

Influence of Social Media Messages on Niger Delta Youths' Perception of the Federal Government's War against Oil Theft: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how Nigerian Federal Government social media messages on oil theft are received by youths in the Niger Delta. Amid deep-rooted mistrust, ecological damage, and political exclusion, it explored the disconnect between official narratives and audience reception. A purposive sample of posts from 2023-2024 across Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok alongside user comments, emojis, and shares was analyzed through the lenses of Uses and Gratifications Theory, Technological Determinism, and Cultivation Theory to expose the ideological and rhetorical dynamics at play. Findings reveal a clear discursive rift: the government's securitized, punitive language ("war," "saboteurs," "wrath of the law") fuels skepticism, satire, and resistance among digitally literate youths. Rather than deterring oil theft, the messaging provokes counter-narratives that highlight elite corruption, military collusion, and historical neglect. Fact-based, neutral content receives more constructive engagement, while threat-laden rhetoric intensifies distrust. It calls for a shift toward participatory, transparent communication that engages Niger Delta youth as partners in resolving the region's oil-related crises.

Keywords: Social media messages, Influence, Federal Government war on Oil theft, Niger Delta Youth, Critical Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's vast crude oil reserves, discovered in Oloibiri in 1956, remain central to its economic survival. Yet, despite generating significant national revenue, the country continues to suffer staggering losses from oil theft estimated at over 300,000 barrels daily (Akpan, 2013). Between 2007 and 2020 alone, oil theft cost Nigeria over \$46 billion (Dataphyte, 2023). Beyond economic damage, this illicit industry has entrenched corruption, devastated the environment, and fueled insecurity, especially in the Niger Delta the region that bears the brunt of both extraction and neglect.

While government responses have included military interventions, pipeline surveillance contracts, and empowerment programs, these top-down strategies have largely failed. Increasingly, social media has emerged as a new battleground. Platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, and WhatsApp have become tools for both state messaging and youth-led resistance. Social media has become a vital tool for engaging this demographic, which is often excluded from traditional governance structures (Udoudo & Udo-Inyang, 2022).

This study explores how youth in the Niger Delta interpret and engage with social media messages on oil theft. By analyzing the interplay of trust, digital access, and civic voice, it argues that effective anti-theft communication must move beyond surface-level messaging. It must be grounded in local realities, co-created with communities, and embedded within broader reforms aimed at restoring trust, promoting transparency, and securing environmental justice.

Statement of Problem

Oil theft and pipeline vandalism have long been significant challenges for oil-producing nations, including Nigeria, where these activities have severely impacted the national economy (Ibru, 2015). Despite various policy interventions, including the enactment of the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) in 2021, which aims to hold oil-producing communities accountable for the protection of oil infrastructure, the problem persists. The PIA mandates oil-producing towns to take responsibility for any theft or sabotage in their areas, with financial penalties imposed for non-compliance. However, many communities remain unaware of or indifferent to the provisions of the law, particularly the youth, who are most vulnerable to involvement in oil theft due to limited economic opportunities.

The government thus, recognized the potential of communication, particularly through social media, to address oil theft in the region. Social media offers a platform for grassroots activism, enabling local communities to voice out their concerns and engage with national efforts to combat oil theft. Youth in the Niger Delta, as active users of social media, play a crucial role in disseminating information and influencing public opinion. However, while there is existing research on oil theft and the role of media, there is a significant gap in understanding how youth perceive and interact with social media messages related to government anti-oil theft campaigns. This gap is especially important given the region's high rate of youth involvement in illicit activities due to alleged economic marginalization.

Previous studies on media and oil theft have largely focused on traditional mass media or broader public awareness campaigns, without exploring the role of social media in shaping youth perceptions. Social media is particularly relevant in this context, as it allows for direct, real-time communication and engagement, bypassing traditional media channels often controlled by elites. Understanding how youth engage with and perceive these messages is essential for assessing the potential of social media to foster greater community participation in efforts to combat oil theft. This study helps fill this gap by examining the Influence of Social Media Messages on Niger Delta Youth's Perceptions of the Federal Government's War against Oil Theft.

Objectives of the Study

The study examined the following specific objectives on The Influence of Social Media Messages on Niger Delta Youth Perceptions of the Federal Government's War against Oil Theft:

1. To determine the level of exposure of the Niger Delta Youths to social media messages on the federal government war against oil theft.
2. To identify the challenges to effective communication using social media in the federal government war against oil theft in the Niger Delta
3. To determine the influence of the social media messages on the Niger Delta Youth's responsiveness towards curbing oil theft in the region

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oil theft in Nigeria, commonly referred to as illegal oil bunkering, involves unauthorized tapping into pipelines, flow stations, and export terminals to siphon crude oil, which is then refined or exported unlawfully (Ugwuanyi, 2014). While bunkering is a legitimate process in maritime operations involving the fuelling of ships, it becomes illegal when carried out without appropriate licenses or in violation of established regulations (Asuni, 2019). Obasi (2011) elaborates that illegal oil bunkering encompasses a wide range of criminal activities, including unlawful ship loading, theft, smuggling, and diversion of oil. These acts contravene Section 44(3) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, which vests ownership and control of all mineral resources in the Federal Government. The illegal activities are often concealed under the guise of legitimate operations and have evolved over time from militia-driven efforts to full-scale, community-supported, and government-enabled enterprises. According to Asuni (2019), illegal oil bunkering now occurs in three forms: small-scale theft for local use, large-scale siphoning for international export, and over-lifting of oil beyond the authorized quantities.

Oil theft in Nigeria poses a multifaceted threat to the nation's economic stability and domestic resource mobilization (DRM), significantly undermining fiscal capacity. Countries like Nigeria, where oil theft is rampant, record an average tax yield of just 9.2% of GDP far below the IMF benchmark of 14.7% (Balima et al., 2020; Romsom, 2022). This shortfall in tax revenue, compounded by the physical loss of crude oil, inflates fiscal deficits, erodes the provision of public services, and impedes progress toward Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the shift to green taxation in the post-COVID-19 recovery. Moreover, oil theft contributes to macroeconomic instability by exacerbating inflation and distorting exchange rates, while widespread smuggling and tax evasion further undermine public trust and long-term financial planning (IMF, as cited in Romsom, 2022).

Fuel subsidy mismanagement and cross-border smuggling exacerbate the situation. Nigeria's artificially low fuel prices create a strong incentive for illicit trade, particularly in border regions where price differentials with neighboring countries are exploited (Wang, 1994). These black-market operations not only diminish the formal tax base but also promote adulteration of petroleum products, causing engine failures and environmental harm (Soud et al., 2020). Even in non-subsidized neighboring countries, illegal flows continue due to inconsistent tax policies and exemptions on certain fuels like kerosene and light cycle oil. The consequences are severe: in addition to \$12 billion in crude stolen annually, Nigeria loses an estimated \$20 billion in deferred tax income due to production shut-ins and sabotage of energy infrastructure (Romsom, 2022). In the Niger Delta, the environmental damage is catastrophic. Oil spills from illegal bunkering destroy ecosystems, while pipeline explosions and armed clashes destabilize communities (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). Revenues from oil theft often finance insurgent groups, perpetuating a cycle of violence sustained by illicit oil rents (Obi, 2010; Ikelegbe, 2005).

Security concerns and operational risks have also led to a decline in foreign investment, particularly from multinational oil companies like Shell, Chevron, and ENI, which have scaled back or exited onshore operations (Bloomberg, 2013; Ventures Africa, 2014). This divestment has contributed to rising unemployment and a decline in local incomes, worsening poverty in oil-producing regions. Although Nigeria has seen some progress in economic diversification with the non-oil sector contributing more to GDP in recent years (Oxford Business Group, 2014; This Day, 2014) structural dependence on oil revenues remains entrenched (Otaha, 2012; Ahmad & Singh, 2003). Social development has also suffered: insecurity deters the delivery of basic services, while youth recruitment by armed groups increases school dropout rates and weakens human capital (Ebegbulem et al., 2013). Some communities displaced by violence or environmental degradation have migrated to urban slums, while others support oil theft syndicates who provide employment, fuel, and basic services positioning themselves as more effective than the state (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). Thus, oil theft in Nigeria extends beyond criminality to form part of a broader "moral economy," reflecting systemic governance failures in the Niger Delta.

Over the years, the Nigerian government has introduced several measures to curb vandalism and illegal bunkering in the Niger Delta. These include establishing a task force on national strategic infrastructure, creating special security outfits, and assigning the Nigerian Navy to oversee registered maritime activities. During the Obasanjo administration particularly in his second term beginning in 2003 several ships involved in illegal crude oil trafficking were captured, and arrests were made. However, prosecutions often failed as seized ships and suspects mysteriously disappeared. In response, the government increased militarization in the region, deploying the Joint Task Force (JTF) in 2008, which comprises the Army, Navy, and paramilitary agencies. While the JTF has conducted numerous operations and seized illegal equipment, oil theft and bunkering have persisted, suggesting limited effectiveness (Tomas, 2010; Ogodo, 2012).

International strategies were also attempted. In 2003, the Nigerian government warned Côte d'Ivoire against refining stolen Nigerian crude and offered legal supply contracts to discourage the illicit trade. This approach, however, was not extended to other countries suspected of receiving stolen oil, limiting its success. President Yar Adua (2007–2009), facing escalating militant attacks and bunkering, introduced an amnesty programme aimed at disarming and reintegrating militants. Upon Yar Adua's death, President Goodluck Jonathan expanded efforts by arming the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) and assigning them pipeline protection duties. He also sought international cooperation by appealing to countries like the U.S. and EU to stop purchasing stolen Nigerian oil (Nwanosike, 2013; Udo, 2013).

Despite these numerous interventions, oil theft and illegal bunkering remain rampant. The government's decision to contract ex-militant commanders for coastal protection failed to yield lasting solutions. Experts attribute this to the sophisticated nature of the illicit trade and the involvement of high-profile actors both locally and internationally. Furthermore, the Ad hoc Committee on Crude Oil Theft Prevention and Control of the National Economic Council (NEC) revealed that the government lacks adequate vessels and infrastructure to monitor and secure the vast network of pipelines in the region, undermining efforts to tackle the problem effectively (Paul & Tobi, 2016).

Efforts to curb oil theft, including militarization and the amnesty programme, have only provided short-term relief and, in some cases, worsened the situation by empowering former militants and fueling further conflict (ESRC, 2012; Aghedo, 2013; Agbiboa, 2014). Addressing the issue effectively requires a shift from surface-level solutions to tackling Nigeria's rentier state structure, as suggested by resource curse theory (Ross, 2012; 2014). Scholars propose two main solutions to help resource-rich states escape this trap: strengthening institutions and promoting transparency and accountability (Luong & Weinthal, 2010; Kolstad & Wiig, 2017). While transparency initiatives have gained more attention, institutional reform remains critical for long-term progress (Lawera et al., 2017; Stevens & Dietsche, 2008).

Improving transparency can rebuild trust between communities and the government. For instance, giving locals access to oil-related contracts such as the controversial satellite surveillance project may encourage cooperation in combating theft (Reuters, 2019). Public exposure of criminal involvement by elites, including military and political figures, could deter high-level collusion and reduce reliance on ex-militants for security roles (Adibe et al., 2018). Transparency in multinational corporations' (MNCs) operations, paired with accurate reporting of local conditions, may also pressure home governments to enforce ethical practices. Additionally, empowering citizens especially Niger Delta indigenes to understand and assert their rights is essential. While strengthening the Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) is a positive step, more citizen engagement is necessary. Professional bodies like the Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE) could be empowered to hold MNCs accountable. As global demand for fossil fuels declines, Nigeria's shift toward a tax-based revenue model may enhance public oversight and reduce corruption, paving the way for structural reforms to dismantle the rentier state.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study was anchored on three media theories with Uses and Gratification theory leading the study as the major theoretical frame work. This will be well backed by the Technology Determinism theory and Cultivation Theory.

The Uses And Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, pioneered by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the early 1970s, is one of the most influential approaches to understanding media consumption from the perspective of active audiences. The theory posits that media users are not passive recipients of messages but active participants who seek out media to satisfy a range of personal, social, and psychological needs (Blumler, Gurevitch, & Katz, 1973). The fundamental assumption of U&G theory is that individuals actively choose media content based on their unique needs and motivations, which are categorized into four key areas: diversion (escape from daily life), personal identity (reinforcement of values), personal relationships (companionship and social interaction), and surveillance (seeking information for decision-making) (McQuail, 1972). This framework shifts the focus from the traditional "media effects" model, which emphasized the passive role of the audience, to one where the audience plays a central role in shaping their media consumption and, consequently, their media experiences. The use of the gateless and participatory social media in fighting the menace oil theft here explained the vital uses and gratifications.

The Technology Determinism Theory

Technological Determinism theory, first introduced by Marshall McLuhan in 1964, explores how media and technology influence societies and shape human behavior. McLuhan's idea of "Media Ecology" suggests that

the rise of different technologies causes profound changes in social structures and human experiences. The basic assumptions of this theory include the notion that media play an integral role in society, shape perceptions, and link the world together. McLuhan's famous assertion, "The medium is the message," implies that the medium through which information is conveyed influences society more than the content itself. Over time, the theory has been expanded upon by scholars like Postman (2000), who added that both media producers and consumers actively shape cultures, and Boyd & Ellison (2007), who examined the impacts of social media in the digital age. By examining how youth in the Niger Delta engage with social media, the theory helps shed light on the ways in which technology influences public opinion, ideologies, and socio-political movements. This makes Technological Determinism a useful framework for analyzing the intersection of technology, media, and societal dynamics in a rapidly changing digital world especially in fighting the oil theft saga by the federal Government of Nigeria..

The Media Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, a communications and sociological framework, was first introduced in the 1960s by Hungarian-born American professor, George Gerbner. The theory suggests that long-term exposure to media, particularly television, shapes how individuals perceive the world and influence their behaviors. Gerbner's initial focus was on television's role in shaping societal views, particularly in relation to violence. Later, Larry Gross, an American screenwriter, contributed to expanding the theory's scope, indicating that media's portrayal of social realities shapes how individuals interpret and react to the world around them (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986). Cultivation theory proposes that regular media consumption leads to a homogenized understanding of social realities, influencing societal norms and behaviors, such as reinforcing stereotypical gender

Cultivation theory remains highly relevant in contemporary research, especially in understanding how new media, such as social media platforms, influence individuals and communities. In the context of influence of social media messages on Niger Delta youths perception in the federal government's war against oil theft, the theory helps researchers understand how youth engage with media messages and whether these influence their behaviors and attitudes toward issues such as oil theft.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methods was employed to gather secondary data from stakeholders social media messages in the federal government war against oil theft in niger delta. Messages was analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis. This approach was informed by the nature of the research questions, which required the integration of qualitative data for analysis. CDA enabled the assessment of how these messages were conveyed and whether they contained political undertones. This method facilitated the evaluation of the social meanings embedded in the messages and their implications for public discourse.

Unger, Wodak, and Khosravinik (2016) describe Critical Discourse Analysis as an interdisciplinary research programme developed to address specific research issues. It draws from various theoretical models and techniques with the shared aim of analyzing semiotic elements of power and their potential for unjust application, which may influence cultural and social transformation. Tebogo (2014) highlights that CDA is concerned with the long-term study of these interrelations and their broader societal effects.

The researcher adopted a purposive sampling strategy for the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focusing on specific qualitative characteristics to select relevant social media content while excluding non-relevant materials. This method, as supported by **Wimmer and Dominick (2003)**, enabled a targeted examination of discourse related to the Nigerian federal government's anti-oil theft campaign in the Niger Delta. Five major social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and various news blogs were selected based on ease of data access. From these platforms, ten recent posts were analyzed, with two posts randomly selected from each platform for qualitative analysis, aligning with standard qualitative sampling practices (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

The selected sources included well-followed and nationally significant channels such as Channels TV News on YouTube, Punch News Website, the official X account of NNPC Limited, the Nigerian Navy's Facebook page, and Arise TV News on Instagram. These platforms were chosen based on their high followership counts, objectivity ratings, and relevance to national development efforts. The global usage data provided by Digital Global (2024) further supports their selection, with Facebook at 3.065 billion users, YouTube at 2.70 billion, Instagram at 2.4 billion, X at 556 million, and news blogs with 500 million users. This underscores the broad public reach and influence these platforms possess in disseminating messages related to national issues.

In collecting qualitative data, the researcher systematically analyzed social media messages and blog posts from **January 2023 to December 2024**, focusing on those published by government agencies and news organizations regarding the federal government's response to crude oil theft in the Niger Delta. Posts from key stakeholders such as the **Nigerian Navy**, **NNPC Limited**, and prominent media outlets were included. Messages were selected using systematic random sampling following a comprehensive content search. The researcher examined various multimedia elements text, images, and audience responses to provide an in-depth analysis of both message framing and public reception (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

The Critical Discourse Analysis examined several discursive elements including language use, framing, power relations, ideological perspectives, and the influence of specific social media platforms. Elements such as metaphor, vocabulary choice, and framing strategies revealed how the government constructed narratives about oil theft and asserted authority (Fairclough, 1995). In contrast, the youth's responses were evaluated for resistance or reinforcement of these narratives, highlighting the presence of counter-discourses and alternative ideologies. Finally, engagement metrics like; likes, comments, and shares were used to assess the effectiveness and impact of these narratives on youth audiences, reflecting social media's role in shaping public perception (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Secondary data was gathered from various social media pages to present a more critical perspective on Niger Delta youths' views of social media messages related to the Federal Government's war against oil theft in the Niger Delta.

handle	Post	Views	likes	Dislike
heNigerian Navy	Tackling oil theft: Navy warns Saboteurs to desist or face the wrath of the law	15,213	445	Nil
heNigerian Navy	Operation Delta Sanity: Nigerian Navy ship detected and arrested motor tanker	4,926	708	Nil
ARISEtv	Asari Dokubo Visits President Tinubu, Accuses the Military of Oil Theft	77,435	167	Nil
npclimited	War on Crude Oil June Report	3324	46	Nil
GbaramatuVoicetv	Watch the moment Nigerian military helicopter bombarded vessel with stolen crude oil in Niger Delta Visit www.gbaramatuvoicenews.com for more updates #Tompolo #Tantita #NNPCL #GbaramatuVoice #NigeriaNews #CrudeOil #BreakingNews	10,574	Nil	Nil
eterobi.2027	BREAKING NEWS: Many top Nigeria Officials in government are operating an Outshore refinery in Malta, therefore giving less attention to the one in Nigeria (Dangote refinery). This criminality and Wickedness from our politicians must stop. Nigeria is a country blessed with oil and other mineral resources, I see no reason for Nigeria to be among the poorest countries in the world. - PO #PeterObi2027 #PO_2027 #togetherwecannigeria □□□□	20745	571	Nil
ChannelsTVYouTube	Crude Oil Theft: 'No Room for Illegality, Get A Job', OPDS Commander Tells Samkiri Community	627	Nil	Nil
ChannelsTVYouTube	Crude Oil Theft: Navy Discovers Illegal Crude Oil Refinery In Rivers State	753	3	Nil

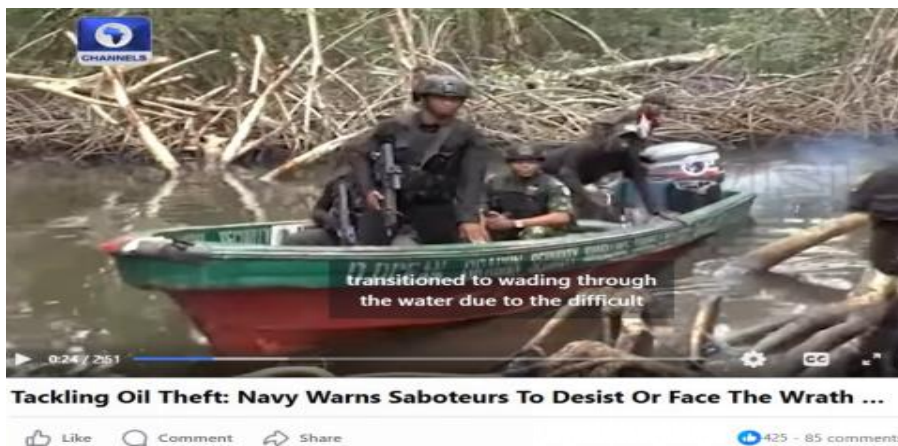
tanetwork	FG Arraigns 15 for Oil Theft, Pipeline Vandalism in Port Harcourt	869	17	Nil
npclimited	WAR ON CRUDE OIL THEFT for 11th to 17th January, 2025	1245	109	Nil

From the 10 stories above, a total of 135,711 views were obtained, with a total of 2,066 likes, 264 comments, and 255 social media shares. Nonetheless, 20 randomly chosen comments were used as the basis for the development of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The researcher, however, will only explore 10 stories and then randomly select 30 comments, including texts, stickers, and emojis that fit the inclusion criteria. The bases of the inclusion include: (1) the comments must be related to government social media messages against oil theft in the Niger Delta; and (2) the messages to be evaluated is from various news post buttressing the federal government war against oil theft from 2023 to date. The decision to analyze social media messages in the CDA stems from their potential to illuminate the power dynamics involved in the fight against oil theft. On the other hand, any comments, images, emojis, or stickers that did not align with the established criteria were excluded from the study.

The Critical Discourse Analysis

In examining the thematic discourse of Niger Delta youths' responses to federal government social media messages in the war against oil theft, the researchers analyzed a selected corpus by focusing on audience access to social media platforms, interpretation of discourse as a dominant act, and the structure and strategies of discourse. The study highlighted how these elements contribute to the enactment and reproduction of social inequality. Grounded in the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the analysis adheres to its core mandate to describe, explain, and interpret based solely on news posts and user comments.

Text Control: it was deduced from the social media post that different language styles were used in the ten posts analyzed, especially on the once generated from federal law enforcement agencies and disseminated via the social media handles of national news media houses like Channels, Arise, NTA and local medium GbaramatuVoice. For instance, the word '**Warn**' as captioned in the Nigerian Navy post on channels television triggered negative reactions from the audience.



It was observed from the post that the use of threat-filled words triggered a negative reception. Instead of commending the efforts of the Nigerian law enforcement agencies and the federal government, the audience responded with statements like "Imagine criminals in navy uniforms" or "Go after the bigger bunkery vessels."



The lexical choice of "warn" a word connoting threat and confrontation triggered resistance and skepticism rather than compliance or support. Rather than evoking trust in the actions of law enforcement agencies and the federal government, the audience responded with accusatory and dismissive statements such as **"Imagine criminals in Navy uniforms"** and **"Go after the thieves with the bigger vessels."** This indicates a shift in perception, where institutional authority is no longer automatically associated with legitimacy, but is instead viewed with suspicion and criticism. This brought about heated debate online amongst social media audience in Niger delta and even audience across the nation. This the Online audience did via memes, gifs, and witty comments were, using trolls, banter and using ideological based response to reflect the diverse opinions within the Nigerian online community.

Reacting to social messages in the federal government's war against oil theft, youths did expressed their views through social media trolls in response to every news updates, whether on TikTok, YouTube, Twitter (X), Facebook, or Instagram. These platforms have become popular spaces for sarcastic and confrontational commentary, especially Twitter (X), which is widely known for its savage tone.



An example from the observed social media messages is the TikTok post by GbaramatuVoice titled *"Watch the moment Nigerian military helicopter bombarded vessel with stolen crude oil in Niger Delta"*, and the Facebook post by the Nigerian Navy stating *"Navy warns saboteurs to desist or face the wrath of the law"*, numerous trolls appeared in the comments section.

Some examples of such troll comments include:

"The army should bring this same energy to stop illegal mining of solid minerals in the North. Let's put an end to illegal mining."

"Go for the bunker bigger vessels"

"You're calling the only functioning refineries 'illegal' where are your own refineries?"

"Let the military use the same drones to monitor the North and curb banditry and terrorism."

"Empty vessel stops all this we knew that is empty □□□"

Banters: In response to social media message from the federal government in the war against oil theft in Niger Delta social media audience including Niger delta youth online did not hold back their taking bantering the law enforcement agency and the federal government in all social media platforms used in the dissemination of the anti-oil theft messages. Banters following the social media messages in the federal government war against oil theft helped to increase the visibility of some of the news report, thus enhancing the reach of the report. Popular among the banter is

"BAT and Asari. Surely there is reward for criminality by Nigerian standard!"

"Since you can't refine crude into petroleum products, they take charge".

“Inspector NNPCPL pls focus on the tanker and leave the poor Nigerians Alone”

“Waste of time.”

Ideologically speaking, while the federal government presents the mineral resources in the Niger Delta as a national treasure that must be protected to sustain Nigeria's economy, the average Niger Delta youth sees vandalizing pipelines as a **justified act of personal vendetta** against the federal government for its failure to develop the region that has long sustained the nation's economy through its natural resources. There is a clear ideological difference between the federal government and the Niger Delta youth from the responses deduced from the various social media handle. while the federal government is so concern of getting maximum profit from the crude produce, the Niger Delta begging for survival and overall development of the region for its role in the sustenance of the nation’s economy. Instead of celebrating the successes recorded in the war against oil theft, the online audience clearly criticized the federal government's efforts, urging them to do more by getting local refineries operational and empowering locals so they can stay away from oil-related crimes.

This was clearly depicted i in the comment section of NNPCPL post on X (Twitter) as shown below

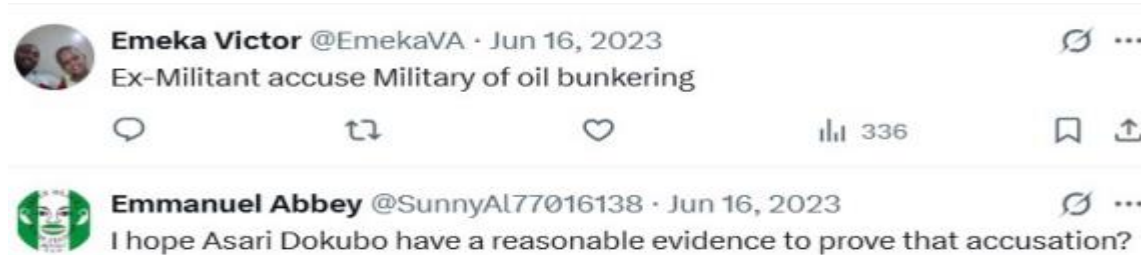


Mannerism in Presentation of the social media Anti-Oil Theft Messages: It was deduced from that, the social media messages about the federal government's war on oil theft clearly highlighted the power imbalance between the government and Niger Delta social media users, ranging from local youths to influential political figures. The majority of reports indicated that the government asserted its authority by repeatedly issuing warnings to oil thieves and threatening severe consequences for those caught sabotaging both the national economy and the environmental integrity of the Niger Delta.

On the other hand, youth, community leaders, and political figures from the region are using social media to highlight the perceived injustice on how oil theft is portrayed and addressed. They argue that oil theft is an organized crime, often involving powerful actors, and that targeting local communities alone is **unfair and misleading**. This sentiment was clearly expressed on the X (formerly Twitter) page of Niger Delta freedom fighter Asari Dokubo, as well as on the TikTok page of Peter Obi, the Labour Party’s 2023 presidential candidate.



Popular comments include “the real thieves a chill in the NNPC, start from the top” “Let them arrest those vessels coming into Nigerian without authorization, because oga untop are involved”, “Let the govt do wat they like, God's judgement is real... Where is abacha today, ambrose alli, yaradua, shagari, Shakara, gaddafi, mandela, n others” amongst others.



This is a typical illustration of the saying "there is no smoke without fire." The social media messages in the Federal Government's war against oil theft in the Niger Delta open up another dimension via comments to the oil-related crimes in the creeks. They clearly highlight the need for proper interrogation of arrested suspects, effective whistle blowing mechanisms, and a transparent prosecution process. These steps are essential to establish a balance of power and to avoid the perception that the law only targets the poor populace of the Niger Delta.

The Use of Subtle Language: In contrast, similar stories with more broadcast-friendly headlines were met with commendation by the same online social media audience following the federal government's war against oil theft in the Niger Delta. A good example is a post by the Nigerian Navy on their official Facebook page, which received widespread praise. The post was simply titled: “Operation Delta Sanity: Nigerian Navy Ship Detected and Arrested Motor Tanker.” It avoided the use of phrases like “arrest of saboteurs,” “warning to oil thieves,” “war against oil thieves,” or “arrest of illegal bunkerers.” Even when referring to oil theft, the language was more measured, using phrases such as “suspected to have been involved in crude oil theft.”



OPERATION DELTA SANITY: Nigeria Navy Ship BEECROFT detected and arrested Motor Tanker SWEET MIRI suspected to have been involved in...

The comment section was filled with reactions such as “The Nigerian Navy is working,” “God bless the Nigerian Navy, onward togetherness,” and “heart job.” One could easily argue that these comments may have come from government officials, friends, family members, or even team members which is highly possible. However, with 37 shares on this particular post, indicating that it reached a wider audience, there was still no repulsive response from Niger Delta youths, activists, or even young Nigerians across the globe.

Findings

The CDA reveals amongst others:

1. The study reveals that confrontational language in anti-oil theft messages triggered negative reactions from Niger Delta youths.
2. Social media users challenged government authority through satire, banter, and ideological critiques.

3. Responses reflected deep mistrust in state institutions and highlighted perceived injustice and selective enforcement.
4. Neutral, fact-based messaging received more positive engagement and less resistance.
5. Overall, the discourse exposes a significant gap between federal narratives and local realities in the Niger Delta

CONCLUSION

The social media messages in the federal government's war against oil theft is largely ineffective and counterproductive. Its use of threatening language exposes a power dynamic that is rejected by a skeptical and digitally-savvy audience. Niger Delta youths use the very same platforms to articulate a powerful counter-narrative of systemic injustice, redirecting the focus from local "saboteurs" to high-level corruption and the state's failure to develop the oil-rich region. The resulting online discourse is not one of support but of resistance, criticism, and a demand for a more equitable and transparent approach.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study findings the following recommendations were made:

1. **Collaboration:** Promote social media collaborations with young people from the Niger Delta by partnering with respected youth leaders, content creators, and social media influencers to share credible narratives and discourage oil theft.
2. **All Inclusive Messaging:** Government social media content should highlight efforts against major oil theft sponsors and not just small-scale offenders. This will help dispel the perception that the war targets only the poor and improve trust among youths
3. **Encourage Two-Way Communication and Feedback:** Create interactive platforms (e.g., polls, Q&A sessions, virtual town halls) where Niger Delta youths can voice their opinions, ask questions, and receive responses. This engagement will foster a sense of inclusion and transparency.

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