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## Twitter Ban in Nigeria: Implications on Economy, Freedom of Speech and Information Sharing

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# **Twitter Ban in Nigeria: Implications on Economy, Freedom of Speech and Information Sharing**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explored the implications of Twitter ban in Nigeria on economy, freedom of speech and information sharing. The study utilized mass media and legal documents to determine the opinion of the government officials, religious leaders, industrial experts, international organizations, legal experts and IT-based business specialists on the ban. It was discovered that Twitter ban infringes on the rights of the people to freedom of expression, access and sharing of information. It was discovered that the ban affected economy so badly that its effects have resulted to bridges on information flow between business associates, losses of jobs, investment hostilities and business failures. It was concluded that the government should reverse its decision and allow people access to Twitter as this is one of the platforms people can make a living, and also an avenue to improve the economy of the country.

**Keywords:** Twitter, Twitter Ban, Implication on Economy, Freedom of Speech, Information Sharing, Nigeria

## **The Birth of Twitter Ban in Nigeria**

President Muhammadu Buhari on Tuesday, 1 June, 2021 made a post on Twitter and issued a threat which was considered war inciting when he threatened to treat Nigerians “Misbehaving in the language they understand”. This was resulted in Twitter deleting the tweet on the President’s official handle @MBuhari.

From The Guardian Newspaper of Thursday, June 3, 2021, President Buhari had in the tweet shared on Tuesday, 1 June, 2021, cited the Nigerian Civil War experience, which was fought between 1967 and 1970, and noted that most of those “Misbehaving” by burning electoral offices were too young to understand the gravity of war. The tweet raised global concern and millions of comments with widespread condemnation and criticism. As a result, some Nigerians called on Twitter to suspend the President’s account, claiming the tweet “expresses intentions of self-harm or suicide” as stated on Twitter’s usage policy. Following the occurrence, Twitter deleted the

message, and replaced the tweet with: “This Tweet violated the Twitter Rules, Learn More” (Njoku, Olumide, Daka, Ugoeze, Abuh, Nzor and Osibe, 2021).

In response to the matter, Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, accused Twitter of double standard claiming that other individuals and groups also make inciting tweets but ignored by Twitter (Eze, Taiwo, Obi and Nweje, 2021).

***Reactions of prominent Nigerians towards Buhari’s war threat against Nigerian’s citizens:***

Former President of Aka Ikenga, Chief Goddy Uwazurike and former second vice president of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Monday Onyekachi Ubani and others cheered Twitter and were happy that the tweet was deleted as Buhari’s tweet signified hatred on those he should be loved and protected (Eze, Taiwo, Obi and Nweje, 2021).

In the same vein, Adeolu Ogunbanjo, national president, National Association of Telecommunication Subscribers (NATCOMS) opined: “I see (Buhari) choice of words offensive to the younger generation and obviously it is a threat because his words were too open ended and coming. In his word, Adeolu opined, “I think he (Buhari) should calm down and look at Twitter is saying; that you can’t use their medium to be threatening a whole generation of a country. These people he is threatening are supposed to be the ones in charge” (Ogubanjo (2021, p.6)

Jide Awe, chief executive officer of Jidaw System Limited stated, “The truth is that all social media big tech platforms are private platforms. My assumption is that such actions are taken when a user’s post is deemed to be against the social media platform’s community guidelines and terms. All users agree to those rules when they sign up. Having social media is a choice” (Awe, 2021, P.6).

With respect to wider reach and influence of social media, Awe (2021) asserts that many world leaders use social media to communicate with their citizens and the world. The global response to posts and tweets is a sign of the power of social media platforms. However, they own their private platforms. On their own, Awe stressed that these platforms determine when a user flouts the rules and the actions to take when there is a violation. Anyim (2020) posits that Twitter is an important tool of evidence since information generated from it could be considered admissible in Nigerian Court of Law.

Peter Ayodele Fayose, former Ekiti State Governor stated in his Tweet, “Nigeria is boiling everywhere and all that the President can do is to be threatening genocide up and down. Now that Twitter has dealt with our almighty President Buhari, won’t he “deal” with Twitter too? Like Trump, like Buhari. “It is obvious that those using the president’s powers for him do not know when and where to stop their power madness. Regrettably, Twitter may not know that Buhari is not the one operating the handle. Can our President operate android phone not to talk of making genocide tweets? A President who cannot address his own people in time of crisis can certainly not be the one tweeting on the crisis. Twitter should rather hold Garba Shehu, Lai Mohammed and co accountable.” (Fayose, 2021).

Senator Shehu Sani through his Twitter handle @ShehuSani made this assertion, “The President should talk to us... the President should address us...the President should speak to us...now una don hear am”

Dele Momodu Ovation in his Twitter handle @Delemomodu: “I had no answer until I saw the video...it was a sad day for those who still have some medium of belief in project Nigeria. The President did not declare war on bandits and herdsmen but was interested in fighting another civil war, and said so openly. That was an all-time low!!” (Momodu, 2021).

More reactions were evolving against Mr. President’s tweet which the likes of Chief Goddy Uwazuruike, the Emeritus President of Aka Ikenga stated that he was not surprised about the position being canvased by the president, insisted that the President’s governance style and action had always been against the Igbo ethnic group. “Not too long ago, the President was appealing to bandits to release some students kidnapped in Kaduna; acknowledging that the President said nothing about the kidnap of over 200 students of Isiamiyya School in Niger State. Mr President did not threaten those in Bornu and Zamfara who are kidnapping. He did not threaten those who have made Kaduna ungovernable. He did not threaten the Fulani herdsmen killing people in Benue nor showed concern about it. He is threatening those who are busy shaking their fists. IPOB does not carry weapons” (Uwazuruike, 2021).

Similarly, Alaigbo Development Foundation condemned what it called the President’s penchant for ethnic profiling, stating that his body language has given impetus to allegation that the violence

in the South East (Igbo land) was being perpetrated by some imported machineries to orchestrate military invasion. As stated by ADF's spokesman, Chief Abia Onyike, yesterday, expressed disappointment that instead of fishing out the criminals and making them face the law, president Buhari had rushed to threaten the people of the region. According to Onyike (2021), "It sounds like a message of collective annihilation. Why did he (Buhari) not talk like this when Fulani herdsmen killed hundreds of people in the South East and other parts of Nigeria? He should stop this policy of ethnic profiling in order to save us genocide."

Moreover, Pan-Arewa Socio Political Organisation, Coalition of Northern Group (CNG), in a statement by Abdul-Azeez Sulaiman, contended that Buhari's remark was not only empty but unpresidential, adding that the tweet merely amounted to admission of failure and loss of capacity. He stated, "We find it ridiculous that most parts of President's tweets concentrated more attention to infrastructure than on the lives of the citizens that are wasted daily with virtually no response from the authorities. "The President's revelation that most of those involved in the current agitation for secession are those who have not witnessed the 1967 civil war is a vindication of our position that the only reasonable option to ensure a more secure future is for the Igbo to be allowed to have their wish for a Biafran nation." The fact that the strength of the Igbo agitation rests on youth who are mainly of 50, with diseased mindsets induced by their forefathers and encouraged by their political, cultural and religious leaders to take up arms against the Nigerian state and Northerners, has rendered the nation's unity negotiable. It is therefore unreasonable for those older Nigerians who are mostly above 70 to insist that the unity of Nigeria is sacrosanct whereas the people executing secession agenda are almost entirely below 50 (Sulaiman, 2021)".

According to Adegboruwa (2021), "In democracy, it is dangerous for the government to seek to control the media space, be it social or traditional media, as it is illogical to supervise those who are to hold you accountable"

### **Implications of Twitter ban on Freedom of Speech, Expression and Information Sharing**

From peoples' opinion, the ban on Twitter in Nigeria has serious implications centered on the rights of the masses. This section focuses on the pool of reactions from several government, industry, religious, international communities and experts view point on this matter.

### *Implications on Human Rights*

Social media platform like Twitter, is one of the best technological innovations that have made information sharing, marketing information and collaboration easier. It was acknowledged that Millions of people across Nigeria, especially youth, rely on social media to engage in discourse and to share and access information (Anyim, 2020). As a matter of fact, Nigeria's constitution and international human rights law, as set out in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, protect the right to free expression and access to information and provide that any restriction to this right must be justifiable in a democratic society (Ewang, 2021).

Pastor Enoch Adeboye of The Redeemed Christian Church of God, quoted, "Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers," (Adepetun, Aikulola, Nwokoro, Ugoeze and Akpa (2021).

Nigeria is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which in Article 19 obligates States to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, encompassing the right to hold opinions without interference, and the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any medium regardless of frontiers (ICNL, 2021).

At the regional level, Article 9 (2) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) also guarantees every person's right to express and disseminate opinions within the law (The African Commission on Human Right and People). The African Commission Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (Principle 38 (1) & Principle 37 (1), prohibits States from interfering with the right of individuals to seek, receive and impart information through any means of communication and digital technologies, through measures such as the removal, blocking or filtering of content, unless such interference is justifiable and compatible with international human rights law and standards.

In a statement, Chairman of the Association of Licensed Telecom Operation of Nigeria (ALTON), Gbenga Adebayo, and Executive Secretary, Gbolahan Awonuga, said: “As an industry, we endorse the position of the United Nations that the rights held by people offline must also be protected online. This includes respecting and protecting the rights of all people to communicate, to share information freely and responsibly, and to enjoy privacy and security regarding their data and their use of digital communications” (Adebayo and Awonuga (2021).

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator, Samantha Power, said the suspension was nothing more than state-sanctioned denial of free speech and therefore should be reversed immediately (Paulinus and Obi, 2021).

On June 5, 2021, US Diplomatic Mission issued a statement where it said the suspension of Twitter operation in Nigeria was an infringement on the rights of Nigerians to freedom of expression (Daily Sun, Thursday, June 10, 2021. P.6).

On June 7, 2021, US Ambassador to Nigeria, Mary Beth Leonard, while responding to a question concerning the joint statement, during meeting Minister of Foreign Affairs, Geoffrey Onyema said the missions have not changed their stance, “We remain firm in our position that free access to the ability to express one’s self is actually very important, and perhaps, even more important in troubled times,” Leonard said (Paulinus and Obi, 2021).

Governor Samuel Orton of Benue State posits that suspension of Twitter is a ploy to distract Nigerians from the Federal Government’s failure to address insecurity. He further stated that the ban is illegal, suppression of the fundamental rights of Nigerians and a gag on social media (Orji and Ejemba, 2021)

The EU, US, Britain, Canada and Ireland said, “Banning system of expression is not the answer, precisely, the moment when Nigeria needs to foster inclusive dialogue and expression of opinions, as well as share vital information in this time of COVID-19 pandemic” (The Guardian, Tuesday, June 8, 2021, p.9).

Valentine Ozigbo, business mogul and international sports developer posits that the ban on Twitter contradicts the constitutional rights of Nigerians to express their thoughts freely and access information (The Guardian, Tuesday, June 8, 2021, p.9).

## **General Economic Implication of Twitter Ban in Nigeria**

Digital media like Twitter are essential for information exchange, marketing customer services and remote work, especially during public health and safety emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. The suspension can slow commerce, cut productivity and ultimately cost jobs (Iyatse and Adepetun, 2021).

Nigerians in Diaspora Movement (NDM) stressed that banning Twitter in Nigeria was an act of insensitivity considering the fact many Nigerians make a living through the site. NDM recollected that social media like Twitter have been proven to lift people, especially the youth, out of poverty through the acquisition and exchange of value adding ideas. To this effect, NDM hereby, unequivocally, calls upon the Nigerian government to reconsider the ban on Twitter without further delay (Paulinus and Obi, 2021).

Valentine Ozigbo, the immediate past President and Group CEO of Transcorp PLC in a statement acknowledged that Twitter is a platform that drives business and creates jobs for millions of Nigerians, especially the youth. “As a business leader and investor in technology and communications, I appreciate the role of social networking platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook in driving business and the economy. This suspension will have untold negative consequences to our economy, or image as a democracy and the youth who use Twitter as a platform to advance their career (Adepetun, Aikulola, Nwokoro, Ugoeze and Akpa, 2021).

According to NetBlocks, a watchdog organization that monitors cyber-security and governance of the Internet, each hour of the social media gagging costs Nigeria about \$250,000 (N102.5 million), bringing the daily loss to N2.5 billion. It means the economy would have lost approximately 7.5 billion in the past three days (4<sup>th</sup> June, 2021). The suspension has already created a market access gap for millions of small business and medium scale enterprises that use the platform to reach their customers. This could potentially complicate the challenges COVID-19 and other structural defects had imposed on businesses. Also affected is the e-commerce market in the country, estimated at \$12 billion (Iyatse and Adepetun, 2021).



The chairman, Mobile Software Solution, Nigeria, Chris Uwaje, opines that the ban would bring a monumental economic disfunction, with the capability to fuel more unemployment, whose disaster recovery damages will cost a long time to amend. He identifies the following as among the possible consequences of shutting down Twitter: massive damage to consumer, delay development of Nigeria's digital ecosystem, massive cyber-attack on Nigeria etc. (The Guardian, Monday, June 7, 2021, P. 9).

Most Information and Communication Technologies professionals described government ban on Twitter as a decision made without knowledge of technology's dynamism. They argue that the decision could undermine the economic boost technology gives the country by way of consistently strengthening the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Osugwu, Ndujihe, Njoku et.al, 2021).

In a report to Al Jazeera, Gbenga Sesan, executive director of the Paradigm Initiative, a pan-African social enterprise working on digital inclusion and rights, opines that this ban will force investors out of Nigeria and also that global tech companies that want to investment in Africa are likely to consider a place like Ghana rather than Nigeria (Iyolah, 2021).

Sesan also added that the suspension of Twitter sends the wrong signal to foreign investors; meanwhile, small businesses using Twitter as a source of livelihood in Nigeria will be affected due to the fact that businesses in Nigeria use digital media to reach customers, expose their brands and communicate with various stakeholders. That will definitely be affected by this erratic decision (Iyolah, 2021).

The President, Association of Advertising Agencies of Nigeria (AAAN), Steve Babaeko, observed that significant population of Nigerian youth earn their livelihood through Twitter, "some simply by being attack dogs or mouthpiece for politicians and the government" which by implication, income for those youths will be lost to the ban. On the other hand, unemployment among the youth segment currently stands at about 35%, depending on which state of the Federation one is looking at; with Twitter ban, the unemployment rate will worsen (Babaeko, 2021).

It was reported that about 39 million Nigerians have Twitter account. Many use the platform for businesses and networking, and as a result of this ban, the ability of this category of people to make

a decent living will be grossly affected. This will also affect foreign investments in Nigeria's technology sector (Sikhakhane, 2021).

In his point of view, Aja (2021) stated, "On my Twitter handle, I have read numerous tweets from individuals with side gigs in design and other IT tech skills complain about how the ban has dropped the volume of business they do. Similarly, for large corporates like banks, this Twitter ban will affect their ability to serve their clients who have adopted Direct Messaging"

### **Specific Economic Implications of Twitter Ban in Nigeria**

This section discusses specific implications Twitter ban in Nigeria has on the economy.

#### ***Implication on Investment***

The suspension of Twitter, a leading micro-blogging platform, has begun to take its toll on struggling Nigeria's economy, leading to a loss of N7.5 billion in the past three days. Nigeria's decision to suspend Twitter, at first indefinitely and later temporarily, could backfire for the government and cost the country economically in terms of new investment into its technology sector. The ban may threaten Nigeria's status as one of the best-performing African countries in attracting investment for technology start-up businesses (Iyatse and Adepetun, 2021).

Besides the financial lost, Bala Zaka, an investment expert, said the signal ban of Twitter has sent to international investment should be more worrisome to the government, who he said should have engaged Twitter diplomatically (Iyatse and Adepetun, 2021).

Financial experts posit affirmed that the decision, which has put the country in the spotlight globally, would increase the investment hostility profile of the country. In the same vein, The United States, Canada, European Union, United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland in a joint statement condemned Nigeria's government for the ban, warning that it would complicate the economic hardship caused by the pandemic (Iyatse and Adepetun, 2021).

#### ***Implication on Tax Income***

However, Twitter is a global digital communication and content platform, it is a veritable tool to diversify our economy and provide the youth a future to build their lives in a productive manner. It is evident that the longer the suspension continues the more the government of Nigeria will lose potential tax income (Tenola, 2021). Twitter has created jobs for a huge number of people and revenue in the form of taxes for the government and when this revenue generation avenue is closed, government will definitely incur great loss (Nwokoma, 2021).

### ***Implication on Influencers***

Twitter is the primary business space for most of Influencers. Since the advent of Twitter, the influencer marketing space in Nigeria has grown so much that almost anyone with dedicated followers could snag deals with organizations looking to extend their reach. While the organizations that work with Influencers can easily use other platforms for their marketing activities, it could be harder for them to do the same. Moreover, while they may be able to afford VPN services, their followers who keep them in business may find it difficult or reluctant to do so (Nwokoma, 2021).

### ***Implication on Freelancing***

The Internet revolution has brought significant increase in the number of people making a living off the Internet, specifically social media. From social media managers to content creators and product photographers, thousands of Nigerians have created careers off these platforms. Nigerians are now using Twitter to get jobs, investors, and fill vacancies. These are few of the activities that a Twitter ban would hinder (Nwokoma, 2021).

### ***Implication on Startups***

It was also identified that Nigeria's startup space has experienced tremendous growth in a short time, with \$3,77.4 million raised in 2019, although that figure declined to \$120.6 million in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. This has created jobs for a huge number of people and revenue in the form of taxes for the government. However, this Twitter ban puts a threat to all those activities. For most startups, their businesses depend, in some part, on social media. Without access to social media to run marketing campaigns or build relationships with their customers, business

would take a hit. Applications that are built using Twitter APIs are also affected. Political stability is one of the factors that investors consider while making investment decisions. By banning Twitter and directing the NBC to start licensing OTT services in the country, investors are not likely to risk investing in Nigerian startups which in turn deprives the country of much-needed investments (Nwokoma, 2021).

### ***Implication on Small and Medium Enterprises***

With consideration on small and medium enterprise (SMEs) as vital to the growth of any economy, frequently providing as much as 60-70% of the economy with jobs. Numbering about 117.4 million, SMEs in Nigeria contribute 48% of national GDP, account for 96% of businesses, and 84% of employment. Many SMEs have leveraged on the Internet, especially social media, for business activities such as marketing and customer service. The number of vendors on Twitter and Instagram is a testament to this. While these businesses could move to other platforms, their posts might not gain as much engagement as Twitter provides (Nwokoma, 2021).

In a nutshell, Hudley, Bishi and Grossman (2021) concluded that Twitter ban in Nigeria will have a serious damage on the economy as many Nigerians rely on Twitter to support their work. Employers, for instance, use the platform to circulate job openings. Freelancers use it to advertise and promote their services. And the country's vibrant start-up community — Nigeria has the most start-ups in Africa — uses Twitter to attract investment.

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