RESEARCH ARTICLE

POSTING, SHARING, LIKING AND COMMENTING: NAVIGATING THE ETHICAL TERRAIN OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF AND STUDENTS OF AEU-FUNAI

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ABSTRACT

This study examined ethical implications of posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media among academic staff and students of Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria, and ways to navigate through the ethical landmines posed by them. The objectives were to: identify the motives behind them; ascertain their ethical implications; and find ways to navigate those landmines. The study adopted survey design and was anchored on uses and gratification theory. Sample size of 389 was drawn using Taro Yamane method and data collected from 385 respondents to explore the ethical implications of above social media communicative acts. Findings revealed that students engage on social media because of self-presentation, self-love, maintaining relationships, and need for feedback. The implications were that thoughtless communicative acts on social media hurt emotions, negatively impacted on people, gives one a poor online image, make the author/sender liable to litigation, as well as affected their mental health. To navigate the ethical landmines, it was recommended that staff and students should always fact-check and verify their sources, flip the script before use, employ discretion and be considerate of others, and avoid invasion of privacy.

Keywords: Social media interactions, motives, ethical landmines, implications, navigation.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The age of digital technology has presented us large-scale use of social media, since the application of social media is all-pervasive and traverses various strata of society cultures (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020). Suffice it to say that social media has afforded us many advantages; however, their heightened adoption has risen in popularity and now has widespread effects. It has gain momentum as a worrying factor to overall well-being of society when mismanaged. Individuals now engage social media platforms in cybercrime, cyber-bullying, propagation of hate speeches, fake news, *infodemic,* and misinformation etc.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and YouTube have changed the manner people convey their viewpoints and be in tune with each other's feelings. It has completely transformed and revolutionized ways in which institutions, class of people, and persons articulate and disseminate ideas and information (Kvalnes, 2020). A common action of punching the *like* or *Unlike* button on Facebook or the application of hashtags symbols on Twitter and Instagram has permitted social media users to express their opinions effortlessly and in a symbolic manner. (Kaur, Balakrishnan, Rana & Sinniah, 2019).

The desire to transferring information or ideas and fraternize with folks usually shove us off the precipice of mankind, failing to think of the legal and ethical consequences of that seemingly harmless post we made, shared or re-tweeted, liked or commented on; its impact of psychological trauma on people's mental health. Social media enthusiasts currently are so much in a hurry to be in communication. Social media has provided them the platforms for conveying their thoughts at breakneck speed to a broad spectrum of people, without censorship from an editor or the editorial board (Kvalnes, 2020). A critical question that begs for answer is: "do they do intrapersonal communication or introspect before posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media?" Many people have been dehumanized, traumatized and embarrassed by these thoughtless and hasty actions of uncensored citizen journalists.

Presently in Nigeria, there is addiction to social media, especially among the youths, and the young at heart. As the drive to engage and express ones opinion rapidly grows, the social media user thinks more of only himself or herself; thinks most often of the praises that tags his/her comments, and most often with feeling of achievement and satisfaction, regardless of the damaging consequence that communicative act may have had on the recipients. Despite the adverse effect of wrong application of social media, online users are usually protected by the

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fundamental right of speech and freedom of expression as enshrined in various constitutions of countries of the world. This has hindered much court convictions from litigations. This notwithstanding, the ethical implications has been much as the havoc non-self-censored posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media has been detrimental well-being of people. This act of posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media though backed by fundamental human right act, has eroded the positive impact derivable from social media. Herein is the problem that warranted this study. Ethical standard should come to play as people express themselves on the social media, especially the Facebook.

Individuals should constantly be wary of the consequences of engaging on social media, bearing in mind that for every act performed, there are bound to be reactions and repercussions (www.legalwise.co.za). There have been litigations and job losses as a result of what people may have posted, shared or re-tweeted, likes or commented on social media. A school of thought may argue that there is freedom of speech and expressions which gives them the right to air their views and make their choices without hindrances, however, considering that something may be legally right, but morally wrong, brings us to the crux of this study. What is the morality of that your interactive actions on social media? How does it impact on the psyche of the other man in public domain? What you posted, shared or re-tweeted, liked or commented on social media, according to "The 4 Way Test" of the Rotary International, is it the Truth?, is it Fair to all concerned?, will it build Goodwill and better Friendship?, and will it be Beneficial to all concerned. Morality asks the golden question, that thing you did to another person, if done to you, would you appreciate it?

The objectives of the study therefore was to examine the motives, the ethical implications and challenges of posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media among the academic staff and undergraduate students of Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State (AE-FUNAI), and possible ways to navigate the ethical landmines posed by them.

Research Questions
1. What are the motives behind posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media?
2. What are the implications of thoughtless communicative acts on social media?
3. What are possible ways to navigate the ethical landmines posed by these acts?

2.0. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION, THEORY, AND EMPIRICAL REVIEW

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2.1. Conceptual Clarification
Social Media Ethics

Various ethical issues crop up when engaging on social media. These issues involve considerations of what is deemed right and wrong and the decisions-taking about what is morally acceptable on social media. It is important to use social media responsibly by adhering to the ethical standards when using them, hence the need for ethics. Social media ethics could be described as the code of conduct or guidelines that determines how people should use social media platforms. It includes "considering how to engage with others online in a respectful, lawful and appropriate manner, as well as respecting their rights, not discriminating against anyone and adhering to the laws of the country" (Awan, 2024).

As in real life scenario, there are some things one should and shouldn't do online. There are such things that are seen disrespectful or thoughtless on stream, and it's significant to be conscious of them. Social media ethics involves "refraining from posting content that is offensive, inappropriate, or illegal; engaging in thoughtful, constructive conversations with other users; avoiding bullying, harassment and other forms of online abuse; respecting the privacy of others, refraining from sharing confidential information; refraining from making false or misleading statements; and not using social media for personal gain" (www.quora.com).

The basic ethics in using social media is to have compassion, understanding or empathy. Social media is a public online forum, and every single thing shared is subject to examination or investigation; and by being considerate, we can assist in making sure that our social media interactivity are beneficial and uplifting (Mirabella, 2024).

Some instances a social media user should avoid include: "Posting pictures or videos without the subject's consent; posting mean comments about someone's appearance; spamming people with unwanted content; posting unkind comments about someone's race, religion, or sexuality; posting private information about someone without their consent; posting false or misleading information; stalking or harassing someone online; and sharing copyrighted material without permission" (www.quora.com). Social media ethics help you censor yourself from unintentionally injuring another person's emotions or putting yourself into troubles. It is advised that whenever you intend to post something on social media, take a break to think about if it violates any of the social media ethics. It could save you so many headaches, and can be pivotal

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in addressing the ethical issue of misinformation and fostering a more trustworthy and responsible social media environment (Bryan, 2023).

Posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media.
Posting: A Post, which could also mean a tweet is a content shared on social media through a user's account. It can be as simple as message, which may have images, videos, and links to other content attached to it (Constant contact, 2023). According to a blog, a post refers to "any social media status update, photo, or video, or an item shared on a blog or forum" (https://blog.hootsuite.com). A post could be a mixture of written or typed works, pictures, audio-visual records, links, and digital audio files (Socialbee, 2024). A post can be your latest picture, write-up, invention, accomplishments or even a link to your blog post, or a simple comment.

Sharing: Through sharing a post, you let people know you care about the post. You can also add your comments while sharing a post. On Twitter, this is called Retweet with a Comment. Sharing a post with a comment is seen as the ideal way to share as it affords others the opportunity to understand why the post is being shared and your perception about the shared post (van Alstyne, 2021). Any post shared on social network has enduring presence; once it is shared, it can be copied and reposted without end or putting a definite stop on it. Sharing content has evolved into a more sensitive concern, which requires careful pondering prior to sharing your post or reposting other people's own (The Morung Express, 2023).

Liking: The thumbs-up symbol designates "Like" on Facebook, while a heart icon shows "Like" on Instagram and Twitter. A like is the most common type of engagement on social media. A seamless way to show your admiration over a shared social media post is by simply hitting the "like" button. A social media user can click the Like icon instead of scripting a comment as a quick means to show his acceptance of the post (Socialbee, 2024). When the "like" icon is used, it indicates your appreciation over the post. Like is a gauge to ascertain the extent or rate of ones online performances, especially as it regards for brands and businesses. It is an indicator of concurrence from your audience. "Liking a post on social media can show one enjoyed the content of the post; agree with the sentiment of the post; as well as supports the poster" (van Alstyne, 2021).

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Commenting: Commenting on a social media post is perhaps one of the best ways to engage on social media. It signifies that you read and comprehended what the sender said, and that you cared enough to give a feedback. The comment could be concise, such as a simple "Congratulations!" or it could as well be a carefully weighed reply (van Alstyne, 2021). Commenting is another means of active participation on social media, letting users to clearly and without ambiguity respond to a sender using customised and targeted messages (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2021). Engaging in social media commenting functions as a method of large-scale individual communication, which makes easier the interchange of people's line of thoughts, impressions, and convictions up for debate and consideration (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). Commenting is described as "discussing a certain topic with others, which provides individuals with additional opportunities to coherently integrate the existing information stored in their memories with the newly encountered information" (Eveland, 2004).

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Uses and gratification theory was adopted for this study. This theory is of the notion that people actively choose media and the types of content that gives them satisfaction. Katz et al. (1974) posits that gratification is derived from the media content which is believed to satisfy the needs for education, information, entertainment and escapism. According to Hassan (2014) "Media users are gratified when they are exposed to content of the media". Use and gratification theory arose out of the studies which shifted their focus from what the media do to people, to what people do with the media. The 'Uses' approach assumes audience are active and willingly expose themselves to media. The uses of mass media are dependent on the perception, selectivity and previously held beliefs, values, and interests of the people. The term 'gratification' refers to "the rewards and satisfaction experienced by the audience after the use of media. This explains the motivations behind media use and habits of media use" (Hassan, 2014).

This theory, according Ezra (2017) "addresses the question of 'what users do with the media' instead of the traditional theories of media effects question of 'what media do to people' As Folarin (2006) puts it "instead of asking 'What kinds of effects occur under what conditions?', the question became, 'who uses which contents from which media, for which reasons and under which conditions?'" The attention therefore was moved from media production and dissemination functions to media reception and consumption modes. Uses and gratification theory connects the gratifications of needs and media choice entirely on the audience and

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viewers sides. Uses and gratification strives to explain the uses and functions of the media for persons, groups, and society in general.

Adanlawo and Chaka (2022) pointed out that media users have four simple needs to satisfy, which include entertainment, knowledge and information, social interaction, and personal characteristics. Students use social media to gratify above mentioned needs. Suffice it to say that no matter the needs the students may wish to gratify using Facebook, it is important to consider the implications that posts, like, share and comments could have on themselves or the other person. Gratification is usually got from social media contents. Suffice it to say that the same content may differently satisfy individuals since varied desires are correlated with "individual personalities, stages of maturation, social backgrounds and gender" (Ezra, 2017).

2.2. Review of Empirical Studies

Adanlawo and Chaka (2022a) studied the implications of inappropriate posting and commenting on Facebook to university students. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings showed that undergraduates post and comment inappropriately on Facebook, and the consequences are much after graduation. The study concluded that increased knowledge about risk factors will lead to a reduction of inappropriate posting and commenting on Facebook.

Lauri, Farrugia and Lauri (2022) sought to ascertain the users' emotional connections to social media and positive mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, using the Social Media Use scale and the Positive Mental Health scale. Findings showed that while there is no association between routine use of social media and positive mental health, there is a significant negative correlation between emotional connectedness of social media use and positive mental health; and that the negative association varies across age groups with younger people having less positive mental health scores, while suggesting that the link between social media use and positive mental health is more complex than just measuring time spent online and effects on mental health outcomes.

Whiting and Williams (2013) explored motives that drive people to the use social media. Findings from the 25 in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who use social media identified ten uses and gratifications for using social media which include "social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others".

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This portends that uses and gratifications theory should be given a pride of place, as it helps to explain numerous reasons why consumers use social media.

McCauley, Gumbley, Merola, McDonald and Do, (2016) researched on how the Vietnamese use Facebook in their day-to-day lives. The thrust of the study was using the Uses and gratification theory was to explore Facebook as a channel that allows posting of items that enhances the "self-love". Findings showed that Facebook enables socialization, enhances social interaction, and are a means of recreation or relaxation in Vietnam. Zhou (2024) explored the effect social media use has on the mental health of Chinese youths. Using a qualitative method, the study analyzed their thoughts as growing up children and how their addiction to social media affected their mental health. Finding showed that social media use engendered, depression, tension and mental stress. The study recommended that families and schools should be active in guiding growing children to healthy use of social media.

Wolfer (2014) studied how students perceive inappropriate alcohol consumption posts on Facebook and their effect on peer group socialization. It was found that the students perceive Facebook posts about non adult drunken manners and acts such as drink-induced vomiting as inappropriate, as older Facebook folks and family members may be embarrassed seeing such posts. Nonetheless, findings further revealed that students disregard these inappropriate posts and do not frown at them, rather sees them as fun.

Hong and Cameron (2018) looked at how online comments on a news story on an organization influenced people's perceptions of reputation of that organization. Results showed that participants that saw comments that were supportive scored the organizations as being more reputable and to an extent not the cause for the crisis than people who only saw the story. This shows that online comments can have a purposeful effect on how people usually changed their perception of the organizations in accordance to the comments made. Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2015) studies effects of posting, commenting, and tagging on dissemination of news stories on Facebook. Findings showed that rate user engagement in the news content is dependent on the interactivity of the platform.

Flynn and Li (2019) analyzed the effect of social media comments and likes on a firm's reputation during a crisis. Results revealed that online responses to the organization's Public Relations releases can influence people's perceptions of the firm's reputation and responsibility

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during of crisis periods; that comments that are supportive enhances the firm's reputation and goes on to ameliorate blames of being responsible for the crisis.

3.0. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey was adopted for this study. According to Berger (2000), "survey is a research method researchers use to get information about certain groups of people who are representative of some larger group of people of interest to them". The population of the study was 13,200, made up of 12,000 students and 1,200 academic staff of AE-FUNAI; data got from the Office of the Dean, Students Affairs and the Academic Staff Personnel department of the AE-FUNAI. The Taro Yamane formula was used to get the sample size of 389. The Multistage sampling technique was adopted. However, the multistage cluster sampling type of multistage sampling technique was at the first instance adopted to get samples of 35 academic staff and 354 students, and later for final sampling of the respondents, multistage random sampling was adopted. For the 35 academic staff, Faculties of Agriculture, Basic Medical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Education, Engineering, Environmental Sciences, Humanities, Law, and Physical Sciences got three questionnaire each, while Faculties of Management Sciences and Social Sciences got four each. For the 389 students, Faculties of Agriculture, Basic Medical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Education, Engineering, Environmental Sciences, Humanities, Law, and Physical Sciences got thirty-four questionnaires each, while Faculties of Management Sciences and Social Sciences got thirty-six and thirty-eight respectively. 385 questionnaire were returned. The percentage and 4-point Likert scale with a mean value of 2.5 were adopted for the data analysis.

4.0. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1: Why posting, sharing, liking and commenting on social media?

Table 1 above revealed reasons people post, share, like and comment on social media. From the result, the entire variables were accepted since their mean values are greater than the 2.5 benchmark, except that of social proof reason which was marginally rejected by respondents. The implication is that people post, share, like and comment on social media for various reasons, but to be seen as opinion leaders/agenda setter and for self-presentation and fulfillment were the two most accepted reasons for their communicative act on social media

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Table 1: Reasons people post, share, like and comment on social media.

SN	Table 1: Variables	Frequency				Mean	Position
		Strongly Agreed (SA):4	Agreed (A):3	Disagreed (D):2	Strongly disagreed (SD):1		
1	Self-Love	74 (19.2%)	179 (46.4%)	92 (23.8%)	40 (10.6%)	2.74	Accepted
2	To be seen as opinion leaders/agenda setter	155 (40.2%)	162 (42%)	47 (12.4%)	21 (5.4%)	3.17	Accepted
3	Self-presentation and fulfillment	162 (42%)	155 (40.2%)	37 (10%)	31 (8%)	3.16	Accepted
4	Maintaining relationships	84 (21.8%)	180 (46.6%)	85 (22%)	36 (9.6%)	2.8	Accepted
5	Social proof	40 (10.4%)	129 (33.4%)	136 (35.5%)	80 (20.7%)	2.33	Rejected
6	Need for feedback	82 (21.2%)	188 (48.7%)	84 (21.8%)	31 (8.3%)	2.82	Accepted
					Cluster mean	2.84	

Source: Authors' Analysis (2025).

This finding is supported by Whiting & Williams, D. (2013) who identified ten uses and gratifications for using social media; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar (2015) who asserted that "those who share news content via their status updates act as opinion leaders by passing along information that is already available elsewhere and making it personally relevant to their social network"; by Seiter (2016) and Digital Stack (2024) who said that when people share the right type of content, they gain social currency, and people feel better about themselves when people react positively to what they post on social media. People dedicate around 30–40% of all communications to referencing themselves. But on the net that number rises to around 80% of social media posts (Seiter, 2016; Fu, et al. (2017).); by McCauley, et al. (2016) for self-love; maintaining relationship; need for feedback (Seiter, 2016), and social proof is the concept where individuals incline towards the actions of others, particularly when they are indecisive (Faster Capital, 2024).

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Research Question 2: What are the implications of thoughtless communicative acts on social media?

Table 2: The Implications: Why social media ethics matter.

S N	Table 2: Variables	Frequency				Mean	Position
		SA	A	D	SD		
1	Emotions or feelings could be hurt	155 (40.2%)	162 (42%)	47 (12.4%)	21 (5.4%)	3.17	Accepted
2	Could negatively impact on another person	71 (18.5%)	210 (54.6%)	89 (23%)	15 (3.9%)	2.88	Accepted
3	Could give the author/ sender poor online image	74 (19.2%)	179 (46.4%)	92 (23.8%)	40 (10.6%)	2.74	Accepted
4	Could make the author/sender be liable to litigation and conviction	14 (3.6%)	190 (49.4%)	171 (44.4%)	10 (2.6%)	2.54	Accepted
5	Could ruin one's reputation and future	84 (21.8%)	180 (46.6%)	85 (22%)	36 (9.6%)	2.8	Accepted
6	Could affect one's mental health	57 (14.8%)	194 (50.2%)	128 (33.2%)	6 (1.8%)	2.78	Accepted
					Cluster mean	**2.82**	

Source: Authors' Analysis (2025).

Table 2 above revealed the implications of thoughtless communicative acts on social media. From the result, the entire variables were accepted since their mean values are greater than the 2.5 benchmark. The implication is that of all the accepted consequences, emotions or feelings could be hurt, and could negatively impact on another person are the two more agreed implications of thoughtless communicative acts on social media. This finding is supported by Truth foundation (2024) who asserted that it's important to think about the potential consequences of your actions before you hit "post"; by Kvalnes (2020) who advised social media users to always ask themselves "This thing I am about post, share, like or comment on, does it feel right?", "Is it in accordance with my values or the values of the brand?" "Can it be justified?"; by Suthar (2024) that it is advisable to always exercise good judgment when engaging with posts on social media platforms; could make the author/sender be liable to

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litigation (Clement, 2024); could ruin one's reputation and future (Birnbaum, 2013;, Adanlawo & Chaka, 2022b); and could affect our mental health (Bansal, 2021).

Research Question 3: What are possible ways to navigate the ethical landmines posed by these acts?

Table 3: Navigating the ethical terrain for social media users

S N	Table 3: Variables	Frequency				Mean	Position
		SA	**A**	**D**	**SD**		
1	Fact-checking reduces ethical/legal implications	155 (40.2%)	162 (42%)	47 (12.4%)	21 (5.4%)	3.17	Accepted
2	If you were this person, you would want this photo posted	10 (2.6%)	140 (36.4%)	220 (57.1%)	15 (3.9%)	2.38	Rejected
3	Apply self-censorship while communicating on social media is necessary	39 (10.1%)	197 (51%)	127 (33.2%)	22 (5.7%)	2.65	Accepted
4	Consideration of other people emotion is very important while on social media	71 (18.5%)	210 (54.6%)	89 (23%)	15 (3.9%	2.88	Accepted
					Cluster mean		

Source: Authors' Analysis (2025).

Table 3 revealed the ways of navigating the ethical terrain for social media users. From the result, the entire variables were accepted since their mean values are greater than the 2.5 benchmark, except the variable that "If you were this person, you would want this photo posted?" which was rejected. The implication is that of all the accepted consequences, fact-checking reduces ethical/legal consequences, and consideration of other people emotion is very important while on social media are the two more agreed ways to navigate the ethical landmines posed by communicative acts on social media.

This finding is supported by Adanlawo & Chaka (2022) who said understanding the consequences or risks associated with reckless social media use will help in reducing thoughtless social media communicative acts; by Kvalnes (2020) and The Morung Express (2023) who said that fact checking is essential, and advised that before posting a content, make sure that your

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source of information is credible; be conscious of misinformation by substantiating and fact-checking contents before sharing (Clement, 2024) and transparency in attribution of sources (Bryan, 2023); flip the script (Scott, 2023); and use of discretion (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

Social media ethics affords us the opportunity to communicate in a more humane manner filled with empathy for others. It guides the social media users to imbibe the philosophy of "do unto others as you would wish do to you". It is ethically necessary to take into account the potential consequences of what you post, share, like, or comments on. We reduce adverse impacts on people by avoiding unethical social media practices. Empathy, and respect for the other person out is the bedrock. We therefore conclude that thoughtless communicative actions on social media have adverse effects on people, however, increased knowledge about the consequences and dangers linked with them can help lessen the rate at which people engage in reckless post, share, like, or comments on social media. It behooves on social media users to be ethically guided while carrying out their fundamental human rights of freedom of speech and expression, because what's done may not be entirely undone. That your social media posts, shares, likes and comments may have a negative impact on another person's life.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, it is recommended that invasion of another person's privacy should be avoided, as unjustified social media intrusion and disclosure of intimate details of individuals in the media or on the net is unethical. People who engage on social media should be careful and considerate of others. They should be careful what they post, share, like, or comment on something or somebody as it may have adverse consequences. Flipping the script is recommended. Ask, if you were this person, would you want this content posted? There is need to strengthen legislation on the legal implications of thoughtless communicative acts, as not many court convictions have taken place in Nigeria, making people to take advantage of this.

Competing Interest

The authors have declared that no conflicting interest exist in this paper.

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