platform to understand people's take on certain issues and how to help them better; they should also partner with relevant agencies to set up regular digital literacy campaigns to help the public effectively engage with social media content on X (formerly Twitter). Also, stakeholders like X (formerly Twitter) should ensure suitable systems are in place for accurate Trends metrics to avoid misleading users with the wrong Trends or content by some users. In addition, X (formerly Twitter) should develop campaigns and guides to help users better understand how to engage with the Trends feature on X (formerly Twitter).

**Keywords:** *X (Formerly Twitter) (L86), Public Sphere Nigeria (D72), Agenda-Setting Theory (D83), Technological Determinism (D83), Social Media Nigeria (L86)*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand the audience's perception of X (formerly Twitter) Trends as a tool for the Nigerian Public Sphere.

### Background of the Study

The traditional public sphere, as described by Jürgen Habermas, was confined to physical spaces only. The public sphere signifies an aspect of social life where public opinion can be formed; all citizens have access (Habermas, 1964). According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere first emerged around 1700 to mediate between individuals' private interests in their familial, economic, and social lives and the demands and concerns of social and public life (Douglas, 2000). Fuchs (2023) observes that the idea of the public sphere relates to the common good, where everyone benefits from institutions and not just a few people.

In addition, public opinion and the public sphere are essential aspects of a democratised society. People share their public opinion in public spheres. The public sphere is essential in every society; even though it is not one place only, there are several places where public opinion takes place. Habermas reveals that the public sphere consists of organs of information and political discourse. This includes newspapers and magazines and political discussion institutions, such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public gatherings, pubs and coffee shops, meeting rooms, and other public spaces. He describes it as a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the domain of state power (Douglas, 2000).

However, with the advent of the internet and technological advances, scholars now describe public spheres as including digital spaces, not just physical spaces. Schäfer (2015) states that researchers envision the digital public sphere as a communicative sphere provided or supported by online or social media where participation is open and accessible to anyone interested, where issues of common concern can be discussed, and where proceedings are visible to all. The concept of the public sphere has proven extremely useful in understanding online societies, social media, and digital communications. In this regard, it appears that digitalisation and globalisation have not fundamentally altered our societies and politics (Ahava, 2018). Furthermore, Fuchs (2023) asserts that a digital public sphere must be in tandem with strengthening democracy in business, politics, and culture. It is more than just democratising the internet.

The emergence of social media sites such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) has further altered how people interact (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). Likewise, the participatory nature of social media makes it easy for everyone with an opinion to be seen and heard. With social media, mediated opinion leaders emerge, altering the once-idealised notion of how a public sphere should look or be. According to Ijioma (2021), the mass media has historically been known to facilitate public conversation; the rise of the internet has led to scholars adapting public sphere theory to internet technologies.

X (formerly Twitter) has gained much attention concerning public opinion sharing and as a political communication tool. Also, scholars argue that it has quickly become a public sphere in recent times, and more often than not, it has become a platform that echoes or sets the agenda of societal issues. X (formerly Twitter) is therefore becoming a “Twittersphere”, or we could say “Xsphere” with the recent change of name. According to Casero-Ripollés et al. (2020), social media, particularly Twitter, is becoming a crucial tool in millions of people's social connections. In addition, Opeibi (2019) observes that social media, such as Twitter, have become the medium

of choice for many political campaigns. Besides campaigning, politicians use Twitter to engage with their followers and connect with the general public. Likewise, Ijioma (2021) observes that many journalists utilise Twitter as a public square to know the daily trending topics and ensure they feature in the traditional media, increasing the prominence of these topics and setting the agenda for public discourse.

X (formerly Twitter) is one platform people visit to be up-to-date concerning public issues and one that has been likened to a digital public sphere. X (formerly Twitter) has also become a place where people discover what is happening. Beyond interacting and joining global conversations, the public can lend their voices to causes and know what others say about an issue. As such, examining how the audience perceives X (formerly Twitter) as a digital public sphere is crucial, specifically looking at one of its features, "Trends". According to Annamoradnejad and Habibi (2019), a "trending topic" or simply "trend" is a word, expression, or topic discussed more frequently than others. Trending topics become popular due to a concerted effort by users or as a result of an event that causes people to speak about a particular issue. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the audience's perception of X (formerly Twitter) Trends as a tool for the Nigerian public sphere. The focus is on the Trends feature of X because the feature serves as a tool for users of X (formerly Twitter) to find out more about what is happening and help drive conversations on the platform.

### **Problem Statement**

The public sphere is a place for the free flow of ideas and opinions. Public opinion is an essential element of the public sphere; however, if public opinion is tainted, the public sphere is negatively impacted. This is more prominent in the digital age, where anyone with access to the internet can share their ideas, and the opinion of the majority is often what the minority leans towards. In the same vein, freely shared ideas can positively or negatively influence the public opinion of others. Smith (2019) mentions that on Twitter, people may suppress their genuine feelings or act civilly under pretences during heated discussions to avoid losing the social rewards of agreeing with the majority. Ijioma (2021) also argues that Twitter has evolved into the Habermasian ideal of the twenty-first century due to its opportunity for individuals to participate as equals and reach a critical consensus on societal issues.

Likewise, the algorithm of X (formerly Twitter) contributes to popular conversations; as more people talk about a certain subject, it "Trends" and appears on the timeline to more people. The possibility here is that this situation can stifle other voices who have contrary opinions about such issues. Smith (2019) opines that X (formerly Twitter) can alter users' perceptions of discussions on specific topics. One example is the site's usage of algorithms. According to Asur et al. (2011), as content spreads across a social network, it can take over earlier topics of interest, and due to users' short attention spans, it is quickly obliterated by newer content. Another factor influencing the prominence of such topics is the impact of network members on content dissemination.

This widespread content creation and consumption has created a highly competitive online environment where various content types compete for people's limited attention. Despite this, certain subjects continue to emerge and rise to the top of all these experiences regarding public opinion. These common topics contribute to a mutual understanding of what is trending and, in turn, affect the public agenda (Asur et al., 2011). Trends significantly dominate conversations for several reasons, including the volume of content on that conversation, when influencers or opinion

leaders talk about the issue, or, in some cases, when these topics are mere clickbaits by individuals to sway public opinion.

According to Segura (2017), it is suggested that social media platforms promote citizen participation in political life. In addition, they also serve as speech curators. As such, their ability to impact public discourse calls into question their status as debate hosts. Thus, social media organisations may undermine civic engagement and create an inadequate public sphere. Gaisbauer et al. (2020) note that tweets visible on X (formerly Twitter) directly impact public opinion and understanding. They added that X (formerly Twitter) affects how users view public opinion on specific topics and society. Certain viewpoints, especially those advanced by committed minorities, can appear more widespread than they are. Many examples from real-world events have shown the efficacy of trending topics in gaining more global exposure during disasters and social movements. There has been substantial research to provide analytics for such events (Annamoradnejad & Habibi, 2019).

Furthermore, the public sphere helps study communicative dynamics and processes during crises, such as popular topics, how information is distributed, and which actors gain or lose power (Rauchfleisch et al., 2021). Khan et al. (2011) note that it is essential to remember that the new public sphere is not a blessing in itself; instead, it requires legal, social, political, and ethical rules to benefit global civil society. The new public space or virtual platform presents benefits and risks to international citizenship. Koc-Michalska et al. (2023) also state that citizens who receive information from professional news organisations can better differentiate between truth and falsehood. However, citizens who rely on social media for news have more difficulty spotting false information and, unfortunately, share it more quickly.

So, X (formerly Twitter) can affect public opinion positively or negatively due to its ability to suggest what is "trending," thereby influencing what people say about an issue. Schmitt (2021) notes that because many opinion leaders, journalists, and multipliers participate in policy discussions via X (formerly Twitter), it serves as an amplifier and an indicator of trends in the foreign policy community and the general populace. Another concern for X (Formerly Twitter) Trends is the tendency to "beat the algorithm" and get one's issues more popular than other people's. Some people achieve this through different means, including forcing the algorithm to detect a trend by getting people to tweet a particular word or phrase or using a hashtag frequently more than usual. Doing this will signal to the algorithm that there is a trend. According to Ingram (2020), in an article for NBC News, people who want to sway or distort online debates about politics or other issues have used social media trending lists as a battlefield for years. The lists, which are broken down by geography, show what people are talking about the most, and they can help draw more attention to those issues and hashtags.

Annamoradnejad and Habibi (2019) opine that little research has been done to clarify or consider the nature of X (formerly Twitter) trend dynamics. Unlike other studies that focus on how X (formerly Twitter) affects public opinion, this paper critically analyses the agenda-setting power of X (formerly Twitter) trends. In addition, in their study, Zhang and Ng (2023) note that previous research has yet to empirically study the affordances and agenda-setting impacts of X (formerly Twitter) trends. Therefore, this study wants to find out how often X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria utilise X (formerly Twitter) Trends, ascertain if X (formerly Twitter) trends influence X (formerly Twitter) users' content in Nigeria, and determine whether X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria consider X (formerly Twitter) Trends a feature that highlights significant content.

## Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

- To find out how often X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria utilise X (formerly Twitter) Trends.
- To ascertain if X (formerly Twitter) Trends influence X (formerly Twitter) users' content in Nigeria.
- To determine whether X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria consider X (formerly Twitter) Trends a feature that highlights significant content.

## Research Questions

The research questions include the following:

- How often do X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria utilise X (formerly Twitter) Trends?
- Do X (formerly Twitter) Trends influence X (formerly Twitter) users' content in Nigeria?
- Do X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria consider X (formerly Twitter) Trends a feature that highlights significant content?

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant in understanding how social media, especially X (formerly Twitter), influences public opinion through its Trends feature. It also helps to understand how this feature dictates public conversations and, in turn, public agendas. The study will be relevant to the public, media, and government in understanding how X (formerly Twitter) Trends influence policy agendas. This would help build awareness and help stakeholders make informed decisions in this subject area. This research is also one of the few studies that analyse X (formerly Twitter) Trends and the digital public sphere in the Nigerian context.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines critical concepts related to X (formerly Twitter) Trends and the Nigerian public sphere. Some of those concepts include social media and public opinion, the nature of X (formerly Twitter), how X (formerly Twitter) works, and the public sphere. It also examines the theoretical and empirical reviews.

### Social Media and Public Opinion

According to McGregor (2019), social media and its metrics have emerged as a new way to measure and represent the public, and they may offer a unique reflection of the public. Social media platforms offer a space for actively expressing opinions and a tool for evaluating public opinion (Zhang et al., 2021). Public opinion, as important as it is to democracy's foundations, is a socially constructed image of the public shaped by the processes and data used to generate it and how those charged with analysing and using it understand it (McGregor, 2019).

Public opinion is now freely shared on social media as the "social" in social media becomes more accentuated with platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and its Trends feature. Due to technological advances, social media has recently become the focus of public opinion studies and deliberations. Zhang et al. (2021) argue that social media has radically altered the media landscape of the twenty-

first century and how people engage with one another, introducing a new way to perceive public opinion. McGregor (2019) observes that public opinion can now be represented in a more public, relational, and temporally sensitive way with social media.

Furthermore, Grzywińska and Batorski (2016) note that social networking sites have changed how media consumers process information. It has also impacted the agenda-setting theory, with its main assumptions being challenged. Social media users choose what to share on their networks, deciding what news is important. Social networking sites can also directly impact public opinion, becoming a source for media agendas. The authors also note that social networking sites do not eliminate traditional media's role in agenda-setting but instead modify it.

### **The Nature of X (Formerly Twitter)**

According to Britannica (2023), Twitter evolved from the podcasting endeavour Odeo, which was launched in 2004 by Evan Williams, Biz Stone, and Noah Glass.

Wojcik and Hughes (2019) note that Twitter is a modern public square where many people discuss, debate, and share their opinions. Media personalities, politicians, and the general public use social networks to get real-time information and reactions to the day's events. Britannica (2023) explains that Twitter, an online microblogging service that sends short messages of no more than 280 characters, known as tweets, significantly altered politics and culture in the early twenty-first century.

According to X (n.d.), X (formerly Twitter) is a social media platform that allows friends, family, and colleagues to communicate and keep in touch by exchanging short, regular messages. The posts are short messages that may include images, videos, links, and text. These messages appear on your profile, are sent to your followers, and can be found using X (formerly Twitter) search.

Britannica (2023) notes that Elon Musk purchased Twitter for \$44 billion in October 2022 at his original proposed price of \$54.20 per share. Shah and Martin (2023) also note that Elon Musk's rebranding of Twitter as "X" started around the end of July 2023.

### **How X (Formerly Twitter) Trends Work**

On X (formerly Twitter), one will see several tweets under each trend, which can sometimes be a hashtag or a keyword. A trend can sometimes be seen when X (formerly Twitter) users use a particular hashtag, word, or phrase in their tweets within a certain number of tweets. At other times, it could be a hashtag so people can follow a specific conversation of interest.

According to the X (n.d.), Trends are calculated by an algorithm and customised for users based on who they follow, their preferences, and their location. This algorithm recognises popular topics to help you discover the hottest new topics of conversation on X (formerly Twitter). They also add that the algorithm considers the number of tweets linked to the Trends when ranking and assessing Trends. Zubiaga et al. (2014) note that one of the critical features on Twitter's homepage is a list of top words, or "trending topics," that are updated at all times. These phrases are based on the current issues trending on the site.

When people visit the Trends section of X (formerly Twitter), they are offered many options for conversations to discuss or engage with. They also get to see the locations where these issues are trending. Asur et al. (2011) equate trending topics to crowdsourced popularity in their research, and I agree with them. For instance, users live-tweet about sporting events as they watch them on

TV, discuss breaking news as they hear about it, and the like. As a result, there is an increase in activity correlated with the event in question, resulting in a social trend (Zubiaga et al., 2014).

Currently, X (formerly Twitter) Trends are shown by location. However, there is the possibility of seeing Trends for other countries in local countries. For instance, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag trended in different countries, not just the country it originated. Therefore, there are worldwide and local Trends, depending on their salience and reach. It is possible to see Trends from a particular location by changing the trend location one wants to see. Zubiaga et al. (2014) state that trending subjects are popular among users, journalists, developers, and social media researchers. Keeping track of current topics can help one stay informed and identify the main concerns of the community.

Another thing about X (formerly Twitter) Trends is that they are fleeting. They last a short while; however, there have been exceptions where a particular hashtag or keyword Trends for so many days. This, most times, depends on the intensity of the issue or the results of other happenings that emanate from such issues. These posts are often relevant to the Trends but might not be in other instances. This is when people try to manipulate Trends to gain public attention. According to Asur et al. (2011), one of the critical reasons for studying X (formerly Twitter) trending topics is to figure out why some stick around while others fade away quickly.

One of the reasons people want to get their content trending is to influence what the public thinks about a particular issue and how often they think about it. Thitivesa (2018) notes that if you can get a campaign to go viral on the internet, you will have much power to influence the general public, corporations, and government agencies, or even start a movement. In addition, Zubiaga et al. (2014) say that a trending topic consists of a term or phrase and a stream of tweets related to that topic.

The use of hashtags, which have become a useful discourse technique on Twitter, is a significant digital weapon. This one-of-a-kind technological and communicative capacity has proven to be a valuable political weapon. Hashtags are increasingly being used to track and relay current events, subjects, controversies, and trending messages worldwide as a vital socio-technical feature of Twitter (Opeibi, 2019). Zhang and Ng (2023) observe that X (formerly Twitter) Trends are intended to highlight current issues and provide helpful tips for users; however, they are also used to distribute false information and misinformation.

Furthermore, the importance of this feature cannot be overstated, and as a result, X (formerly Twitter) explains the rules behind it. According to X (n.d.), X (formerly Twitter) wants to promote healthy conversations on the app, and they may not allow or temporarily prevent tweets from appearing in Trends until there is more context. It includes Trends against X (formerly Twitter)'s guidelines, one with profanity and/or adult or graphic references, and one that targets the privacy of victims of serious crimes and minors who are private figures.

### **Public Sphere**

Fuchs (2021) opines that political communication is integral to the political system in all models of democracy, and the political system's central mechanism is the public. This study opines that a public sphere is a place where public conversations happen and where individuals can come together to discuss issues of public interest. One of the problems with the traditional public sphere is the changes it has undergone and its applicability today.



According to Fuchs (2021), the public sphere is a domain of public political communication that serves as a conduit between society's various subsystems. The Internet can socialise human activities, but class relations and structures of domination colonise the Internet's and society's humanistic potential (Fuchs, 2023). Fuchs (2021) says it is a space for mediating political communication and where political opinions are formed. On the other hand, the digital public sphere is a dimension and element of the public sphere in societies where digital information and digital communication are dominant. Mukhopadhyay (2016) argues that social media acts as an agent of interconnectedness between people in the extended public sphere. This networked dialogue serves as the foundation for strategic deliberations. It also influences the current system and brings about successful changes in policy-making decisions. This reinforces the need to study the digital public sphere and understand how it affects other areas of society.

## **Theoretical Review**

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

Max McCombs and Donald Shaw propounded the agenda-setting theory in 1968. The theory holds that the media influences the perceived salience of issues. This theory is one of the long-standing media effects theories scholars have tried to test for its applicability to social media. This theory underpins this study as it posits that the media dictates what the public thinks about issues due to how they cover them. This can be in the form of frequency, repetition, the space allocated to such issues, and others. The theory has been tested, and different variants have been developed to meet society's changing requirements and the media, such as intermedia agenda-setting, agenda-building, reverse agenda-setting, and the like. As such, while relating traditional media to social media, this study leverages the agenda-setting theory to understand how agendas are set using X (formerly Twitter) Trends.

McCombs and Valenzuela (2007) note that a significant cause of agenda-setting is the constant repetition of messages about public topics in the press, as well as the pervasiveness of the mass media in our daily lives. As a result of this learning's incidental nature, topics shift rapidly from the media agenda to the public agenda. Although, there are a few studies in the area of X (formerly Twitter) Trends, Zhang and Ng (2023), in their study on how X (formerly Twitter) Trends impact social and personal agendas, discovered that people's perceived social and personal agenda are influenced by X (formerly Twitter) Trends. This study opines that this is typically what happens with X (formerly Twitter) Trends: one issue that has been repeated can quickly be translated into a public agenda. Thus, the agenda-setting theory provides the basis for explaining how social media users perceive Trends on X (formerly Twitter).

### **Technological Determinism Theory**

One cannot successfully study technology and society without looking at the technological determinism theory. This theory also frames this work because it focuses on the relationship between technology and society. The theory holds that changes in technology affect society. The theory's connection to this study helps to look at how social media, a function of technology, affects society regarding what they consider important.

Marshall McLuhan proposed this theory in 1964. The theory posits that one cannot interpret media content without the media's technology. The nature of the media that a person is connected to shapes communities more than the content of the communication. He added that this theory is one

of the new ones that originated from the media's role and its impact on different societies. (Zaeid, 2020).

Adler (2006) observes that there are two variants of technological determinism:

- Soft says that technology is one important force among many.
- Hard says that technology is the key or only significant engine.

There is a lack of adequate research in the area of X (formerly Twitter) Trends and technological determinism theory. However, there are several researches regarding technological determinism in the context of social media. This theory underpins this study because it helps to understand how social media, specifically X (formerly Twitter), shapes society through conversations derived from what is trending on the platform.

### **Empirical Review**

Pierre and Güzel (2021)'s study aimed to reconstruct the concept of the public sphere in the context of the Twitter-mediated (now X-mediated) Petrocaribe Challenge in Haiti. Their objectives were to identify the relationship between the Petrocaribe challenge movement and the public domain, gauge the political economics of the movement, and assess the dimension of political communication of the selected tweets. The authors examined 163 posts on X (formerly Twitter) using a qualitative methodology based on critical discourse analysis. According to their research, the Petrocaribe Challenge is a Twitter-mediated (now X-mediated) political movement that does not fit the political public sphere criteria. However, reconstruction of the selected tweets revealed that X (formerly Twitter) functions as an information channel, allowing protesters to build awareness about the campaign. Furthermore, the authors opine that social media protests will not result in systemic change unless they are part of a consistent revolutionary project.

Casero-Ripollés et al. (2020) focused on the digital public sphere and geography. Their study examined how physical location influences X (formerly Twitter)'s Political Conversation. They sought to determine to what extent X (formerly Twitter) users' geographic location affects their involvement and influence in the online conversation generated by major political events. Their study shows that physical location matters in X (formerly Twitter) political conversations as their findings reveal that users' geographical location directly impacts the political debate on X (formerly Twitter), despite the removal of physical boundaries that the online environment encourages. In addition, demographics, cultural variables, and proximity to centres of political power all influence the form of digital political discourse.

In addition, the study of Zhang and Ng (2023) explored the impact of ranked X (formerly Twitter) trends on people's agendas. They discovered that participants' perceptions of social and personal agendas are significantly influenced in familiar and new settings. Their study warns the public and X (formerly Twitter) about the dangers of unchecked and unaddressed trend manipulation, which can affect personal and social agendas. In addition, participants who were exposed to X (formerly Twitter) Trends ranked their perceived issue salience as more consistent with the actual ranking, suggesting that X (formerly Twitter) Trends serve as an aggregator of social agendas that individuals refer to.

### **Research Gap**

Below are the research gaps based on the studies cited above

### **Conceptual Research Gap**

The studies cited have looked at this subject matter from diverse approaches. Pierre and Güzel (2021) focused on analysing posts on X (formerly Twitter), Casero-Ripollés et al. (2020) focused on the digital public sphere and geography, while Zhang and Ng (2023) examined the impact of ranked X (formerly Twitter) trends on people's agendas. There exists an opportunity to look at this subject matter from the perspective of user intent and user perception to find out precisely the impact of X (formerly Twitter) on public discourse and agenda.

### **Contextual Research Gap**

Future research should explore how other features of X (formerly Twitter) contribute to setting agendas and determining conversations on and off the platform. They can also utilise other platforms to find out the same.

### **Geographical Research Gap**

The studies cited do not focus on the Nigerian context or the African context. As such, a gap needs to be studied to ensure this subject matter is tested in the African context and even in different countries in Africa, such as Nigeria.

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This section explores the research method used in data about the study's focus on understanding the audience's perception of X (formerly Twitter) Trends as a tool for the Nigerian public sphere.

### **Research Design**

This study adopted an experimental survey research design to examine the phenomenon of Twitter (Formerly Twitter) Trends and the digital public sphere. This also helped the researcher test the agenda-setting theory in a new context. In addition, it has developed our understanding of the relationship between the two variables in this study, which are Trends on X (formerly Twitter) and the Nigerian public sphere.

### **Research Method**

#### **Sampling**

This research utilised the survey research method using an online questionnaire with a multiple-choice question format. The researcher used the simple purposive sampling method to select 200 survey respondents with the criteria of being Twitter users. This is to get the right respondents for this study. Survey respondents were selected on the sole criterion of being Twitter users. This study is poised to get the best results using this method because of the specificity of the characteristics needed. The respondents are Nigerians who are X (formerly Twitter) users.

#### **Data Collection Tool**

The data collection tool for this research was structured questionnaires distributed online using Google Forms.

#### **Data Collection Method**

The data were collected using a structured online questionnaire to only 200 X (formerly Twitter) users.

## Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected using Google Forms from 2021 to 2024. After the name change from Twitter to X, the questionnaire was edited to accommodate the name change.

## Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical principles such as voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent.

## Method of Data Analysis

After the data was collected and collated, they were analysed using charts and figures presented in pie charts and bar graphs, while the open-ended questions were analysed with qualitative content analysis.

## Presentation of Data Analysis

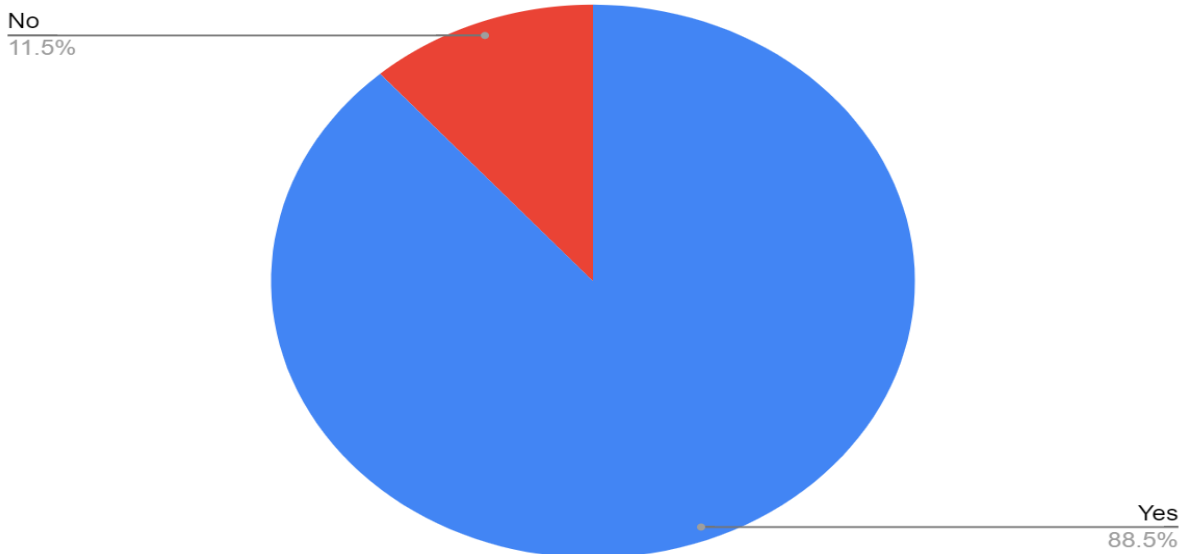
### Introduction

The data presentation is grouped according to the research questions in this study, which are:

- How often do X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria utilise X (formerly Twitter) Trends?
- Do X (formerly Twitter) Trends influence X (formerly Twitter) users' content in Nigeria?
- Do users consider X (formerly Twitter) Trends a feature that highlights significant content to X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria?

We will examine the psychographic data before we answer the above questions.

Figure 1: Are you familiar with how X (formerly Twitter) Trends work?



*Figure 1: Are You Familiar with How X (Formerly Twitter) Trends Works?*

Figure 1 reveals that 88.5% of the respondents were familiar with how X (formerly Twitter) Trends work, while 11.5% were not.

### Research Question 1: How Often Do X (Formerly Twitter) Users in Nigeria Utilise X (Formerly Twitter) Trends?

Figure 2: How often do you check X (formerly Twitter) Trends?

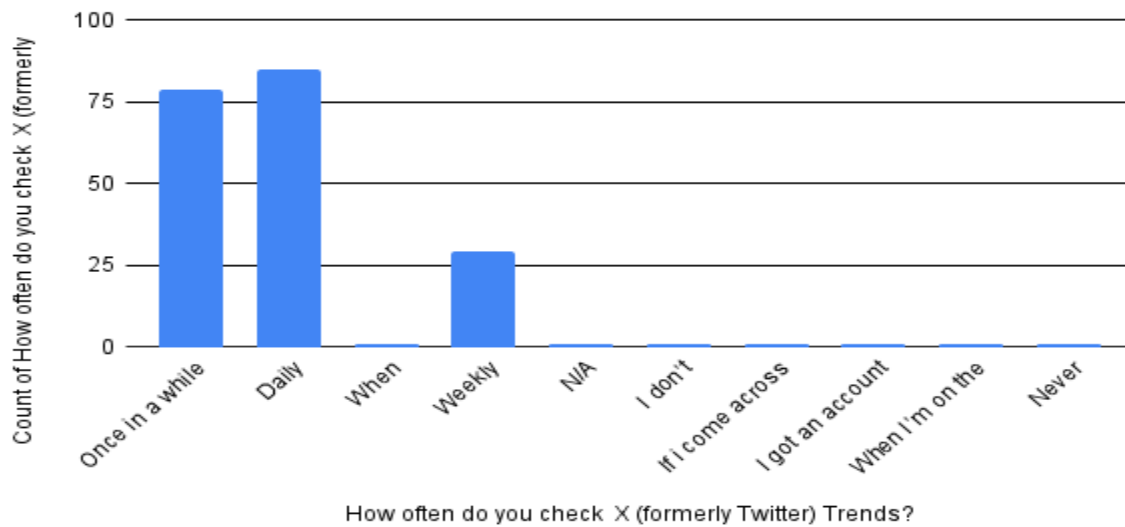


Figure 2: How Often Do You Check X (Formerly Twitter) Trends?

Figure 2 shows that 42.5% of the respondents said they check X (formerly Twitter) Trends daily, 39.5% check it once in a while, 14.5% check it weekly, 0.5% said when something comes up, 0.5% stated N/A, 0.5% said they do not, 0.5% said if they come across a post, they follow the link because they are not an active user, 0.5% said they have an account but cannot remember when last they opened the app, 0.5% said when they are on the platform, and 0.5% said they never do so.

Figure 3: Do you consider this Trends feature important?

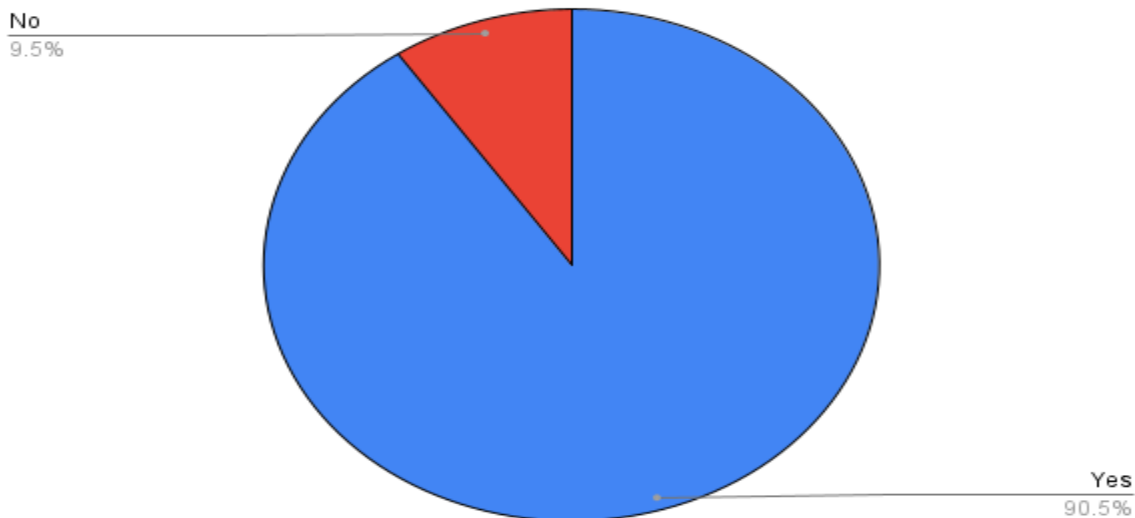


Figure 3: Do You Consider This Trends Feature Important

Figure 3 reveals that 90.5% of the respondents considered the X (formerly Twitter) Trends feature important, while 9.5% did not.

Figure 4: Do you create your X (formerly Twitter) content according to the platform's Trends?

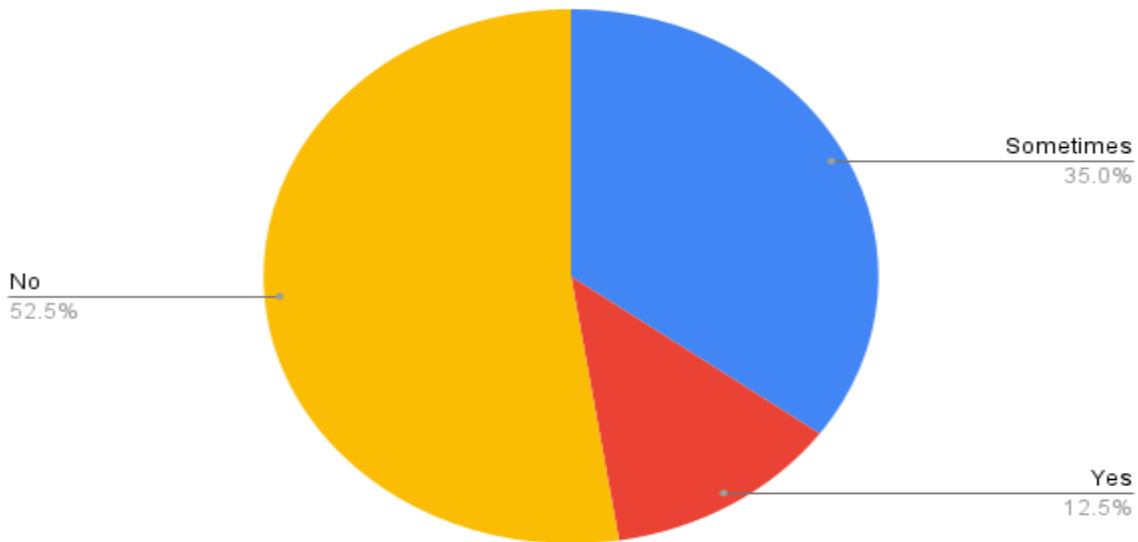


Figure 4: Do You Create Your X (Formerly Twitter) Content According to the Platform's Trends?

Figure 4 shows that 52.5% of the respondents did not create X (formerly Twitter) content according to the platform's Trends. 35% said they did that sometimes, while 12.5% did so.

Figure 5: Do you use hashtags to help you Trend on X (formerly Twitter)?

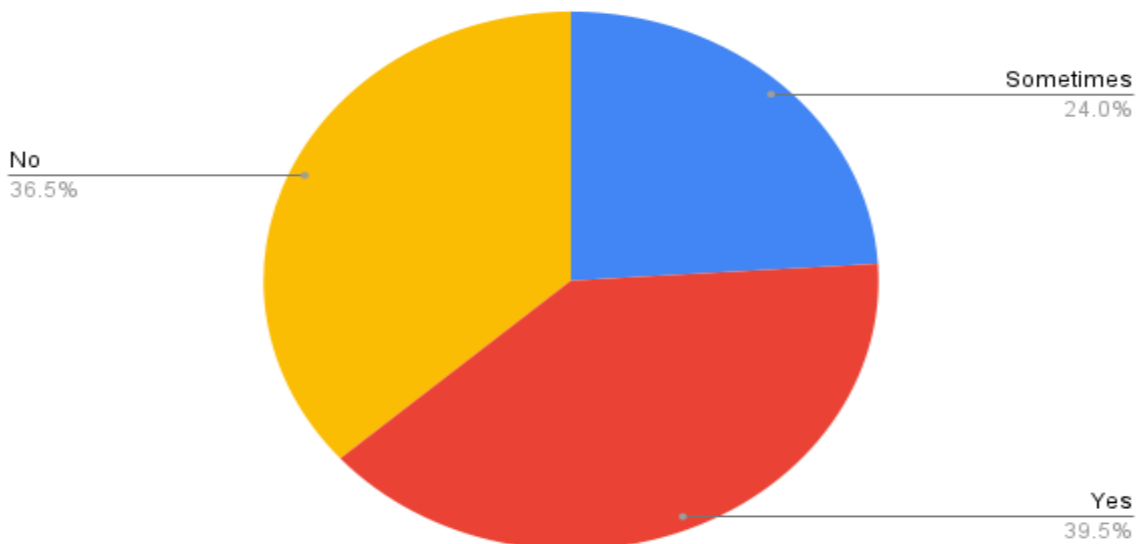


Figure 5: Do You Use Hashtags to Help Trend on X (Formerly Twitter)?

Figure 5 shows that 39.5% of the respondents used hashtags to help them trend on X (formerly Twitter), 36.5% did not, and 24% sometimes did.

**Research Question 2: Do X (Formerly Twitter) Trends Influence X (Formerly Twitter) Users' Content in Nigeria?**

Figure 6: Do you use X (formerly Twitter) Trends?

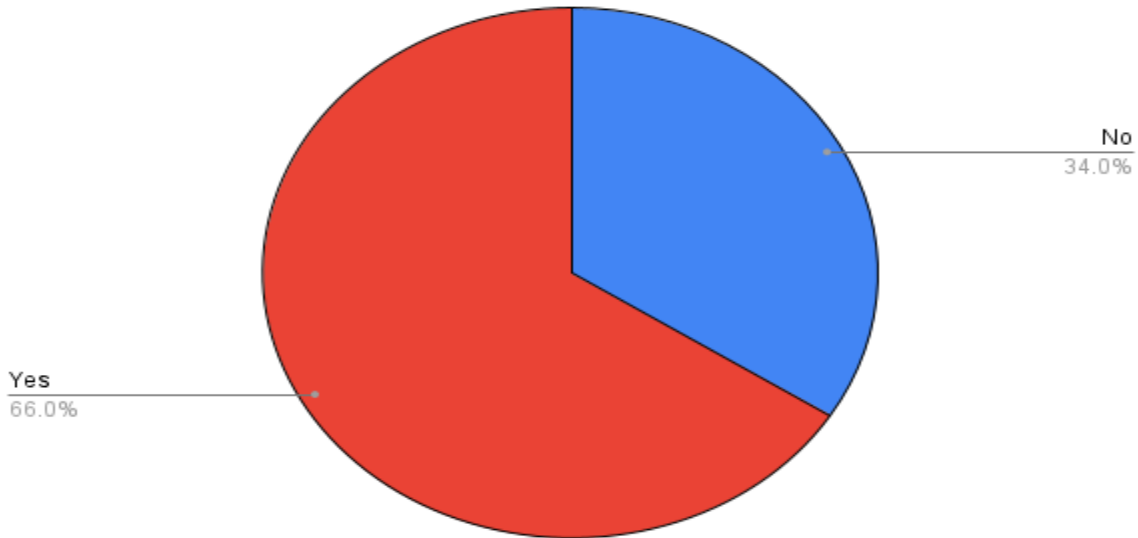


Figure 6: Do You Use X (Formerly Twitter) Trends?

Figure 6 shows that 66.% of the respondents used X (formerly Twitter) Trends, while 34% did not.

Figure 7: Do X (formerly Twitter) Trends influence the type of content you share and engage with on X?

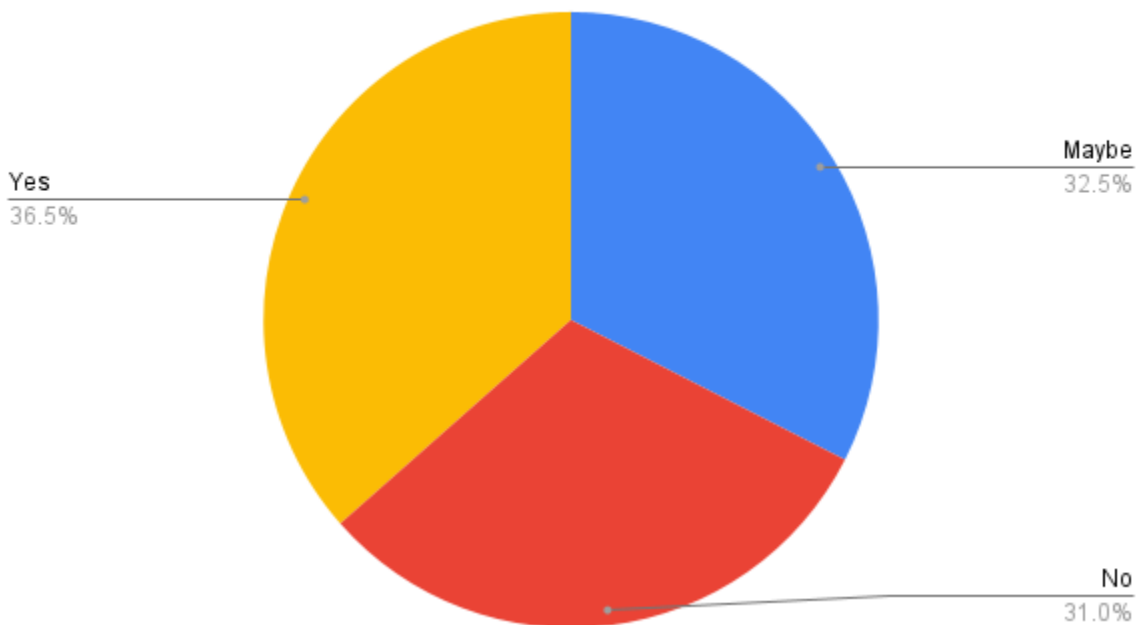


Figure 7: Do X (Formerly Twitter) Trends Influence the Type of Content You Share and Engage with on X?

In Figure 7, 36.5% of the respondents said that X (formerly Twitter) Trends influenced the type of content they shared and engaged with on X. 32.5% said maybe, while 31% said it did not influence the content they shared.

### Research Question 3: Do X (Formerly Twitter) Users in Nigeria Consider X (Formerly Twitter) Trends a Feature Highlighting Significant Content?

Figure 8: Do you agree that this Trends feature indicates important discussions on X (formerly Twitter)?

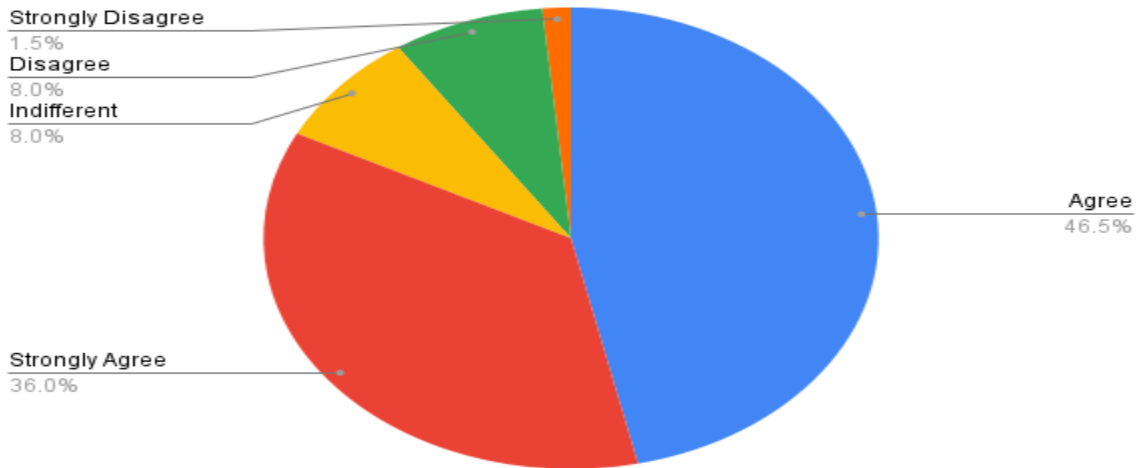


Figure 8: Do You Agree That This Trends Feature Indicates Important Discussions on X (Formerly Twitter)?

Figure 8 shows that 46.5% of the respondents agreed that the X (formerly Twitter) Trends feature indicates important discussions on X. 36% strongly agreed, 8% were indifferent, 8% disagreed, and 1.5% strongly agreed.

Figure 9: Do you agree that this Trends feature indicate latest discussions on X (formerly Twitter)?

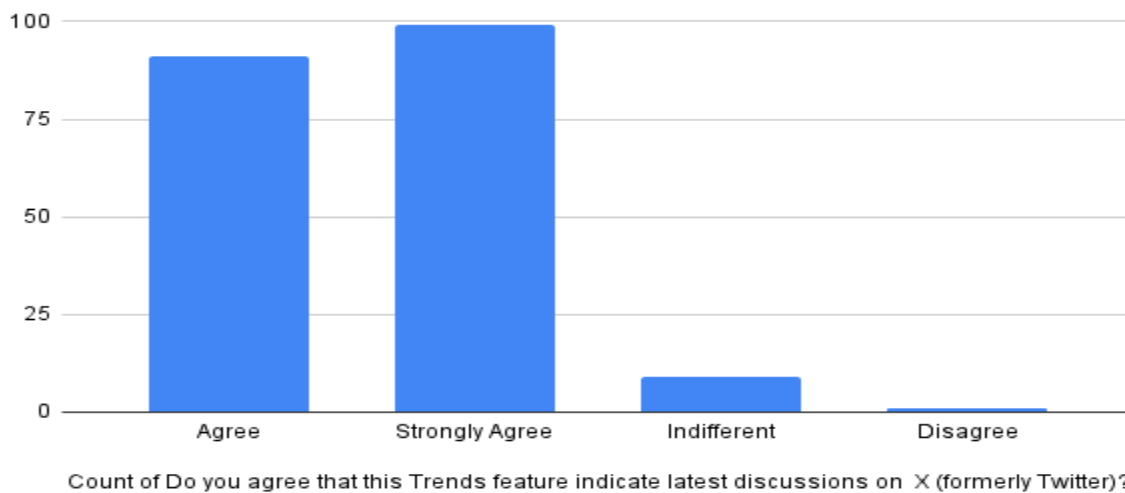


Figure 9: Do You Agree That This Trends Feature Indicate Latest Discussions on X (Formerly Twitter)?



Figure 9 shows that 49.5% of the respondents agreed that the Trends feature indicates the latest discussions on X (formerly Twitter), 45.5% agreed, 4.5% were indifferent, and 0.5% disagreed.

Figure 10: Do you think X (formerly Twitter) Trends highlight the latest conversations in society?

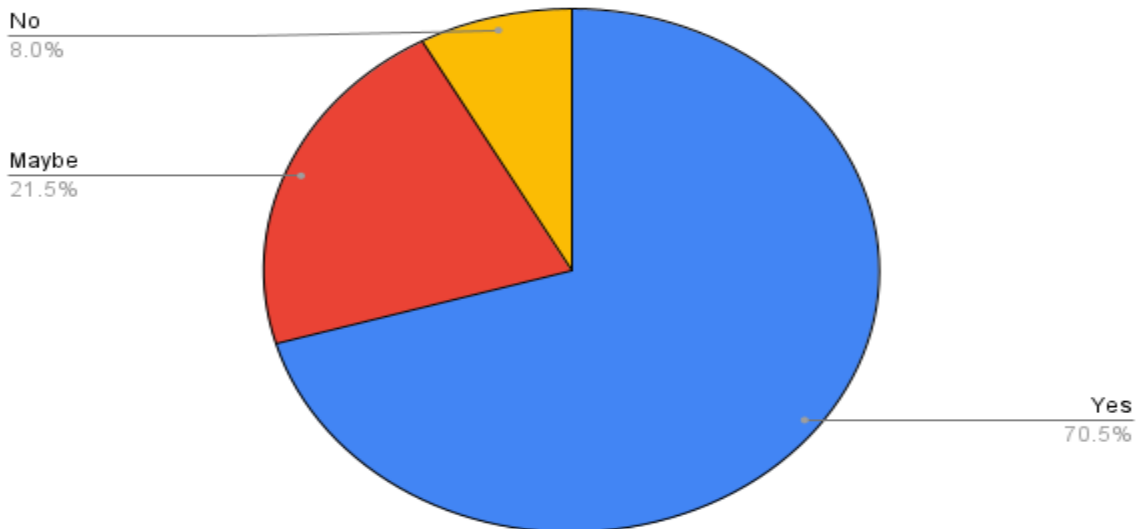


Figure 10: Do You Think X (Formerly Twitter) Trends Highlights the Latest Conversations in Society?

Figure 10 reveals that 70.5% of the respondents said X (formerly Twitter) Trends highlight the latest conversations in society, while 21.5% said maybe it does, and 8% said it does not.

### Qualitative Analysis

Question: How do you know what is trending on X (formerly Twitter)?

Findings reveal that the three major ways the respondent knew how to know what is trending were through:

Checking X (formerly Twitter) Trends Directly. Some of the responses in this category include: “Checking the trends for you”, “By checking the trends in Nigeria and the world”, and “I check the trends tab”.

Utilising Hashtags. Some of the responses in this category include: “The hashtag just shows up all over my tl. Lol”, “I use the hashtag”, and “By checking the hashtags”.

By Checking the X (formerly Twitter) Timeline. Some of the responses in this category include: “On my timeline and in the search area”, “Scrolling through TL”, and “The keywords in the 'gist' usually pop up many times on my timeline when multiple people are talking about it”.

Thus, this shows that respondents knew what was trending on X (formerly Twitter) through the Trends feature, hashtags, and the X (formerly Twitter) timeline.

## 4.0 FINDINGS

The findings show that about an average of the respondents often check X (formerly Twitter) trends, and most of the respondents consider the feature important. However, most respondents do

not create their X (formerly Twitter) content according to the platform's trends. It was also revealed that some of them utilise hashtags to get their content to trend. As such, it is concluded that X (formerly Twitter) users often utilise X (formerly Twitter) trends to some extent.

In addition, the result shows that most respondents use X (formerly Twitter) trends; however, when it comes to the trends influencing the type of content they share, they only influence some of the respondents' content. And so, X (formerly Twitter) trends influence just a number of users' content, even if most of them use the feature.

The result shows that most of the respondents believe that X (formerly Twitter) trends indicate important discussions for X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria. They also believe that it indicates the latest discussions and highlights the latest conversations in society. So, it is concluded that X (formerly Twitter) Trends highlights significant content to X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria.

### **Discussion**

In this study, the agenda-setting theory was put to the test in the digital public sphere, and findings reveal that X (formerly Twitter) Trends influence just some users' content; even though the majority of them often use the feature to some extent, they still consider it to highlight significant content on the platform. This shows that although X (formerly Twitter) Trends may set the agenda to some extent on the platform by showcasing significant conversations, most people do not create their content based on the Trends, nor do they use it often. The agenda-setting theory sets the agenda but does not determine, to a large extent, the content created.

Furthermore, one can say that X (formerly Twitter) Trends influence what people talk about on X (formerly Twitter) in Nigeria, but not necessarily what they create content around. This result confirms the agenda-setting function of X (formerly Twitter) Trends. The findings are also in line with the position of Matteson (2013) that individuals are empowered by the social media system to monitor their media consumption and view their public agenda. The convergence of control enabled by social media has placed the individual in a position of power rather than passive consumption. Thus, this brings to the fore the proposition of technological determinism theory, which states that technology in society shapes people's actions. However, this study reveals some slightly different findings because even though the respondents consider X (formerly Twitter) Trends significant in society, most do not create content based on it. As such, it does not necessarily shape their actions.

The potency of X (formerly Twitter) Trends, which indicates what most people discuss at a particular moment, was also tested. It was found that, like how agenda-setting plays out with traditional media, it is similar on X (formerly Twitter). This study shows that X (formerly Twitter) Trends not only transfers salience to issues, but X (formerly Twitter) users also attach importance to these issues. Findings also reveal that X (formerly Twitter) users consider these Trends to indicate significant content. It agrees with Cowart (2017) in her study that agenda-setting on social media occurs through repetition. The findings are also consistent with Thitivesa's (2018) earlier discussed position that if you can get a campaign to go viral on the internet, you will have much power to influence the general public, corporations, and government agencies, or even start a movement.

## **Limitations of the Study and Area of Future Research**

This study has several limitations. One obstacle encountered while collecting data is finding readily available respondents who fit the criteria of "X (formerly Twitter) users." Another limitation is the insufficient sample size of 200 respondents. However, this study's findings make a crucial contribution to the study of using social media as a digital public sphere, even though they do not allow for generalisation. This study uses a survey method to determine the audience's perceptions of X (formerly Twitter) Trends. As such, to produce a robust study and gain contextual knowledge, future researchers can focus on adopting the content analysis method to study tweets and detect patterns in correlation with X (formerly Twitter) Trends.

In addition, X (formerly Twitter) is not representative of the social media public sphere in Nigeria; further studies can be done in this area for a representative sample. Also, other researchers can investigate this subject matter using a larger number of respondents to produce a more generalisable result. Likewise, future research can look at a specific issue in the public domain to better understand different facets of society and how they relate to X (formerly Twitter) Trends.

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

With the internet comes new ways of doing things, things to unlearn, and concepts to relearn. As with X (formerly Twitter) and the public sphere, one cannot deny the impact on users and how this indirectly affects the public agenda. This study concludes that most X (formerly Twitter) users often utilise X (formerly Twitter) trends to some extent. X (formerly Twitter) trends influence the content of some users but not the majority of them, even if the majority use the feature. Finally, the X (formerly Twitter) Trends feature highlights significant content to X (formerly Twitter) users in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

This study recommends the following based on theory, practice, and policy:

#### **Theory**

The agenda-setting theory and the technological determinism theory can be tested in the context of other social media platforms to find their potency regarding how these platforms set public conversation agendas.

#### **Practice**

Stakeholders like X should ensure suitable systems are in place for accurate Trends metrics to avoid misleading users with the wrong Trends or content by some users. In addition, X (formerly Twitter) should develop campaigns and guides to help users better understand how to engage with the Trends feature on X (formerly Twitter). This study also recommends that the media provide proper context for significant content highlighted on X (formerly Twitter) to provide more details regarding trending conversations. Likewise, the public should regularly update and enlighten themselves when it comes to engaging with social media content.

#### **Policy**

The government should pay closer attention to relevant public conversations on the X platform to understand people's take on certain issues and how to help them better. In addition, the study urges

the government to partner with relevant agencies to set up regular digital literacy campaigns to help the public effectively engage with social media content on X (formerly Twitter).

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