JOURNAL OF PEACE, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
JPSDS 4(1), 93-103, June (2025)
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OPEN ACCESS
ORGINAL ARTICLE

NIGER DELTA YOUTH'S, EXPOSURE, RESPONSIVENESS AND PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S WAR AGAINST OIL THEFT IN THE REGION

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Abstract

Crude oil theft remains a critical challenge in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region. This study examines the Niger Delta Youth's level of exposure to social media messages on the war on oil theft in the Niger Delta and how such messages influence their perception of the federal government's war against oil theft in the region. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey, data were collected from 1,536 youths (aged 18–40) across four oil-producing states, including Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, and Imo, through a structured questionnaire. Findings revealed moderate exposure to government messages, which were perceived as somewhat credible (Mean = 2.85) and timely (Mean =2.69), yet largely ineffective in mobilizing offline action (Mean = 2.25). High data costs, technical language, and a trust deficit were key barriers. Although the messages prompted low-commitment online behaviors (e.g., sharing), they failed to inspire direct involvement, such as facility protection (Mean = 1.47) or collaboration with security forces (Mean = 1.17). The study concludes that while current strategies raise awareness, they lack the cultural relevance, consistency, and trust-building needed for impactful youth engagement. A more strategic and context-sensitive social media approach is recommended.

Key Words: Exposure, Responsiveness, Youth, Social Media, Oil Theft, Niger Delta

1.0 Introduction

Nigeria's economy is overwhelmingly dependent on revenue from crude oil, with the Niger Delta region accounting for over 90% of the nation's exports (NNPC, 2022). However, this vital economic artery is severely constricted by the pervasive issue of crude oil theft, with estimates suggesting losses of hundreds of thousands of barrels per day (Premium Times, 2022). This illicit activity has catastrophic economic, environmental, and social consequences, crippling national development and devastating local ecosystems (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; Campbell, 2015).

Oil theft and pipeline vandalism have long been significant challenges for oil-producing nations, including Nigeria, where these activities have severely impacted the national economy (Ibru, 2015). Despite various policy interventions, including the enactment of the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) in 2021, which aims to hold oil-producing communities accountable for the protection of oil infrastructure, the problem persists. The PIA mandates host communities of oil facilities in section 257 to take responsibility for any theft or sabotage in their areas, with financial penalties imposed for non-compliance. However, many communities remain unaware of or indifferent to the provisions of the law, particularly the youth, who are most vulnerable to involvement in oil theft due to limited economic opportunities. This situation points to a communication gap, despite efforts by stakeholders to disseminate information through public media channels to raise awareness about the federal government's campaign against oil theft in the Niger Delta. Although the PIA aims to reduce oil theft by involving local communities in safeguarding oil infrastructure, the effectiveness of this policy particularly its reception among youths remains unclear.

This has triggered research interest in assessing the effectiveness of various media messages, including those disseminated through social media, in supporting the federal government's campaign against oil theft. While previous studies have examined the role of traditional mass media and broader public awareness campaigns, there is a dearth in knowledge regarding the role of social media in this context.

In the digital age, social media platforms like Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp have become critical arenas for disseminating information about these efforts. The government and its agencies now routinely use these platforms to broadcast successes, warn perpetrators, and seek public support (Afolabi, 2021).

While existing research has explored oil theft and the role of traditional media, a significant gap remains in the empirical investigation of how Niger Delta youths perceive and are influenced by social media messages concerning the government’s anti–oil theft campaign. This study addresses this gap by determining the level of awareness of Niger Delta youths regarding social media messages on the federal government’s war against oil theft, examining their perceptions of these messages, and assessing how such messages influence the responsiveness of Niger Delta youths toward curbing oil theft.

Literature Review

Oil theft in Nigeria, commonly referred to as illegal oil bunkering, involves the unauthorized tapping of pipelines, flow stations, and export terminals to siphon crude oil, which is then refined or exported unlawfully (Ugwuanyi, 2020). While bunkering is a legitimate maritime process involving the fueling of ships, it becomes illegal when carried out without appropriate licenses or in violation of established regulations (Asuni, 2019). Obasi (2011) elaborates that illegal oil bunkering encompasses a wide range of criminal activities, including unlawful ship loading, theft, smuggling, and diversion of oil.

These acts contravene Section 44(3) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, which vests ownership and control of all mineral resources in the Federal Government.

Over time, these illegal operations have evolved from militia-driven ventures to full-scale, community-supported, and politically enabled enterprises often concealed under the guise of legitimate activities. According to Asuni (2019), illegal oil bunkering now occurs in three main forms: small-scale theft for local use, large-scale siphoning for international export, and over-lifting of crude oil beyond authorized quantities.

The logistics of illegal oil bunkering highlight its profitability and sophistication. Operations are typically conducted in the remote creeks of the Niger Delta, where dense mangrove forests provide cover for barges that tap directly into high-pressure pipelines. These barges are filled rapidly, and the crude oil is transferred offshore to larger vessels for international trade, often without the need for collusion with oil company staff (HRW, 2003). Despite its illegality, the venture remains highly lucrative and is regarded as the most profitable criminal enterprise in Nigeria's petroleum sector (Onuoha, 2009).

Beyond its economic dimension, oil theft is deeply intertwined with political and security dynamics. Militant and paramilitary groups have used oil theft and piracy to pressure the federal government for greater control over oil revenues and increased regional autonomy. As Odalonu (2015) notes, the intricate web of actors from local youths and politicians to foreign shipping operators makes combating oil theft a formidable challenge that past interventions have failed to address effectively.

Oil theft in the Niger Delta, also referred to as oil bunkering (Watts, 2007), manifests in three distinct forms (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). The first involves local-level theft, where oil is siphoned from punctured pipelines, crudely refined, and sold within nearby communities (Asuni, 2019). The second form is more elaborate, involving the diversion of crude oil directly into barges, canoes, or ships through hoses attached to wellheads or manifold points (Ikelegbe, 2005). These vessels navigate the Niger Delta's complex waterways to transfer the stolen oil into larger tankers offshore for export (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). The third and most sophisticated mode often described as the "white-collar branch" of oil theft involves manipulating export documentation and over-lifting crude oil beyond licensed quotas by legitimate operators. This reveals elite complicity in oil theft, frequently protected by bureaucratic loopholes (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013).

Recent scholarly attention has focused on both the local and international dynamics sustaining oil theft. Bower and Ngada (2018) found minimal correlation between oil theft and poverty levels in pipeline-hosting areas but identified a strong link between rising global oil prices and increased oil theft, emphasizing the role of international demand. Similarly, Akpomera (2015) highlights global criminal networks involved in the trade, including the supply of arms to local actors by foreign buyers. However, Akporiaye, and Yelles (2016) challenge dominant narratives, arguing that the scale and impact of oil theft are often exaggerated and have limited influence on national production or global oil prices. They contend that framing oil theft as a national crisis serves as a smokescreen for deeper structural issues tied to Nigeria's rentier state identity a perspective also supported by Njoku (2016) and Adibe et al. (2018).

These scholars argue that the centralization of oil wealth marginalizes local communities in oil-producing areas. Although the scale of oil theft remains contested, there is consensus on its negative implications for governance, equity, and development in the Niger Delta.

Economically, oil theft in Nigeria poses a multifaceted threat to national stability and domestic resource mobilization (DRM), severely undermining fiscal capacity. Countries plagued by oil theft, such as Nigeria, record an average tax yield of just 9.2% of GDP far below the IMF benchmark of 14.7% (Balima et al., 2020; Romsom, 2022). This loss, compounded by the physical theft of crude oil, inflates fiscal deficits, erodes public service delivery, and impedes progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including transitions to green taxation in the post-COVID-19 recovery era. Moreover, oil theft contributes to macroeconomic instability by aggravating inflation, distorting exchange rates, and weakening public trust in state institutions (IMF, as cited in Romsom, 2022).

Security challenges and operational risks have also led to declining foreign investment, particularly among multinational oil companies such as Shell, Chevron, and ENI, which have scaled back or exited onshore operations (Bloomberg, 2013; Ventures Africa, 2014). This withdrawal has increased unemployment and reduced local income, exacerbating poverty in oil-producing regions. Although Nigeria has recorded modest progress in economic diversification, with the non-oil sector contributing more to GDP (Oxford Business Group, 2014), structural dependence on oil revenues remains entrenched (Otaha, 2012; Ahmad & Singh, 2003). The social consequences are equally severe: insecurity hinders service delivery, while youth recruitment by armed groups increases school dropout rates and undermines human capital development (Ebegbulem et al., 2013). In some areas, displaced communities have migrated to urban slums, while others align with oil theft syndicates who provide employment, fuel, and basic services—often appearing more effective than the state (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). Consequently, oil theft extends beyond mere criminality to form part of a broader "moral economy" that reflects systemic governance failures in the Niger Delta.

Over the years, successive Nigerian governments have introduced various measures to curb vandalism and illegal bunkering in the region. These include the establishment of a task force on national strategic infrastructure, the creation of special security outfits, and the assignment of the Nigerian Navy to oversee registered maritime activities. During President Obasanjo's administration particularly in his second term beginning in 2003 several ships involved in illegal crude oil trafficking were seized, and arrests were made. However, prosecutions often failed, as seized ships and suspects mysteriously disappeared. The government's increased militarization of the region, notably through the establishment of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in 2008, produced limited results despite numerous operations and equipment seizures (Tomas, 2010; Ogodo, 2012).

Internationally, efforts were also made. In 2003, Nigeria warned Côte d'Ivoire against refining stolen crude and offered legal supply contracts to discourage illicit trade. However, this initiative was not extended to other countries suspected of purchasing stolen oil, thus limiting its success. President Yar'Adua (2007–2009), faced with escalating militancy and oil theft, introduced an amnesty programme

aimed at disarming and reintegrating militants. His successor, President Goodluck Jonathan, expanded these efforts by empowering the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) to protect pipelines and by seeking international cooperation, urging the U.S. and EU to halt the purchase of stolen Nigerian crude (Udo, 2013).

Despite these numerous interventions, oil theft and illegal bunkering persist. The government's decision to engage ex-militant commanders for coastal protection has yielded minimal success. Experts attribute this failure to the sophistication of the trade and the involvement of high-profile actors both locally and internationally. Furthermore, the Ad Hoc Committee on Crude Oil Theft Prevention and Control of the National Economic Council (NEC) reported that the government lacks adequate vessels and infrastructure to monitor and secure the vast pipeline network in the region (Paul & Tobi, 2016).

Although existing literature provides a comprehensive overview of oil theft and the federal government's countermeasures, very few studies explore the potential of localized and community-driven media initiatives in bridging the communication gap between federal anti-theft campaigns and the grassroots. Without examining the relevance, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of media messages to local audiences, scholarship remains limited in offering actionable insights for sustainable policy communication and social change.

These identified gaps necessitate the current study, which emphasizes the need for a more elaborate, region-specific, and participatory approach to understanding the role of social media in the fight against oil theft. Such an approach will not only enrich theoretical understanding of media influence in conflict-affected resource regions but also inform the development of inclusive and effective communication strategies that reflect the lived realities of those most affected.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Uses and Gratification (U&G) theory. The U&G theory, pioneered by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the early 1970s, is one of the most influential approaches to understanding media consumption from the perspective of active audiences. The theory posits that media users are not passive recipients of messages but active participants who seek out media to satisfy a range of personal, social, and psychological needs (Blumler, Gurevitch, & Katz, 1973). The fundamental assumption of U&G theory is that individuals actively choose media content based on their unique needs and motivations, which are categorized into four key areas: diversion (escape from daily life), personal identity (reinforcement of values), personal relationships (companionship and social interaction), and surveillance (seeking information for decision-making) (McQuail, 2010). This framework shifts the focus from the traditional "media effects" model, which emphasized the passive role of the audience, to one where the audience plays a central role in shaping their media consumption and, consequently, their media experiences. Katz's early work, alongside the research conducted by Blumler and Gurevitch, formed the basis for a broader understanding of media as a tool through which individuals actively meet their diverse needs. This Theory is relevant to the study as it helps explain the

thoughts and experiences of Niger Delta youths, as well as how they interact with social media messages in the federal government's war against oil theft. It also aids in evaluating the impact of social media messages on shaping awareness and behaviour.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This design was appropriate for collecting data from a large sample to generalize findings about the population's attitudes, perceptions, and reported behaviors (Nwodu, 2009). The study was conducted in the Niger Delta region. Four states Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, and Imo were randomly selected from the nine oil-producing states using a table of random numbers. The study focused on urban centers and local government headquarters within these states due to higher smartphone penetration and internet access. The target population was youths aged 18-40 in the selected states. Using the Wimmer and Dominick sample size formula for a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a minimum sample of 384 was calculated. To enhance robustness and allow for state-level analysis, a total sample of 1,536 was targeted from a possible 8,427,107 study population, allocating 384 respondents per state. A multi-stage sampling technique was used:

Stage 1: Random selection of four states (Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, Imo).

Stage 2: Purposive selection of state capitals and major urban commercial cities.

Stage 3: Simple random selection of five Local Government Areas (LGAs) per state.

Stage 4: Quota and convenience sampling were used to administer questionnaires to the required number of youths in each LGA headquarters.

A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was the primary instrument. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Simple percentages, frequency tables, mean scores, and standard deviations were computed using SPSS version 25. A mean score threshold of 2.50 was set; scores above this indicated acceptance/agreement with a statement, while scores below indicated rejection/disagreement.

Results

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Of the 1,536 respondents, 52% were male and 48% were female. The majority (31.9%) were aged 28–32, followed by 26.7% aged 18–22. Regarding education, 40.6% were undergraduates, 31.7% were graduates, and 23.9% had a high school education. Most respondents (61.8%) resided in urban areas.

Table 1: Respondents bio-data (N=1536)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	798	52.0
	Female	738	48.0
Age	18–22	410	26.7
	23–27	335	21.8
	28–32	490	31.9
	33+	301	19.6
Education	High School	367	23.9
	Undergraduate	623	40.6
	Graduate	487	31.7
	Postgraduate	59	3.8
Location	Urban	949	61.8
	Rural	587	38.2

Research Question 1: Level of Exposure

Results indicate a moderate level of exposure to social media messages on oil theft. While 45.4% agreed that social media is a major source of information (Mean = 2.84), only 41% reported frequently encountering such posts. A significant finding was that social media messages were perceived to appear only "once in a while" (Mean = 2.31), indicating inconsistent messaging.

Research Question 2: Perception of Messages

Respondents found the messages credible (Mean = 2.85) and timely (Mean = 2.69). However, they largely disagreed that the messages portrayed the government positively (Mean = 2.45) or were effective tools for mobilizing youth (Mean = 2.25). There was also a strong sense that the messages could be misleading (Mean = 2.96), reflecting underlying trust issues.

Research Question 3: Influence on Responsiveness

The influence was mixed. Social media messages were effective in defining the role of youth (Mean = 2.65) and exposing community impacts of oil theft (Mean = 2.70). They also encouraged sharing and commenting (Mean = 2.83) and advising peers against theft (Mean = 2.99). However, they were ineffective in motivating youths to physically protect oil facilities (Mean = 1.47) or collaborate with law enforcement (Mean = 1.17).

Table 2: Summary of Key Quantitative Findings Mean Scores

Variable Theme	Representative Statement	Mean Score	Interpretation
Exposure	Social media is a major source of information	2.84	Accepted
	I frequently come across posts	2.07	Rejected
Perception	Messages are credible and trustworthy	2.85	Accepted
	Messages help mobilize youth	2.25	Rejected
Responsiveness	Messages encourage reporting theft	3.17	Accepted
	Messages make me protect facilities	1.47	Rejected

5. Discussion

Addressing research question one, the study revealed that Niger Delta youths have a moderate level of exposure to social media messages in the federal government's war against oil theft. A mean score of 2.84 indicates acceptance that social media is a major source of information and exposure, while a mean score of 2.07 reflects the lack of frequency in social media postings about the federal government's war against oil theft in the Niger Delta.

This moderate level of exposure is a fundamental concern, as it is widely believed that an anti-theft campaign cannot succeed if its target audience rarely encounters its messages. The inconsistency in posting, as reflected in the low mean score for frequency, suggests an ad hoc communication approach rather than a sustained and strategic campaign. This finding aligns with the work of Akoja, Mofoluke, and Nwenearizi (2020) on youths' perception of social media as a credible news source in Lagos, Nigeria, which revealed that youths frequently use social media as a news source.

The paradox of credibility versus ineffectiveness (**RQ2**) is the study's most critical finding. While respondents believe the *information* is credible, they dismiss its *purpose,* mobilization. This aligns with literature on the Niger Delta's trust deficit (Eric & Kpae, 2017). The mean score 2.85 for "messages are misleading" further underscores this deep-seated cynicism toward official narratives.

Finally, the influence on responsiveness (**RQ3**) is limited to low-commitment actions like online sharing and advising peers. The failure to inspire concrete actions, such as protecting facilities or collaborating with security agencies, confirms that while social media raises awareness, it has yet to bridge the gap to tangible action in this highly charged context. This resonates with Uses and Gratifications theory; youth use these messages for information and social exchange (gratifications), but not for the government's intended goal of catalyzing behavioral change.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while the Federal Government of Nigeria utilizes social media to communicate its war against oil theft, its current strategy is only partially effective. Niger Delta youth are exposed to these messages but perceive them with a mixture of belief in their credibility and skepticism about their intent. Significant barriers including technical messaging, infrastructural deficits, and a profound trust deficit hinder the campaign's ability to mobilize youth as active participants in curbing oil theft. The government's social media efforts have succeeded in raising awareness but failed to inspire tangible action or overcome deep-rooted socio-political grievances.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Exposure:** The study suggests that stakeholders need to be more consistent in their posts regarding the Federal Government's war against oil theft in the Niger Delta. A sustained and regular posting schedule should replace the current practice of occasional announcements.

2. **Perception:** Social media messages should go beyond showcasing arrests. They should include transparent narratives about prosecutions, community benefits from saved revenue (via the PIA), and address complexities of the issue, including high-level complicity, to build credibility.

3. **Responsiveness:** To capture the attention of Niger Delta youths, local content should form the foundation of social media messaging in the Federal Government's war against oil theft. Leveraging local social media influencers or familiar community media outlets is likely to enhance engagement and build trust.

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