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Audience Perception of Social Media Role on Ethnic Stereotypes in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State

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Abstract: This study examined the role of social media in the reinforcement of ethnic stereotypes among residents of Ojo Local Government Area, Lagos State, guided by five objectives covering the types of stereotypes in circulation, how residents interpret them, their influence on real-life attitudes and behaviour, the platforms most responsible, and the level of exposure. The study was anchored on Cultivation and Reinforcement theories, the study adopted a descriptive survey design. A sample of 400 residents, determined through the Taro Yamane (1967) formula and selected through stratified random sampling across the four Local Council Development Areas of Ojo, completed a structured questionnaire, and data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, and means. Both positive and negative ethnic stereotypes circulate on social media, but residents largely engaged with this content thoughtfully rather than accepting it at face value, and exposure influenced their offline relations with other ethnic groups to a moderate to low degree. Open, algorithm-driven platforms such as X (Twitter), Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram played a bigger role in reinforcing stereotypes than closed platforms like Telegram. Social media plays a measurable role in the circulation and reinforcement of ethnic stereotypes in Ojo. Residents should engage critically with ethnicity-related content, and stakeholders should invest in digital literacy efforts that discourage the careless sharing of stereotype-driven narratives.

Keywords: Ethnic stereotypes, Cultivation theory, Audience perception, Social Media, Ojo Local Government Area

INTRODUCTION

In increasingly interconnected societies, ethnic perceptions are shaped not only by personal interaction but also by mediated representations of ethnic groups (Mastro, 2015). Stereotypes continue to influence how individuals interpret social realities and interact with others across different regions of the world (Grigoryev et al., 2021), and the expansion of social media has further transformed how these narratives are produced, shared, and consumed, allowing ordinary users to participate in the creation and reinforcement of group images that may either challenge or sustain existing social biases (Ramasubramanian, 2015). In North America and Europe, minority groups are often portrayed through narrow cultural frames, such as the depiction of African American and Afro-Caribbean communities as aggressive or criminal or Latinos as undocumented migrants (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Hui (2025) found that, in Singapore, media portrayals of ethnic minorities often emphasize stereotypical narratives, such as associations with crime or poverty.

The persistence of ethnic stereotypes is also evident in many African societies, where colonial systems that categorised populations into rigid ethnic groups contributed to long-term identity divisions, many of which remain visible in media and political discourse (Mamdani, 1996). With increasing mobile technology and internet access across Africa,

social media has become a powerful communication tool capable of both promoting intercultural understanding and amplifying ethnic bias (Frère, 2015; Ramasubramanian et al., 2023).

Within Nigeria, the issue of ethnic stereotyping is particularly significant due to the country's extensive diversity, with between 250 and 480 ethnic groups and numerous linguistic and cultural identities (Oluwadare, 2012). Popular narratives in Nigerian online discussions often portray ethnic groups in exaggerated ways, depicting the Yoruba as cunning or diplomatic, the Igbo as ambitious or materialistic, and the Hausa as conservative or resistant to change (Taiwo, 2023). While these portrayals are often framed as humour or cultural expression, Adeyanju (2008) suggests that they can influence social attitudes and reinforce prejudice, particularly in multi-ethnic societies. Recent national insecurity, including insurgency, banditry, and farmer–herder conflicts, has further intensified ethnic narratives. Despite evidence that violence and crime are not limited to any particular ethnic group, social media discussions frequently generalise such events to entire communities, especially the Hausa and Fulani (CLEEN Foundation, 2022).

The rapid growth of social media in Nigeria has significantly transformed communication and social interaction. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, Telegram, Instagram, X, and TikTok have become dominant sources of information and entertainment, especially among young people (Oparinde & Adeyi, 2025). Unlike traditional media, these platforms allow users to create and distribute content instantly, leading to the widespread circulation of memes, comedy skits, edited videos, and humour-based narratives that frequently rely on ethnic stereotypes. Continuous exposure to such portrayals contributes to the normalisation of these perceptions and may influence how individuals interpret social realities and interact with members of other groups (Ayansola, 2021; Taiwo, 2023).

Lagos is widely regarded as a microcosm of Nigeria due to its economic importance and demographic diversity (Olatunji & Amzat, 2024). Within Lagos State, Ojo Local Government Area represents a particularly relevant setting for examining the role of social media in shaping audience perception. The area hosts a diverse population of traders, students, migrants, and artisans from various ethnic backgrounds. As a major hub for education and commerce, with institutions such as Lagos State University and the Alaba International Market, Ojo attracts individuals who interact regularly across ethnic boundaries. A stereotype encountered online may influence how individuals perceive and relate with their neighbours, colleagues, customers, or business partners in their daily lives (Slater & Garrett, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Ethnic groups in Nigeria have long been stereotyped, with members judged according to generalisations circulated on social media, such as "All Igbos belong to IPOB," "Northerners are beggars," or "Yoruba people are unnecessarily loud," which simplify and distort the reality of Nigeria's diverse communities (Gordon, 2003).

Studies such as Okeke and Omosotomhe (2025), Nsude, Osuagwu, and Etumnu (2023), and Bashir and Shadrach (2025) have shown how social media influences audience beliefs about ethnic groups. However, they essentially end at online perceptions and do not

examine how these stereotypes translate into real-life attitudes and behaviours. Much of this research also examines Nigeria at a national level, without focusing on highly diverse urban environments where people from multiple ethnic groups interact closely, and only a few studies have applied Cultivation Theory and Reinforcement Theory to explain how repeated and selective engagement with social media content reinforces ethnic stereotypes.

This research therefore focused on Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria, a multi-ethnic environment where Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, Tiv, Efik, Urhobo, Ijaw, and many other groups live, work, and interact daily. Understanding how ethnic stereotypes circulate on social media and shape behaviour in this context can inform strategies to promote intergroup harmony, reduce prejudice, and foster a more cohesive and inclusive community.

Objectives of the Study

1. Identify the types of ethnic stereotypes commonly circulated on social media in Ojo Local Government Area.
2. Examine how residents of Ojo Local Government Area interpret ethnic stereotypes when encountered online.
3. Determine the extent to which social media stereotypes influence real-life attitudes and behaviours toward members of different ethnic groups.
4. Identify the social media platforms that most reinforce the formation of ethnic stereotypes among Ojo Local Government Area residents.
5. Assess how the level of exposure to social media contributes to the reinforcement of ethnic stereotypes among Ojo Local Government Area residents.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ethnic Stereotypes and Social Media

In the Nigerian context, ethnic stereotypes are deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-political interactions among major ethnic groups, and they continue to influence patterns of communication and perception in contemporary society (Taiwo, 2023). Social media has further intensified their production and circulation due to its participatory and interactive nature, as stereotypes are rapidly disseminated through posts, comments, memes, and hashtags, often gaining visibility through user engagement features such as likes, shares, and retweets. Social media platforms also facilitate the spread and normalization of stereotypes through algorithmic amplification (Adams, 2024), and when portrayals align with existing stereotypes, repeated exposure can make them appear familiar, acceptable, or even "normal" (Arendt, 2023). Drawing on the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), the positive and negative categorization of stereotypes was adapted to examine ethnic stereotypes among residents of Ojo Local Government Area. Ambivalent stereotypes were not considered, as the focus was on clearly favourable or unfavourable perceptions of ethnic groups. Social media can also challenge stereotypes, but Ezeah and Usulor (2025) found that its effectiveness in deconstructing

entrenched stereotypes is limited by pre-existing audience bias, misinformation, and selective exposure to content. Social media therefore serves as a space where stereotypes are created, circulated, reinforced, and sometimes contested.

Audience Perception and Its Influence on Attitudes and Beliefs

Audience perception is not uniform. Baran and Davis (2012) explain that audiences decode media messages in ways that may align with, negotiate, or oppose the intended meanings of media producers, so different individuals may derive different interpretations from the same media content depending on factors such as education, ethnicity, ideology, and prior media exposure. How media messages are interpreted determines whether audiences accept, question, or reject the meanings conveyed (McLeod et al., 2017). Repeated exposure to particular portrayals also contributes to attitude formation, as audiences may begin to internalise these portrayals as typical or normative, shaping their beliefs about social realities and influencing their responses to certain groups in everyday life. This illustrates that audience perception serves as a central mechanism through which media messages can translate into real-life attitudes and beliefs (McLeod et al., 2017; Livingstone, 2004), which is why this study examined how residents of Ojo interpret ethnic stereotypes online and how these carry into their attitudes and behaviours.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory, developed by George Gerbner in 1969, proposes that long-term exposure to media content gradually shapes individuals' perceptions of reality. Rather than producing immediate behavioural changes, media influence occurs slowly over time as audiences repeatedly consume similar messages, themes, and representations. Gerbner identified first-order effects, which are general beliefs about the social world, and second-order effects, which involve attitudes and judgments toward specific groups, often resulting in bias or stereotyping. The theory is relevant because Ojo is a multiethnic and highly digitalised environment where users frequently engage with memes, short videos, and viral posts that portray ethnic groups through stereotypical frames, and continuous exposure can make such representations appear normal or socially accepted.

Reinforcement Theory, developed by B.F. Skinner in 1953, explains that human behaviour and belief systems are shaped and strengthened through rewards, repetition, and confirmation. In communication studies, it has been adapted to explain how individuals maintain or strengthen their beliefs when those beliefs are consistently supported by external messages or social validation, through selective exposure, social reinforcement, and algorithmic reinforcement. It explains how stereotypes are sustained among Ojo residents: users engage with content that aligns with their existing views, likes, shares, and comments signal social approval, and algorithms keep presenting similar content, so beliefs are continuously reinforced rather than questioned.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population comprised adult residents (18 years and above) of Ojo Local Government Area who are active social media users, across

its four Local Council Development Areas (LCDAs): Oto-Awori, Iba, Olorunda, and Oriade, with a projected population of 901,800 (Citypopulation.de, 2022). A sample of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted, with the population stratified by the four LCDAs (Ojo Local Government, 2024) and the respondents allocated in proportion to the number of wards in each, out of Ojo's 11 wards (Manpower Nigeria, 2026), as shown in Table 1. Within each LCDA, respondents were randomly selected using simple random sampling.

Table 1: Respondents stratified by LCDAs in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State

LCDA	WARDS	RESPONDENTS
Oto-Awori	Ajangbadi, Ijanikin, Ilogbo, Irewe, Tafi (5)	182
Iba	Iba, Sabo (2)	73
Olorunda	Okokomaiko, Etegbin, Idoluwo (3)	109
Oriade	Ojo Town (1)	36
Total	11	400

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Data were collected with a structured online questionnaire of six sections: demographic information (A) and one section for each objective (B to F). It used closed-ended Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions, without a neutral option, to encourage respondents to take a clear position. Content and face validity were ensured through expert review, and the 28 Likert-scale items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.815, indicating a good level of internal consistency. The questionnaire was distributed through WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups, Telegram, and direct messages via Instagram and Twitter targeting Ojo residents, and a quota-based tool (SurveyMars) stopped accepting responses from an LCDA once its quota was reached, which maintained proportional representation. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, and means ($\bar{x} = \Sigma FX / N$), with a mean of 2.50 and above indicating acceptance of a statement and a mean below 2.50 rejection (Otaru & Nwankwo, 2021). The weighting and benchmark are stated at the start of each results subsection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 400 valid responses were received and used for this analysis. The respondents were mostly young adults, with 54.50% aged 18–24 and 35.50% aged 25–34, and there were slightly more female (54.25%) than male (45.75%) respondents. Most (61.75%) held an HND/B.Sc., indicating a fairly literate sample capable of understanding and reflecting on ethnic stereotype content online. The Yoruba ethnic group constituted the majority (76.75%), which reflects the demographic character of Ojo Local Government Area, followed by the Igbo (18.00%), Others (4.00%) and Hausa (1.25%). The majority (64.00%) reported using social media "always", and WhatsApp (35.75%) was the most frequently used platform, followed by TikTok (19.00%) and X/Twitter (17.25%), confirming that the sample was composed of highly active social media users appropriate for the objectives of the study.

Table 2: Obj. 1 — Types of ethnic stereotypes circulated on social media

Statement	Mean	Decision
Certain ethnic groups are portrayed as business-oriented	2.99	Accepted
...as intelligent	2.89	Accepted
...as lazy	2.73	Accepted
...as culturally rich or proud	2.89	Accepted
...as violent	2.81	Accepted
...as inferior to others	2.68	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

As shown in Table 2, all six items recorded means above the 2.50 benchmark, with the portrayal of ethnic groups as business-oriented most strongly agreed with (mean = 2.99) and as inferior to others least (2.68). Both positive stereotypes (business-oriented, intelligent, culturally rich) and negative stereotypes (lazy, violent, inferior) are therefore perceived as circulating, which suggests that stereotyping on social media in this context is not uniformly hostile but mixed. This aligns with Onwordi, Agbamu and Ugwuoke's (2025) finding that Nigerian media portrayals of ethnicity carry both flattering and unflattering identities, and is consistent with the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002).

Table 3: Obj. 2 — Interpretation of ethnic stereotypes

Statement	Mean	Decision
I recognize that ethnic stereotypes online may not always be true	3.14	Accepted
I sometimes view ethnic stereotypes as entertainment	2.90	Accepted
Some ethnic stereotypes reflect real characteristics of certain groups	2.87	Accepted
I consider ethnic stereotypes as generalizations rather than facts	2.88	Accepted
I interpret ethnic-related content based on my personal experiences	2.79	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 shows that respondents most strongly agreed that ethnic stereotypes online may not always be true (mean = 3.14), the highest mean in the section, and that they are generalizations rather than facts (2.88), although they also agreed that some reflect real characteristics of certain groups (2.87). Their interpretation is therefore filtered through critical awareness, personal experience (2.79), and entertainment value (2.90), rather than outright acceptance. This is consistent with Okeke and Omosotomhe's (2025) submission that Nigerian youths are active, discerning participants rather than passive recipients of online ethnic content.

Table 4: Obj. 3 — Extent of influence on real-life attitudes and behaviours

Influence on...	Mean	Remark
how comfortable I feel around certain ethnic groups	3.62	Moderate
how cautious I am when interacting with certain ethnic groups	3.58	Moderate
how I respond to people from different ethnic groups	3.45	Low
my level of trust toward certain ethnic groups	3.49	Low

the assumptions I make about certain ethnic groups	3.44	Low

Source: Field Survey, 2026

As shown in Table 4, exposure to ethnic stereotypes exerted a moderate influence on how comfortable respondents feel around (mean = 3.62) and how cautious they are with (3.58) members of certain ethnic groups, while the influence on their trust (3.49), responses (3.45) and assumptions (3.44) was low. The predominance of low-influence ratings suggests a limited effect on real-life attitudes and behaviours. This lends support to Cultivation Theory, which holds that media influence builds gradually rather than through sudden shifts, and reflects Nsude, Osuagwu and Etumnu's (2023) finding that social media exerts a real, though not overwhelming, influence on intergroup relations in southern Nigeria.

Table 5: Obj. 4 — Platforms that reinforce ethnic stereotypes

Platform	Mean	Decision
X (Twitter)	2.94	Accepted
Facebook	2.79	Accepted
TikTok	2.76	Accepted
Instagram	2.72	Accepted
WhatsApp	2.65	Accepted
Snapchat	2.50	Accepted
Telegram	2.48	Rejected

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 5 shows X/Twitter with the highest mean (2.94), followed by Facebook (2.79), TikTok (2.76), Instagram (2.72) and WhatsApp (2.65). Snapchat (2.50) was marginally accepted, and Telegram (2.48) was the only platform not accepted. This suggests that open, algorithm-curated platforms are perceived as reinforcing stereotypes more than closed, forward-based ones such as WhatsApp and Telegram, consistent with Taiwo's (2023) finding that open, high-traffic platforms play a central role in circulating ethnic characterisations, and it points to platform architecture, not merely popularity, as a factor in how stereotypes spread.

Table 6: Obj. 5 — Level of exposure to ethnic stereotypes on social media

Statement	Mean	Remark
I encounter ethnic stereotypes when I spend time online	3.00	Sometimes
I frequently see content that reinforces ethnic stereotypes	2.98	Sometimes
I come across the same ethnic stereotypes repeatedly	2.89	Sometimes
I encounter ethnic stereotypes in short, engaging content (memes, videos)	3.00	Sometimes
I see stereotype-reinforcing content across different platforms	3.01	Sometimes

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 6 shows all five items clustered between 2.89 and 3.01, corresponding to "Sometimes," so respondents encounter ethnic stereotypes intermittently, whether in general browsing, repeated exposure, short-form content or across platforms. This echoes

Asuquo's (2025) observation that Nigerian youths' engagement with identity-related content is irregular rather than continuous, and may explain why the influence on real-life attitudes was limited, since cultivation theory associates stronger effects with constant exposure.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social media plays a real but measured role in shaping how residents of Ojo Local Government Area perceive ethnic stereotypes. Stereotypes, favourable and unfavourable alike, form part of everyday online content, yet residents do not simply absorb them, and their effect on real-life attitudes and behaviour builds gradually rather than dramatically, as Cultivation and Reinforcement theories would expect. Given the multi-ethnic character of Ojo, even this modest influence matters for how neighbours, colleagues, and customers relate to one another. It is recommended that social media users be encouraged to critically evaluate ethnic-related content before accepting or sharing it, and that community leaders, non-governmental organizations, and relevant government agencies organize media literacy programmes for young and frequent social media users. Platform owners and administrators should promote responsible content moderation, and content creators and influencers should portray ethnic groups in a balanced and accurate manner, avoiding exaggerated or generalized narratives.

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