

SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNITY SECURITY IN ONITSHA: RESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON AGUNECHEMBA VIGILANTE COVERAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Onitsha residents' views on social media coverage of Agunchemba vigilante activities, with particular attention to its role in shaping community security awareness. Anchored in Social Responsibility Theory, the study employs a survey design to assess residents' exposure to social media content, their perceptions of such coverage, and its influence on security consciousness. Findings reveal high levels of exposure, particularly through Facebook, with respondents generally perceiving the coverage as positive and influential in enhancing community security awareness. The results further indicate that social media serves as a participatory platform for information dissemination and civic engagement in local security matters. The study concludes that the ethical and responsible use of social media can strengthen public trust, accountability, and vigilance in community policing efforts. It recommends collaborative engagement among social media platforms, vigilante groups, and government agencies to ensure accurate, transparent, and responsible dissemination of security information.

Key words: Social media, Community security, Agunchemba vigilante, Onitsha, Residents.

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INTRODUCTION

The evolution of social media has transformed the way societies communicate, access information, and participate in security discourses. Across the world, digital platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Instagram have become vital channels through which citizens engage with social, political, and security issues (Castells, 2013; Papacharissi, 2021). In Nigeria, the widespread use of social media has redefined public engagement in community affairs, especially regarding issues of safety and crime prevention (Okoro & Nwafor, 2021). Communities increasingly rely on these platforms for real-time updates on local security matters, including vigilante operations, crime alerts, and emergency responses.

Community security is an integral part of Nigeria's local governance and crime prevention framework. The inefficiency of the formal policing system, coupled with inadequate personnel and logistical challenges, has given rise to the establishment of community-based security groups, popularly known as vigilante outfits (Eze & Oji, 2022). These groups play a

crucial role in complementing the efforts of the Nigeria Police Force by providing grassroots intelligence, rapid response, and local surveillance. In the South-East geopolitical zone, particularly in Anambra State, one of the most prominent vigilante formations is the Agunechemba Vigilante Group, which operates actively in Onitsha and its environs. The group's activities, often publicised through social media, have attracted significant public attention and debate. Social media has provided a space for citizens to share, discuss, and critique the activities of vigilante groups. These platforms serve as alternative sources of information that enhance public awareness of local security initiatives (Chukwu & Ede, 2023). Through social media, community members can obtain real-time reports, photographs, and videos of vigilante operations, and they can also hold such groups accountable. According to Owolabi and Ajayi (2023), social media plays a vital role in shaping community perspectives on safety by serving as a participatory tool that fosters transparency and vigilance. However, the credibility and objectivity of such information often depend on how responsibly the content is shared and managed online.

The role of social media in influencing security awareness and perception has been examined in several contexts. Adegoke (2020) observed that social networking platforms have improved the speed and efficiency of information dissemination on security issues, but also warned of the risks of misinformation and exaggeration. Similarly, Aja and Okoye (2022) emphasised that social media can both strengthen and weaken public confidence in security institutions depending on how issues are framed. This duality underscores the importance of the Social Responsibility Theory, which posits that the media must operate ethically and serve the public good by ensuring accuracy, balance, and accountability in communication (Ezegwu and Leman, 2023; Ward, 2020). Applying this theory to social media implies that platforms and users share a moral responsibility to promote factual, fair, and socially beneficial information concerning community security. In Onitsha, a densely populated commercial hub in Anambra State, social media coverage of the Agunechemba Vigilante Group has become a dominant means through which residents interact with security updates. Facebook, in particular, has emerged as a vibrant space for posting and sharing news about the group's patrols, arrests, and community interventions (Chukwu & Ede, 2023). The level of exposure and engagement with such information can significantly influence how residents perceive the effectiveness, legitimacy, and transparency of the vigilante group. Yet, the extent to which social media contributes to community security awareness and trust in vigilante operations remains underexplored, especially from the perspective of Onitsha residents.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing prominence of social media in Nigeria's security communication landscape, there is limited empirical research on how residents perceive social media coverage of vigilante activities in local communities. Much of the existing literature has focused on the general use of social media for crime reporting and political communication (Okoro & Nwafor, 2021; Papacharissi, 2021), but few studies have specifically examined its influence on community-based security systems such as vigilante groups. Furthermore, while previous studies (Eze & Oji, 2022; Owolabi & Ajayi, 2023) have highlighted the role of social media in promoting security awareness, they seldom address the nuances of public perception, whether citizens interpret social media coverage of vigilante activities as credible, exaggerated, or biased. In addition, most prior research has been conducted in broader regional contexts or urban centres like Lagos and Abuja, leaving a significant geographical and contextual gap in understanding community-level engagement in cities like Onitsha.

Another key knowledge gap lies in the application of the Social Responsibility Theory to digital communication on community security. While scholars such as Ward (2020) have emphasised ethical reporting within conventional media, few have explored how this theory translates into the social media ecosystem, where unverified information can easily spread. The implications of this for vigilante accountability and public trust are yet to be sufficiently understood. Therefore, there is a need to empirically assess Onitsha residents' exposure to, perception of, and awareness of social media coverage of the Agunechemba Vigilante Group. Understanding these dynamics will provide valuable insights into how social media can responsibly contribute to community security enhancement, build trust, and foster collaborative vigilance between citizens and local security agents. This study, therefore, fills the existing gap by exploring the intersection between social media communication and grassroots security consciousness within the Onitsha context through the lens of the Social Responsibility Theory.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Find out the level of exposure of Onitsha residents to social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities.
2. Ascertain the social media platforms through which Onitsha residents accessed Agunechemba vigilante activities

3. Find out the views of Onitsha residents on social media coverage of Agunchemba vigilante activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Social Media and Community Security

Social media has evolved into one of the most powerful communication tools for sharing, interacting, and disseminating information across the globe. It refers to web-based platforms and mobile applications that enable users to create, exchange, and interact with user-generated content in real time (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram allow for instantaneous communication and engagement, breaking geographical and temporal barriers. In Nigeria, the widespread adoption of social media has extended beyond social interaction to areas such as political mobilisation, health communication, and, more recently, community security management (Okoro & Nwafor, 2021). Community security, on the other hand, encompasses the collective efforts of individuals, community-based groups, and state agencies to ensure safety, prevent crime, and promote peaceful coexistence within local environments (UNDP, 2020). It prioritises grassroots participation in maintaining peace and protecting lives and property. With the increasing limitations of conventional policing systems in Nigeria, such as underfunding, inadequate manpower, and corruption, communities have developed informal security structures like vigilante groups to bridge security gaps (Eze & Oji, 2022). These groups, such as the Agunchemba Vigilante in Onitsha, play critical roles in community surveillance and rapid response to crime.

The integration of social media into community security has redefined the communication dynamics between citizens and local security agents. Social media platforms now serve as participatory spaces for reporting incidents, mobilizing support, and monitoring security activities (Chukwu & Ede, 2023). For example, Onitsha residents frequently use Facebook and WhatsApp to share updates about suspicious movements, theft, or community policing activities. This form of digital engagement enhances awareness, collective vigilance, and the exchange of local intelligence. According to Owolabi and Ajayi (2023), the use of social media for security communication has improved the timeliness and reach of information dissemination in local communities, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for safety. However, the intersection between social media and community security also presents challenges such as misinformation, privacy violations, and sensationalism. This underscores the relevance of the Social Responsibility Theory, which emphasizes that media practitioners

and users alike have a moral duty to ensure truthful, balanced, and ethical communication (Ward, 2020). When responsibly utilized, social media can strengthen community cohesion, accountability, and trust between citizens and security actors, thereby enhancing sustainable peace and development.

Social Media Coverage of Security Activities

The advent of social media has transformed how information on security activities is produced, disseminated, and consumed in Nigeria. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, and Instagram have become central tools for both citizens and security agencies to communicate, coordinate, and engage the public on security-related matters. Social media coverage of security issues has made information more accessible, participatory, and instantaneous, bridging the communication gap between state institutions and the populace (Eze & Oji, 2022). In contexts where traditional media are often constrained by ownership, censorship, or slow dissemination, social media provides an alternative space for rapid reporting, public monitoring, and civic accountability (Aja & Okoye, 2022).

In Nigeria, social media coverage of security activities gained prominence during heightened insecurity periods such as the #EndSARS protests of 2020, the Boko Haram insurgency, and banditry in the North (Owolabi & Ajayi, 2023). Citizens began to act as “citizen journalists,” sharing live updates, videos, and eyewitness accounts from affected areas. This democratization of information flows challenges traditional news hierarchies and allows real-time documentation of events that might otherwise go unreported (Chukwu & Ede, 2023). According to Nwoke and Udeze (2022), this shift has not only expanded the visibility of local security operations but has also pressured formal security agencies to respond more transparently and swiftly to public concerns. Moreover, social media has enhanced community-level security communication, especially in urban centers such as Onitsha, Lagos, and Abuja. Local vigilante groups like the Agunchemba Vigilante Group in Onitsha utilize WhatsApp and Facebook to share alerts about criminal activities, missing persons, or suspicious movements (Aja & Okoye, 2022). These platforms allow residents to provide quick intelligence and receive immediate updates about ongoing operations. Through such collaborative information exchange, social media serves as a community surveillance mechanism and reinforces the principles of participatory security communication (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2021).

Security agencies have also adopted social media as an essential tool for strategic communication and public engagement. For instance, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) maintains active social media accounts to update citizens on arrests, public safety tips, and traffic advisories. The NPF's online presence helps counter misinformation and reduce panic during crises. According to Owolabi and Ajayi (2023), security institutions increasingly use social media to project transparency and gain public trust by publishing official statements, clarifying rumors, and showcasing successful operations. This practice aligns with the Social Responsibility Theory, which underscores the media's role in promoting truth, accountability, and ethical communication (Ward, 2020). However, while social media enhances awareness and citizen engagement, it also introduces several challenges to effective security communication. One major concern is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, which can fuel panic, inflame ethnic tensions, or compromise security operations (Eze & Oji, 2022). For instance, false reports of attacks or kidnappings often circulate faster than official clarifications, creating confusion and undermining public confidence in security agencies. Ibrahim and Yusuf (2021) warn that unverified content shared by online users can expose operational details that put both civilians and security personnel at risk.

Theoretical Framework

Social Responsibility Theory

The Social Responsibility Theory of the press, developed in the mid-20th century by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956), emphasises that the media should act responsibly towards society by providing accurate, balanced, and ethical information. In the digital era, this theory extends to social media platforms as agents of social responsibility in news dissemination, particularly on issues that affect public safety and community well-being (Ezegwu and Leman, 2023; Ward, 2020). SRT holds that media institutions and communicators should not pursue unfettered commercial interests at the expense of social goods; instead, they should accept normative responsibilities educating, informing, and protecting the public through ethical reporting and civic-minded programming (Ezegwu and Leman, 2023). Contemporary treatments emphasise their applicability in developing democracies where media failures or capture can undermine public information and accountability. The core assumptions of the theory stipulated by the Robert Maynard Hutchin Commission of Freedom of the Press were clear-cut between libertarian principles of freedom and the practical admission of some media control (McQuail, 2000, cited in Ezegwu, & Leman, 2023).

In the context of this research, the theory explains how social media platforms (such as Facebook, X, and WhatsApp) should responsibly report on the Agunchemba vigilante group's activities in Onitsha. It suggests that while these platforms serve as tools for promoting transparency and accountability in community security, they must also avoid exaggeration or misinformation that could incite panic or distrust. Hence, Onitsha residents' perceptions of such coverage are shaped by how well these platforms fulfil their social responsibility role.

Empirical Review

AbiaKam, and Okereke (2025) carried out a study titled “community policing and security issues in Nigeria: A Study of Local Vigilante Operations in the South-East region” (2019–2023). The researchers adopted a qualitative design, utilising semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis involving community leaders, police officials, and members of local vigilante groups in the South-East region. The scholars found that vigilante groups play a crucial role in bridging the gap between communities and the formal police, effectively reducing crime in rural and urban communities. Also, it was found that inadequate training, lack of government support, and political interference limit their overall effectiveness. The scholars recommended that the government and local councils should provide capacity-building programmes, operational logistics, and standardized procedures for vigilante members, and a structured collaboration framework should be developed between local vigilantes and the Nigerian Police Force to enhance community security. While this study examined vigilante operations broadly in the South-East, it did not assess how social media platforms cover or shape public perceptions of such security efforts. The current study fills this gap by investigating how Onitsha residents perceive the social media coverage of Agunchemba vigilante activities, focusing on digital communication's influence on community trust and security perception.

Oghogho, Osazuwa , Iyamba., Ekeng-Ekeng, and John (2024) carried out a study titled “enhancing security in Nigeria: The implications of social media-based crime reporting”. The scholars used an exploratory qualitative approach using documentary analysis of scholarly literature, NGO reports, and social media case examples of online crime reporting and public security campaigns. It was found that social media has become an important medium for real-time crime alerts, eyewitness reporting, and public mobilization during security incidents and misinformation and unverified reports shared online have also heightened fear, distorted facts, and hampered official investigations. The scholars recommended that there is a need for

partnership between law enforcement agencies and social media platforms to ensure verification of crime-related information and digital literacy campaigns should be introduced to educate the public on responsible use of social media for security communication. This study analyzed social media's role in general crime reporting but not how social media portrays local vigilante groups or how such portrayals shape citizens' opinions about security in specific communities. The current study narrows this gap by exploring Onitsha residents' views on how Agunechemba vigilante activities are represented online, assessing trust, influence, and perceived credibility.

Ezeorah, Luka, and Erunke, (2025) studied the effects of social media on national security in Nigeria, 2015–2024. The scholars adopted a mixed-methods design involving a structured questionnaire survey of 300 respondents and interviews with communication and security experts to evaluate the impact of social media on security trends. It was found that unregulated social media activities contribute to misinformation, panic, and public distrust in official security institutions and verified security information shared on social media enhances public awareness and cooperation during crises. The scholars recommended that policymakers should introduce social media accountability frameworks that promote responsible online security communication and security agencies should employ trained communication officers to manage digital engagement and counter misinformation. While this research assessed social media's national-level influence on security, it did not examine localized community perspectives or specific actors like vigilante groups. The current study bridges this gap by analyzing how Onitsha residents interpret social media coverage of Agunechemba's operations, offering insight into the intersection of digital media, community safety, and local trust.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey research design, which is suitable for gathering data from a large population to examine attitudes, opinions, and behaviours. A survey design enables the researcher to collect quantitative data through structured questionnaires from a representative sample of Onitsha residents. This design was considered appropriate because the study sought to investigate residents' exposure to, perceptions of, and opinions on social media coverage of the Agunechemba Vigilante activities. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), the survey method is valuable for describing the characteristics of a population and analysing relationships among variables within a given social context.

The population of this study comprises all residents of Onitsha, a major commercial city in Anambra State, Nigeria. Onitsha is divided into two major local government areas, Onitsha North and Onitsha South, with an estimated combined population of 1,002,800 residents based on the 2022 projection by the National Population Commission (NPC, 2022). This population includes people aged 18 years and above who are active users of social media and are aware of local security operations, particularly those of the Agunechemba Vigilante Group. The sample size for this study was determined using the Taro Yamane sample size determination formula.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

= sample size

= population size (1,002,800)

= margin of error (0.05)

Substituting the values:

$$n = \frac{1,002,800}{1 + 1,002,800(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1,002,800}{1 + 1,002,800(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{1,002,800}{1 + 2,507}$$

$$n = \frac{1,002,800}{2,508} \approx 400$$

Thus, the sample size for the study is 400 respondents.

A multistage sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness and reduce sampling bias. The process involved the following stages:

1. Stage One – Area Selection:

Onitsha was stratified into its two local government areas; Onitsha North and Onitsha South, to ensure geographic representation.

2. Stage Two – Community Selection:

From each LGA, two major communities were purposively selected due to their high population density and active social media engagement. These communities include Woliwo and Inland Town (Onitsha South), and Odoakpu and Omagba (Onitsha North).

3. Stage Three – Participant Selection:

Within each selected community, participants were chosen using simple random sampling. Lists of households were obtained from local administrative units, and respondents were selected through systematic intervals. Only adults aged 18 and above who are active on social media and aware of Agunechemba vigilante activities were surveyed. This approach aligns with Etikan and Bala (2017), who emphasize that multistage sampling is efficient when

dealing with large, diverse populations and ensures that different subgroups are proportionately represented.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Four hundred questionnaires were distributed, but 383 (95%) were returned, while 17 (5%) copies of the research questionnaires were not returned. The demographic distribution revealed that 55% of respondents were male, while 45% were female. The majority (62%) were between the ages of 18–35, indicating that younger adults constituted the most active social media users. About 71% of respondents had a tertiary education, showing a relatively educated population capable of understanding and engaging with online security discourse

Table 1: Level of exposure of Onitsha residents to social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	130	34
High	147	38
Can't tell	15	4
Low	53	14
Very low	37	10
Total	383	100

Table 1 shows that the majority (38%) of respondents are highly exposed to social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities.

Table 2: Social media platforms through which Onitsha residents accessed Agunechemba vigilante activities

Response	Frequency	Percentag
Facebook	141	37
WhatsApp	66	17
Twitter (X)	117	31
Instagram	34	9
Telegram	25	6
Total	383	100

The data in table 2 showed that Facebook (37%) is the most social media through which Onitsha residents accessed Agunechemba vigilante activities.

Table 3: Views of Onitsha residents to social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	244	64
Neutral	36	10
Negative	103	26
Total	383	100

The data in table 3 indicates majority of the respondents (64%) have a positive view or perception about social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities in Anambra State.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined Onitsha residents' views on social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities. The objective of research question number one was to find out the level of exposure of Onitsha residents to social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities. It was found that the majority (38%) of respondents are highly exposed to social media coverage of Agunechemba vigilante activities, while 10% of the respondents said they were very lowly exposed to it. This indicates that social media has become a dominant channel for security communication among Onitsha residents. The finding corresponds with Owolabi and Ajayi (2023), who found that digital media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp are central to local security information sharing in Southeast Nigeria. It suggests that the accessibility and immediacy of social media have enhanced residents' awareness of the Agunechemba vigilante's operations. From the perspective of Social Responsibility Theory, this finding reflects the media's function in providing the public with accurate and timely information necessary for safety and civic participation (Ward, 2020). When social media users and content creators uphold ethical standards, such platforms serve as vital instruments for community security awareness and engagement.

The aim of research objective two was to ascertain the social media platforms through which Onitsha residents accessed Agunechemba vigilante activities. The data in table 2 showed that Facebook (37%) is the most social media through which Onitsha residents accessed Agunechemba vigilante activities, followed by Twitter (X) with 31%. A smaller percentage (6%) mentioned Telegram. Respondents emphasised that Facebook's community pages and group chats serve as vital spaces for sharing updates about crime, missing persons, and vigilante patrols. This finding is consistent with Chukwu and Ede (2023), who asserted that Facebook dominates community-level security discourse in Nigeria due to its accessibility

and interactive features. It further aligns with Aja and Okoye (2022), who found that Facebook groups in Southeast Nigeria function as informal neighbourhood watch platforms, allowing residents to post security alerts and photographs of suspects.

Findings show that 64 % of respondents viewed social media coverage of the Agunchemba vigilante's activities positively, citing transparency, quick updates, and improved community confidence as reasons. On the other hand, 10% expressed neutrality, and 26% perceived such coverage as Negative or biased. The positive perception supports Eze and Oji (2022), who reported that community-based social media content improves citizens' trust in local security agencies when communication is clear and consistent. It also resonates with the Social Responsibility Theory, which posits that media should serve the public interest by promoting ethical reporting and societal well-being (McQuail, 2010, cited in Ezegwu et al, 2023). However, some respondents expressed concerns about misinformation and the risk of glorifying vigilante violence. This suggests a need for responsible social media use to maintain credibility and avoid sensationalism in security reporting (Ward, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that social media has become a crucial platform for promoting community security awareness among residents of Onitsha. The high exposure of residents to social media coverage of Agunchemba vigilante activities underscores the growing role of digital platforms, particularly Facebook, in disseminating local security information. Residents' positive perception of such coverage reflects increasing confidence in social media as a credible and participatory space for community engagement.

Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, the study affirmed that when social media platforms uphold ethical and professional standards, they can significantly contribute to public safety and awareness. The responsible use of these platforms by citizens and community groups can also strengthen collaboration between residents and local security agents. Therefore, fostering accurate and transparent reporting on vigilante activities can improve trust, accountability, and collective security consciousness. Overall, social media has proven to be an indispensable medium in promoting security dialogue and public involvement in Onitsha's community safety efforts.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Social media platforms should promote ethical reporting standards for community security information.
2. Vigilante groups should create verified social media pages to share accurate updates and dispel misinformation.
3. Residents of Onitsha should be educated on how to identify credible security information online.
4. Government agencies should collaborate with social media influencers to promote community safety campaigns.

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