THE TERROR OF IMAGES: INTERROGATING SELECTED FACEBOOK POSTINGS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

New media makes it possible to connect people who share interests and activities across political, economic and geographical borders through instant messaging. The widespread adaptation of Facebook may be attributed to the fact that it offers some unique features and modifications compared to other platforms and social networking sites. Facebook is said to have about 1.65 billion users as at 2017, totalling to almost a quarter of the world's population. Nigeria has the highest users of Facebook in Africa. People of course use Facebook for different purposes. Unfortunately there are ample evidence that terrorists or terrorists' groups are using this tool to communicate and encourage their followers and supporters to carry out acts of terror. And terrorism is one of the biggest threats to peace and stability of Nigeria, especially national security and socio-economic developments. This paper is however concerned with another kind of terrorism, which is the terror of images posted on Facebook by particularly some users in Nigeria. Stories of violence and graphic images are often posted on individual pages containing uncensored and unedited horrific detail. Watching these images and feeling the anguish of those directly affected has a way of creating stress and anxiety for other Facebook users. In fact, there are studies that have established that constant exposure to gory images can cause post-traumatic stress disorder. As a result, Facebook has started placing warnings for graphic videos and images that have been flagged as offensive or inappropriate. However, most of these violent images still appear on trends and newsfeeds. But why are some Nigerians fascinated with sharing violent images without warning their friends about what they are about to see? Content analysis and questionnaire is applied to interrogate selected graphic images posted on Facebook by Nigeria users.

Introduction

Facebook has not only changed the way users socialise and communicate, it has also redefined the idea of friendship, community and learning. The widespread adaptation of Facebook is mainly as a result of the dramatic increases in the presence and use of Social Media, which is defined as a "group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, turning communication into interactive dialogue by allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 53). Social Media has indeed allowed people to express themselves

through blogs, websites, social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Flicker, YouTube, 2Go, Badoo, LinkedIn, and so on). According to Burnett and Merchant,

> The recent and rapid dissemination of new forms of digital technology has had a noticeable impact on the social and cultural lives of large sectors of the global population. Along the infusion and availability of more interactive and user-friendly interfaces and software designs, and the increasing sophistication of affordable mobile devices, we are witnessing the emergence of ever-newer forms of popular communication (Burnett and Merchant 41).

Furthermore, web-based Social Media makes it possible to connect people who share interest and activities, across political, economic and geographical borders through instant messaging. However, scholars have strongly presented their argument concerning the several negative effects that social networking sites such as Facebook have on knowledge, opinion, attitudes and the levels of violence among people in the society. Social Media, they say, is responsible for aggressive tendencies among children and young people due to the amount of excessive violent images that can be found in some pictures or videos that are posted on social networking sites such as Facebook. Theories like the "hypodermic needle or bullet" theory give further support to these media effect behaviour. There are also several privacy and safety concerns on Facebook that have not yet been addressed. The most frequently raised issue is with the materials posted on Facebook that are deemed inappropriate such as violent, horrific images and videos. Horrific images have been defined as strongly aversive intrusive thoughts such as images of dismembered bodies or disgusting scenes. Indeed, the posting of these types of materials appears to be frequent.

However, the frequency of postings of these pictures and videos does not account for the different responses individuals may have to the same pictures or videos. Thus it is necessary to investigate the perception of users and how they reaction and feel about horrific images and videos on Facebook.

The Birth of a Medium with a Face
One site that has gained a significant advantage in numbers of users seems to be Facebook. Facebook started in a Harvard dorm room in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg who was a student at the time. The main purpose of the site at its inception was said to "connect fellow Harvard students through an online network that allowed students to post a photo and personal information, such as where they lived on campus and the campus organizations to which they belonged. By the following day, more than 1000 students had signed up; by month-end, that number reached approximately 75% of Harvard students" (Cassidy 23).

As the site's popularity grew, the network of colleges expanded, and by the end of the year it had reached one million users. In September 2006, Facebook executives made the decision to open up the site to everyone, rather than those in specific networks, and membership soared from "12 million active users at the end of 2006 to 845 million

active users by February 2012" (Cassidy 23). The site currently ranks as the number one most-trafficked Web site in the world (Internetstats.com).

Facebook offers some unique features and modifications from other social networking sites. As with all SNSs, members create an online profile and control the amount of information they choose to reveal to other users. This information can include simple information as their hometown, college name and birthday, to as specific as relationship information, favourite movies, individual hates, likes and dislikes, and so on. Users can communicate with friends and other users through private or public messages and a chat feature. A status bar allows users to update their status at any time with what they are doing, how they are currently feeling, or any other information they want to include. This status is typically viewable by all of the users' friends or general public, depending on individual page setting.

The Wall is one of the features of Facebook that allows friends to post comments, links, and images on a user's profile page. Depending on the privacy setting, anyone who can see a user's profile can also view that user's Wall. In 2007, Facebook began "allowing users to post attachments to the Wall, whereas the Wall was previously limited to textual content only" (Boyd, and Ellison 17). Photo tagging involves associating pictures of an individual with his name and his profile. Users can create or join groups that may interest them. For instance, a group called "Stars from the Well" is made up of both past and present students of the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. This group was formed in 2010 and students both current and old can join the group to discuss past and current events taking place at the Ahmadu Bello University Studio Theatre, called, Drama Village. Members also pass out information about graduation, deaths, marriages, illnesses of their members and non-members alike.

The Facebook platform also allows for the creation and growth of applications, which allow users to interact, to bring members to the site more often and to encourage non-users to join the site. The Scrabulous application, for example, allows friends to play Scrabble online, with no time limit. Taken together, these features add up to a website to which members frequently return. "On average, two-thirds of users log in at least once every 24 hours, and users spend about 20 minutes on the site each day" (Cassidy 24). Facebook is said to have also managed to win the trust of its users by prioritising their privacy with detailed account and privacy settings. Unlike sites such as MySpace, which allow members to search for and view the profiles of any registered user, Facebook limits searches to only those within that user's networks, unless specifically approved by that user.

Cassidy quotes Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg as saying,

> these restrictions encourage users to reveal more personal information about themselves than they would had anyone been able to see their profile… giving people control over who sees what helps to increase over-all information flow (25).

Another privacy aspect in Facebook is in the area of identity verification. Although a potential Facebook user does not need to belong to a specific network to join, she or he must verify a relevant email address before joining the network. Donath and Boyd discuss the importance of such verification processes, especially in relation to the connections between users, as a way of ensuring honest self-presentation online.

Facebook is currently being described as the fastest growing "country" because it is said to be the leading Social Networking Site, having surpassed 900million users as at the end of 2012 (checkfacebook.com); while Facebook announced that it passed the one billion users mark in September 2013. According to PEW Research, two-third of online American adults (67%) are Facebook users, making Facebook the dominant social networking site in the United States. Statistics show that while both Internet penetration and Facebook use is over 60% in the United States, Nigeria has less than 3.5% of both. This of course is not too surprising going by the high disparity in broadband availability and access. Ironically, Internet and Facebook usage Statistics put Nigeria as having the highest Internet and Facebook users in Africa (Internetworldstats.com).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Horrific Image
The nature of contemporary news and social media, such as, Facebook can turn local disasters into international events within minutes, transmitting the impact of a disaster far beyond those who are directly exposed. Indeed, while thousands of people directly experience terrorist attacks such as Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria, tens of thousands more view the attacks and their aftermath via mediums such as television and Facebook, turning the attacks into what researchers call a collective trauma. Traumatic stress, according to Cohen, is a normal reaction to a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, motor vehicle accident, plane crash, violent crime, or terrorist attack. Such events are extraordinarily stressful – not just for survivors, but also witnesses and even those repeatedly exposed to the horrific images of the traumatic event circulated on social media and news sources.

Roxane Cohen of the University of California, in an article published in *Psychological Science,* "Mental and physical health effects of acute exposure to media images of the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq War" by hypothesised that repeated exposure to vivid traumatic images from the media could lead to long-lasting negative consequences, not just for mental health but also for physical health. They speculated that such media exposure could result in a stress response that triggers various physiologic processes associated with increased health problems over time.

To test this hypothesis, Silver and colleagues embarked on a three-year study examining the relationship between trauma-related media exposure such as the 9/11 terrorist attach and the mental and physical health outcomes in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults. Collecting data from an Internet-based survey of 1322 participants, the researchers were able to obtain assessments of participants' mental and physical health before the 9/11 attacks, collect information about their media exposure and acute stress responses immediately after the attacks and after the initiation of the Iraq War, and conduct annual follow-up assessments in the three years after 9/11. The results were

striking. Almost 12% of the participants reported high levels of acute stress related to 9/11 and about 7% reported high levels of acute stress related to the Iraq War.

After taking pre-9/11 mental health, demographic characteristics, and lifetime trauma exposure into account, people who watched four or more hours of 9/11 – or Iraq War-related television per day following each event were more likely to experience symptoms of acute stress. Furthermore, the effects of trauma-related media exposure lasted over time – frequent early exposure to 9/11-related television predicted posttraumatic stress symptoms and physical health problems two to three years later. Taken together, these findings provide persuasive evidence that widespread media coverage of terrorism and war may have harmful effects on mental and physical health over time. The results suggest that exposure to graphic media images may be an important mechanism through which the impact of collective trauma is dispersed widely. Cohen adds that,

> The emotional toll from a traumatic event can cause intense, confusing, and frightening emotions. And these emotions aren't limited to the people who experienced the event. Round-the-clock news coverage means that we're all bombarded with horrific images from natural disasters, violent crimes, and terrorist attacks almost the instant they occur anywhere in the world. Repeated exposure can trigger traumatic stress and leave you feeling hopeless and helpless (7).

It is important to note in this paper that while some survivors or witnesses of a traumatic event can regain a sense of control by watching media coverage of the event or by observing the recovery effort, others find the reminders can be further traumatising. Excessive exposure to images of a disturbing event – such as repeatedly viewing video clips on social media or news sites – can even create traumatic stress in people not directly affected by the event. Below are some selected images from Facebook. The researcher got permission to use the images from the various Facebook page owners with the assurance of editing their names from the post. The images also served as part of the materials given to respondents during the data gathering.

Selected Images on Facebook
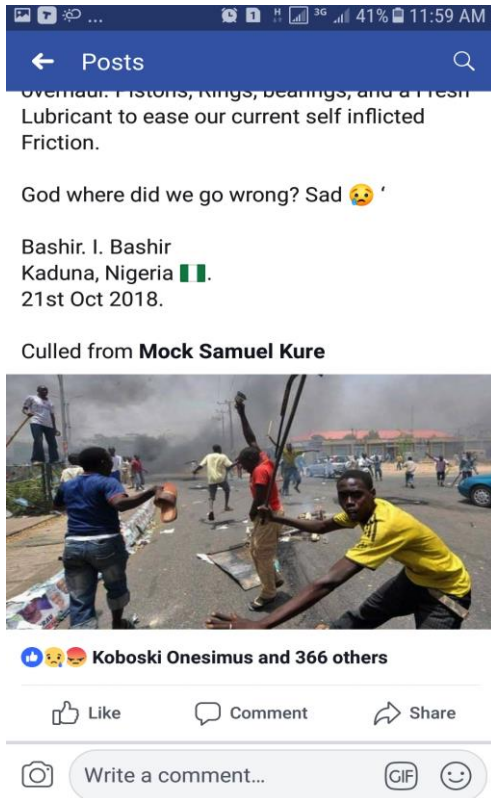
Methodology

This paper utilises a mixed research approach to collect data. According to Lenartz, "a population is the complete set of individuals, objects, or scores that the investigator is interested in studying" (52). The target population for this paper are staff and students of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria. It is often not feasible to study an entire population, thus the researcher made use of the simple random sampling to gather data. In using the Simple Random Sample (SRS), the sample population is given an equal probability chance.

The accuracy of the data collected using simple random sampling can easily be checked through the variance in the overall population. "The objective is to take a sample from the population, measure some characteristics on each of the sampled units, and use this information to estimate (infer) the characteristics in the entire population" (Bryman 4).

The Questionnaire and Content Analysis Methods

According to Bryman, questionnaire is used to acquire information by asking questions and tabulating the responses. Questionnaires are "used to report the perspective of one group of people at a particular period of time" (Bryman 5). This makes questionnaire, which is a quantitative approach ideal for this study, where the intention is to obtain the perspective of a large population. Moreover, questionnaire is a means of collecting information from a wider sample that cannot be reached by individual or focus group discussion.

Content analysis, on the other hand, is the intellectual process of categorising qualitative data into clusters of similar entities in order to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variable. It is a commonly used method of analysing a wide range of textual data, including interview transcripts, recorded observations, narratives, responses and media data such as drawings, photographs, and video. Some selected Facebook postings are presented as samples of images that the researcher view as horrific. These images are also presented to the respondents alongside the questionnaire.

One hundred (100) copies of the questionnaire were administered randomly to both students and staff in 10 faculties of the Ahmadu Bello University Main Campus. A total number of 89 copies were retrieved and analysed. Descriptive statistics is used to analyse and summarise the data and responses are described using graphical formats and tables. In terms of ensuring reliability and validity of the data gathered, the researcher employed external validity. External validity refers to the generalisation of the results of a study across populations, settings and time. Bryman identified three procedures that can be used to increase external validity of a research:

1. Random sampling that are representative of the population under study;
2. Heterogeneous sampling; and
3. Replication of study (Bryman 8).

In line with Cook and Campbell's guideline, the researcher adopted the recommended principle in this paper to ensure external validity.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The questionnaire was divided into four sections. A basic demographic section, which collected information about respondents' age, gender, department, among other things; a section, which asked questions related to respondents' use of Facebook, including the time spent for variety of purposes; a third section included questions related to respondents' perceived reasons for having a Facebook account. The fourth section focuses on horrific images and video posted on Facebook and users perception of such images.

*Table 1 Demographics of Facebook users in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria*

Variables		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age			
	16-25	63	70.0
	26 -35	14	15.6
	36-45	8	8.9
	46 and above	5	5.6
Gender			
	Male	43	47.8
	Female	47	52.2
Faculty			
	Administration	3	3.3
	Agriculture	2	2.2
	Arts	27	39.0
	Education	14	15.6
	Engineering	9	10.0
	Environmental design	5	5.6
	Medicine	4	4.4
	Life science	3	3.3
	Physical science	5	5.6
	Social science	18	20.0
Designation			
	Academic staff	18	20.0
	Non academic	0	0.0
	Students	72	80.0
Have Facebook account			
	Yes	89	98.9
	No	1	1.1
How long			
	1-3 years	30	33.7
	4-8 years	43	48.3
	9-15 years	16	18.0
Frequency of logins			
	Multiple times a day	37	41.6
	Once a day	10	11.2
	A few times a week	14	15.7
	A few times a month	18	20.2
	Very rarely ever	10	11.2
Average time spent			
	10- 30 minutes	47	52.8

1-2 hours	27	30.3
Above 2 hours	15	16.8

Source: Data from 2018 questionnaire processed through SPSS

The distribution above shows that the age of respondents range from 16 years to 46 years and above. The highest respondent age was 16-25 years with 63 (70%) and the lowest were the age range of 46 years and above which represents 5(5.6%). The table shows that 47(52.2%) of respondents were female students while 43(47.8%) were male students. From the distribution, Faculty of Arts, Social Science and Science have the highest number of respondents with Arts: 27 (39.0%); followed by Faculty of Social Science: 18(20%); and Education has 14(15.6%). 18 (20%) of the respondents are academic staff, while 72 (80%) are students. The total number of respondents with a Facebook account were 89 (98.9%), while 1 (1.1%) have no Facebook account. The highest percentage of the number of years respondents have had their accounts is between 4 to 8 years (48.3%). Frequency of login ins looks multiple times in a day having the highest of 37 (41.6%) and the lowest is very rarely with 10 (11.2%). Average time spent on Facebook indicates 10-30 minutes having the highest respondents with 47 (52.8%) while the lowest is above 2 hours with 15 (16.8%).
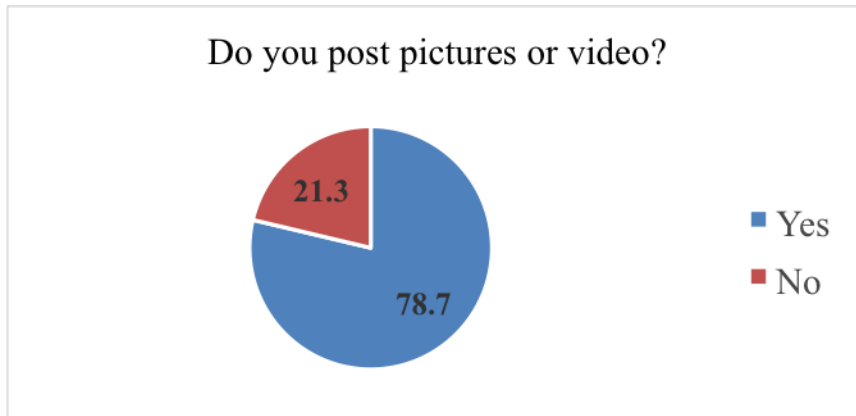
Chart 1
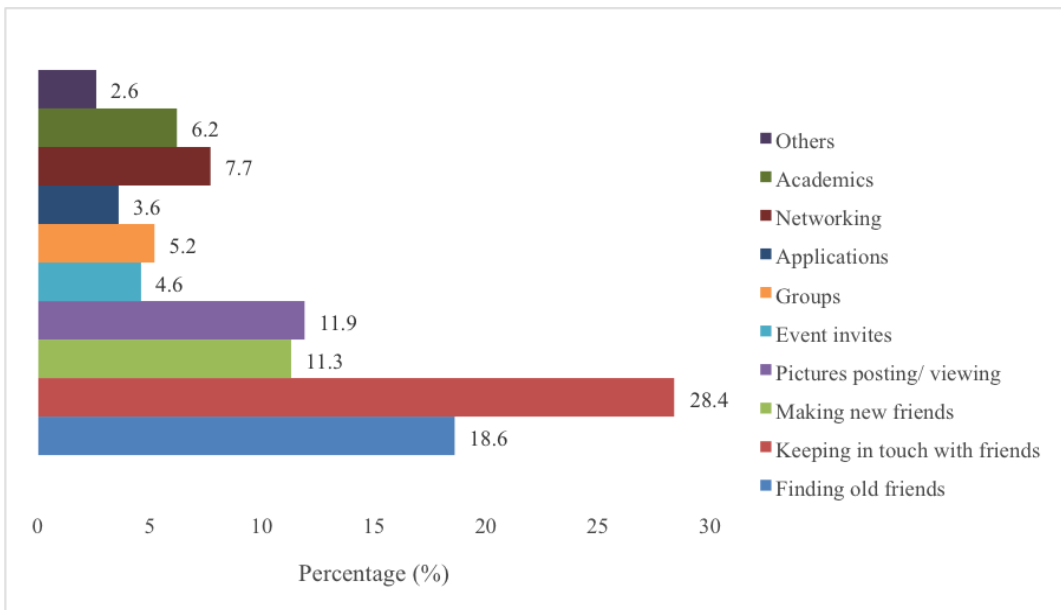
Source: Data from 2018 questionnaire processed through SPSS

As indicated by the above chart, the most common uses of Facebook is "keeping in touch with friends", "finding old friends" was indicated with the second highest number, while "picture posting and viewing" came in third.

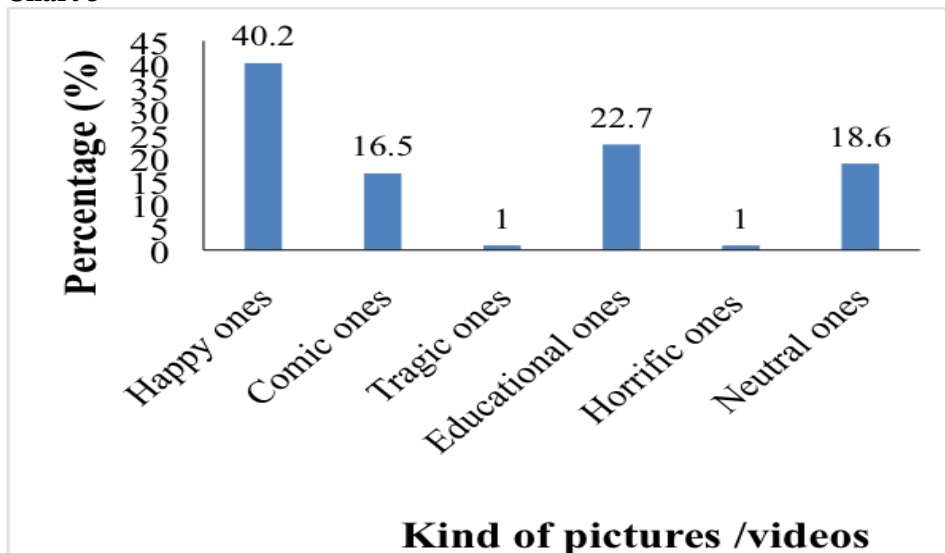**Chart 2**

Do you post pictures or video?

21.3

78.7

■ Yes
■ No

Source: Data from 2018 questionnaire processed through SPSS

The above chart indicates that 78.7% of respondents post pictures and videos on Facebook while 21.3% said they do not post.
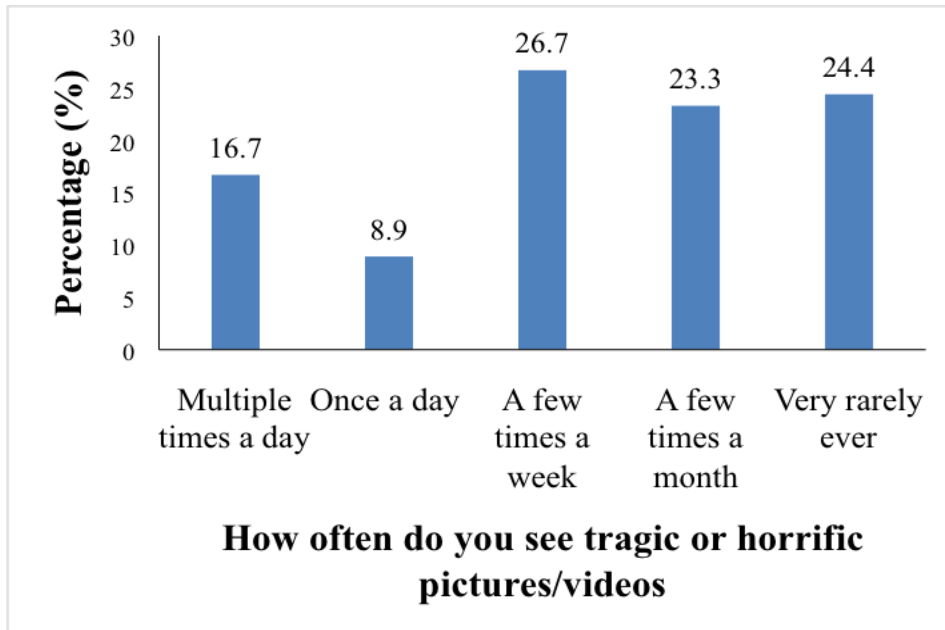
Chart 3

Happy ones 40.2

Comic ones 16.5

Tragic ones 1

Educational ones 22.7

Horrific ones 1

Neutral ones 18.6

Percentage (%)

Kind of pictures /videos

When asked concerning the kinds of images that they post on Facebook, 40.2% of the respondents said happy ones while only 1% admitted to posting tragic and horrific images.
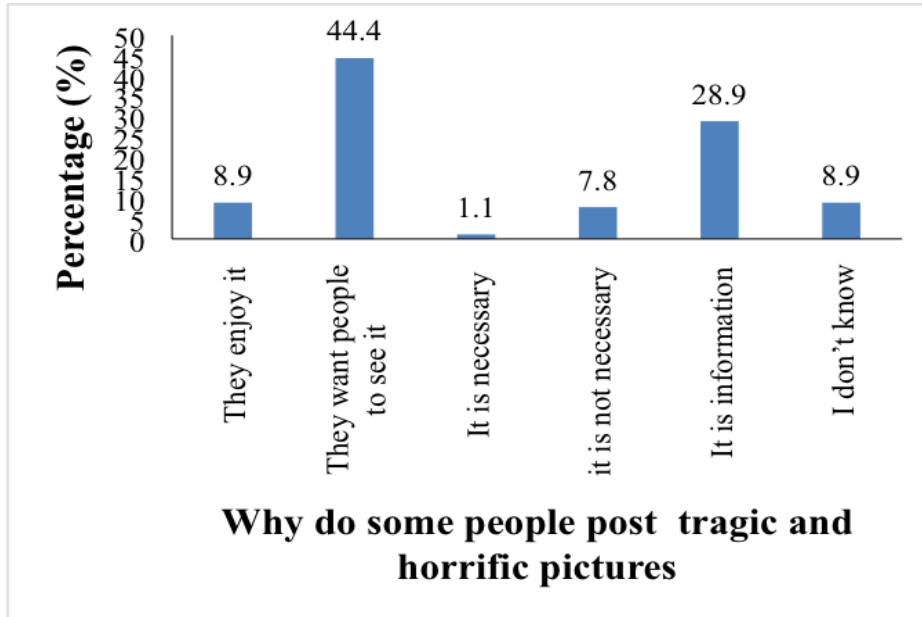
Chart 4

Chart 4 shows that 26.7% of the respondents said they see horrific pictures or videos few times a week. 24.4% said very rarely ever; 23.3% said few times a month; 16.7% said multiple times a day; and 8.90% said once a day. 3(0.3%) of the respondents declined to answer this question. This implied that a large majority of the respondents see horrific pictures and videos weekly and monthly.
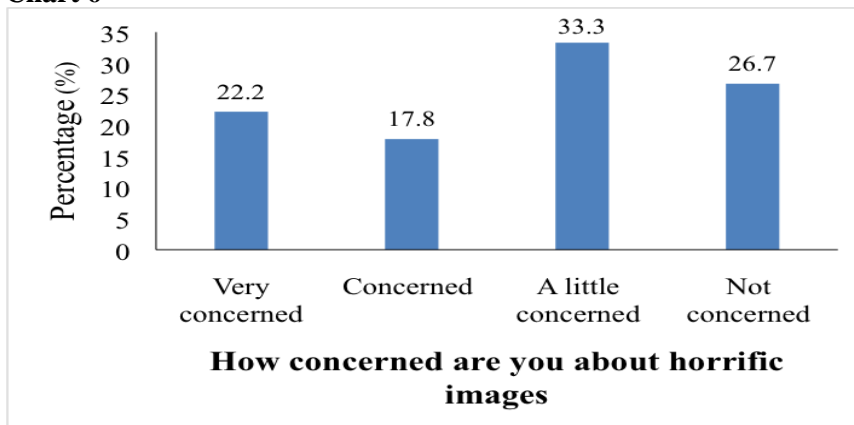
Chart 5

Percentage (%)

| | 8.9 | 44.4 | 1.1 | 7.8 | 28.9 | 8.9 |

They enjoy it | They want people to see it | It is necessary | it is not necessary | It is information | I don't know

Why do some people post tragic and horrific pictures

Source: Data from 2018 questionnaire processed through SPSS

The distribution of the chart above shows that 44.4% said the reason some people post such pictures is because they want people to see it. 28.9% said it is for information, 8.9% said it is because they enjoy it, 7.8% said it is not necessary to post such pictures or videos, 1.1% said it is necessary while 8.9% said they do not know. This implied that majority of the respondents believe that posting of horrific images is for people to see it and it also serves as form of information.
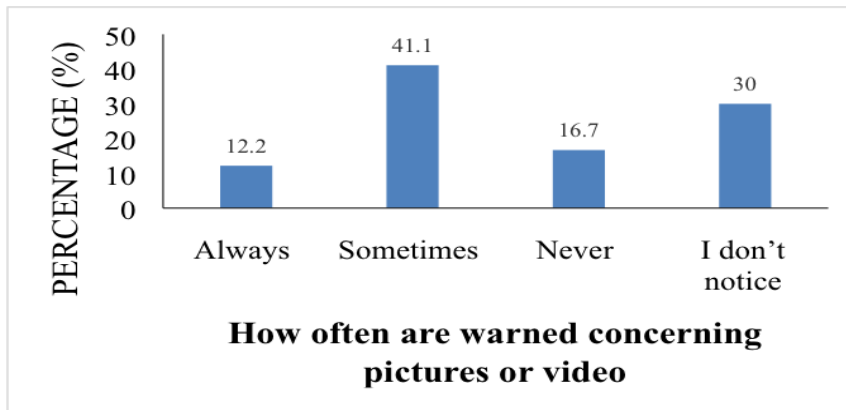
Chart 6

Percentage (%)

| 22.2 | 17.8 | 33.3 | 26.7 |

Very concerned | Concerned | A little concerned | Not concerned

How concerned are you about horrific images

The table shows that 33.3% said a little concerned; 26.7% said not concerned, 22.2% said very concerned while 17.8% said concerned. This implied that majority of the respondents are concerned about the horrific image people post on Facebook.
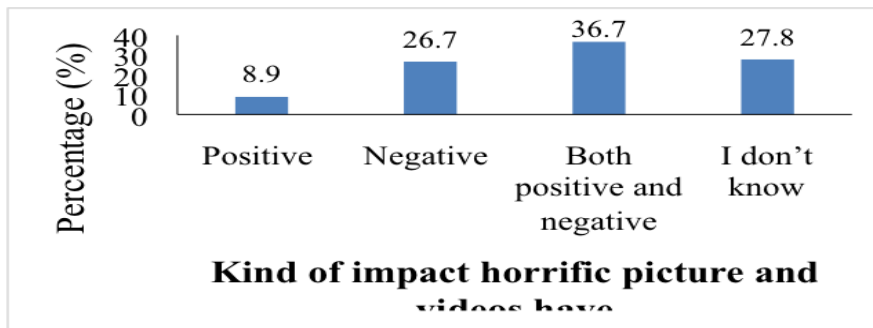
Chart 8

The above chart shows that 41.1% of the respondents said they are sometimes concerned about the horrific images posted on Facebook. 30% said they do not notice, 16.7% said they are never concerned while 12.2% of the respondents said they are always concerned.

Chart 9

When asked about the their perceived impact of these images, 36.7% said the impact is both negative and positive. 27.8% said they do not know, 26.7% said the impact is negative while 8.9% of the respondents said the impact is positive.

Table 2: Impact of horrific pictures or videos on those who watch it

Variables		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do you think posting horrific images have impact			
	Yes	64	71.1
	No	26	28.9
What kind of impact			
	Positive	8	8.9
	Negative	24	26.7
	Both positive and negative	33	36.7
	I don't know	25	27.8
Do you believe that such horrific pictures can cause traumatic stress disorder			
	Yes	71	78.9
	No	5	5.6
	I don't know	14	15.6
Do you think authorities school restrict			
	Yes	68	75.6
	No	6	6.7
	I don't know	16	17.8
What should Facebook users do about horrific pictures and videos			
	Ignore it	25	27.8
	Delete it	27	30.0
	Activate censorship in Facebook setting	24	26.7
	Block the person	3	3.3
	I don't know	11	12.2

Source: Data from 2018 questionnaire processed through SPSS

The table above show that 71.1% of the respondents agree that posting horrific images on Facebook has impact on the users while 26% disagree. 36.7% said the impact is both positive and negative, 27.8% said they have no idea, 26.7% said the impact is negative while 8.9% of the respondents said the impact is positive.

Chart 10
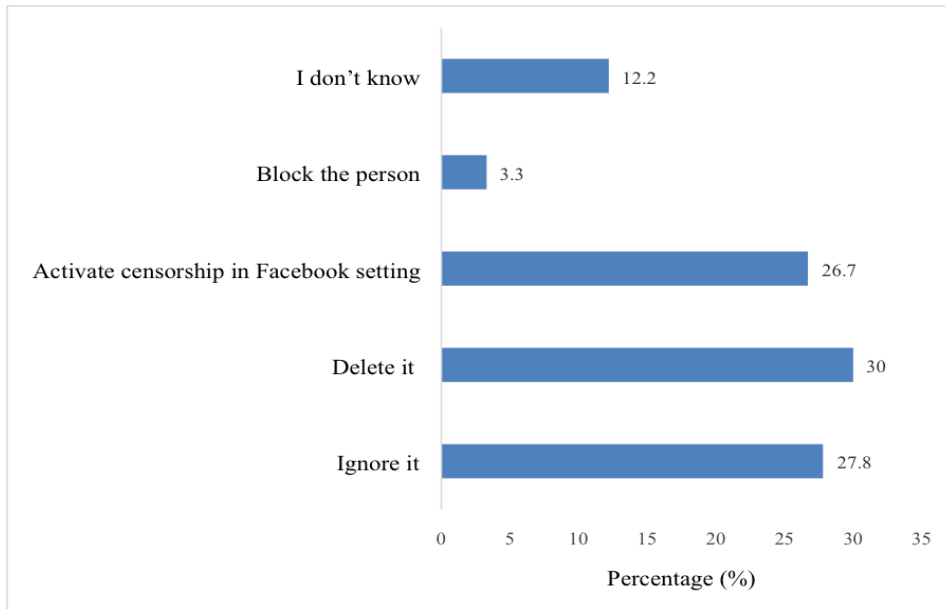
Source: Data from 2018 questionnaire processed through SPSS

Findings
1. Respondents believe that horrific images have both negative and positive effect.
2. Repeated exposure to horrific images on Facebook can trigger traumatic stress.
3. Delete horrific pictures.
4. Ignore it.
5. Activate censorship in Facebook setting.
6. People react differently to images.
7. The effects and symptoms may not appear until years after the exposure.
8. People of all ages can have post-traumatic stress disorder.

Conclusion
Despite the fact that researches have linked the viewing of horrific images to post traumatic stress, graphic images of individuals, happenings and events are still posted on Facebook repeatedly. It is therefore important for media outlets, policymakers, parents, psychologists and researchers to come on board in order to create awareness about the serious short and long-lasting consequences of this situation.

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