

# UNDERGRADUATES AND MEDIA REPORTING OF WAR: EDO STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF RUSSIA-UKRAINIAN WAR

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## Abstract

The paper interrogates the extent to which 120 randomly selected students of Edo State University Uzairue, Nigeria perceives the Russian-Ukrainian war. Using the quantitative approach and based on the conflict perception theories, the results show that most Nigerian Undergraduates do not follow the Russian-Ukrainian war. Results also show Nigerian Undergraduates who follow the war do so via the social media platforms of Instagram and Twitter and they get their information on the war from social media because they trust information such information. The study concludes that Nigerian Undergraduates are not interested in the Russian-Ukraine war because it is a proxy war between Russia and the West and do not want to get themselves entangled in what is not their business. The study recommends that Nigerian undergraduates should be interested in the war because it has wider implications that have consequences for the entire globe.

**Keywords:** Undergraduates, war, students, Russia, Ukraine, Nigeria

**Declaration of conflicting interests:** The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## INTRODUCTION

Tensions between Russia and Crimea have existed since early 2000. This escalated in early 2014 with the annexation of Crimea by Russia and pro-Russian separatists. On 14<sup>th</sup> February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in what has been termed the “Russian-Ukraine” war. Since the invasion, there have been varied reactions and perceptions from people around the globe, including in Nigeria (Adeoye, 2022; Muller, 2022).

Around the world, there have been divergent views about the war. In Russia, for instance, where the media is tightly controlled, polls suggest that Russians have 65% to 71% support for the invasion (Echosec Systems, 2022). In many Russia-based media, including mainstream and social media, the term 'war' is not used

to represent the invasion. Instead appealing terms like “special military operation”, “military action” and “peacekeeping mission” are used. Similarly, the heavy destruction of cities, casualties, heavy weaponry, civilian evacuations, or Russian losses are not shown on Russian media and US and NATO members are blamed for inciting the conflict and posing a great threat to Russia to which Russia is responding by invading Ukraine to “liberate” Ukrainians from the “Nazis” in what Putin has labelled the “special military operation” (Echosec Systems, 2022; Dixon, 2022; Muller (2022).

The Russian-Ukraine war has been covered by thousands of journalists and hundreds of media organisations including freelancers on mainstream media and social media such as Twitter, Telegram, and

Ukrainians generally relied on the internet and specifically on the social media Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which was the reason why Russian soldiers immediately after the capture of any Ukrainian city proceeded to shut down both cellular networks and the internet forcing Ukrainian citizens to get information only from Moscow-controlled and censored news outlet. This is because controlling the perception of the war was an important strategy for the warring nations (Cherkaoui, 2022; Flanagan, 2022). However, Flanagan (2022) posits that there are not a lot of verification issues with the use of social media as it can be difficult ascertaining where the information is coming from (Egielewa, 2021b). The reliance on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter appears to negate findings by Egielewa (2021a) and Egielewa et al (2021c) which showed that Nigerian undergraduates consumed Whatsapp social media platform the most.

Volkov and Kolesnikov (2022) in a sociological study of Russians between February and August 2022 in four regions of Russia found out an overwhelming percentage of Russians trusted information on the Russian-Ukraine war from television because they saw it as a credible source of “official information.” Many of the Russians felt the Western media were anti-Russia and so trusted majorly Russian Television channels and even believed that internet sources were generally influenced by Western ideologies and were not objectives and could also be classified as anti-Russia. These data have shown that “information about what is happening in Ukraine today is being received and interpreted within the echo chambers of respondents’ long-held ideas about Russia and about broader processes that have been taking place across the former Soviet Union, Europe, and the world” (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2022, p. 11). The import of this is that people already have ideological convictions about geopolitical conflicts and these affect their reliance on any media coming from certain regions or countries. However, Volkov and Kolesnikov (2022) also found that trust in television and internet sources was declining steadily.

Adeoye (2022) opines that many Africans have decided not to get themselves entangled in the war as they perceive the war as being a proxy war between Russia and the West. Generally, however, Africans believe that the war shouldn’t have happened in the first place.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on conflict theory and the theory of perception.

### **Theory of Conflict**

The theory of conflict seeks to explain in a scientific way the general contours of conflicts in society including how they start and vary and the effects they bring. In other words, it tries to decipher the dynamics that create social and economic inequality in different contexts. In general, the theory of conflict concerns itself with the issues of the unequal distribution of scarce resources which have been generally accepted to be those Weber classified into three, namely: class, status, and power, with power being the most intriguing feature of society and most dominating of the three. Power, in itself, isn't necessarily bad, it is the interplay of its deployment relating to poverty, inequalities, revolutions and war that determines how it is perceived, whether positive or negative (Dahrendorf & Collins, 2006; Oberschall, 1978).

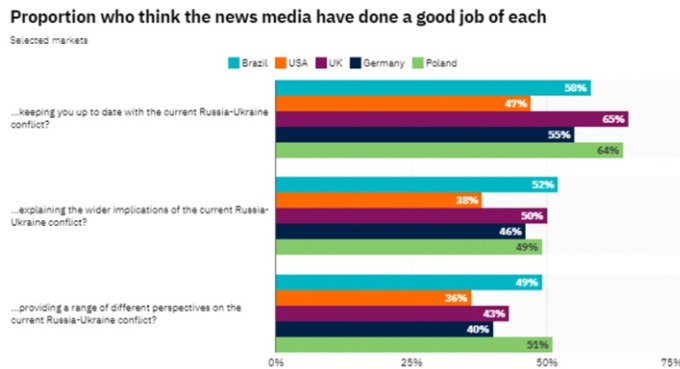
Conflict theory has been traced to Chinese Philosopher Han Fei Tzu who argued that men were intrinsically weak and lazy and can only be controlled by the punishment which the ruling class executes. Their resistance to that control often leads to conflict right from the earliest times (Inyundele, n.d). In the modern era, the German philosopher Karl Marx is often referred to as the father of conflict theory in the 19th century in which he posited that competition over limited resources was an inherent part of every society. In explaining the capitalist society, Marx avers that the society is divided into two classes, a ruling bourgeoisie and an oppressed proletariat (aka working class) in which the ruling class tries to maintain social order through the domination and exploitation of the working class (Dahrendorf & Collins, 2006; Oberschall, 1978; Hayes, 2022).

### **Theory of Perception**

The theory of perception refers to the process of acquiring and processing information (Démuth, 2013). Many scholars posit that the world is made up mainly of perceptions, images or ideas. Two schools of interest that are of particular interest to perception theorists depend on the direction of information flow. In the first school, the bottom-up perception theories, perception starts at the lowest sensory levels or most distant levels of cognitive apparatus and then gradually leads to more complicated and complex processes and a more global and abstract thought pattern. In the second school, the top-down perception theories, perception starts from “feeling” sensory data on receptors, but the processing in terms of the influence of higher cognitive contents declines. In order words, in

Tiktok, in which the devastating impacts of the war have been documented for the global audience, including the wider political, social and economic impacts (Eddy & Fletcher, 2022).

In a survey of 1000 respondents from 5 countries, Brazil, Germany, Poland, the UK, and the US, to gauge the perception of citizens about the war in April 2022, data showed that citizens overwhelmingly followed the war and were interested in issues around the war and citizens of the selected countries followed the event of the war predominantly via the television (39.6%) followed by online site of major news organisations (17.6%), social media (12%) and radio (6.2%) in descending order. Print media (2.6%) was the least patronised (Eddy & Fletcher, 2022). In terms of the citizens' perception of the performance of the media in the coverage of the war, most citizens believe the media coverage was good as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1:** Perception of citizens of Brazil, Germany, Poland, UK, and US on the performance of the media in the coverage of the Russian-Ukraine war.

**Source:** Khatsenkova & Holroyd, 2022

In Russia, media outlets such as the pro-Kremlin Channel One report on the negative implications of the war on many western citizens due to the sanctions they imposed on Russia and the destructions in Ukraine are hardly shown. Thus, many Russians are presented with the view that the Ukraine invasion of Ukraine by Putin is a fight for the survival of Russia (Khatsenkova & Holroyd, 2022; Oleinik, 2022) in which as of June 2022 75% of Russians still support the war against Ukraine although in March 2022 shortly after the invasion, the Russian support for the war was 81%, an indication that the public support of the war was waning albeit slowly (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2022). Many of those whose support for the war was declining were those who were able to get information from independent news sources which include a tiny percentage of Russians who have access to services like Virtual Private Networks (VPN) and can bypass the

Government's strict control of media content and see what happens in Ukraine (Panwar, 2022).

Similarly, more than half of Indonesian social media users have a positive perception of the war because they believe Putin is a strong leader and is "brave" to be able to fight against the West (Dharmaputra, 2022). In a Bloom Consulting study of 1500 citizens from 43 countries across the globe carried out between 28 March and 3 April 2022, findings show that global citizens had a 54% positive perception of Russia and 10% for Russia. Conversely, 75% had a negative perception of Russia compared to 23% negative impression of Ukraine (Statista.com, 2022).

Based on the above studies, there have not been known studies on the perception of Africans on the Russian-Ukrainian war. This study intends to fill this gap but with special emphasis on the perception of Nigerians but specifically the sub-sect of students with the expectation that this will give a glimpse of how Nigerians nay Africans perceive the war.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will guide this study.

Rq1: To what extent do students follow the Russian-Ukraine war?

RQ2: Through what media platforms do the students follow the Russian-Ukraine war?

RQ3: To what extent do students trust information received on the Russian-Ukraine war?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Generally, people understand wars and conflicts based on what they gather from the media. This also depends on which media consumers have access to. Citizens in the Global North have more varieties of media from which they get information on wars and conflicts. On the other hand, people from the global south access information on wars and conflicts from limited sources. For those who live in dictatorial nations, such limited access is further restricted by their governments. People's perception of a war or a conflict can be affected by the angle from which the media report or present such conflicts such as the real causes, the effects, the victors, the victims, the perpetrators, etc. Some experts opine that in war, "the control of communications outweighs the control of the geographical territory," such that what and where people get information about the war is crucial (Cherkaoui, 2022).

the top-down perception, to process sensory stimulus to organize and form cognitive contents, one needs to have a prior experience or knowledge or other helpful similar influences (Démuth, 2013). Some scholars (Brown, 2008; Sollberger, 2015; Zigman, 2018) argue that perception is mind-dependent whether the objects of perception arise from colours, shapes and sounds. Such mind-dependent perception can be largely subjective which enables the individuals to have a representation of that which is perceived (Brown, 2008; Sollberger, 2015). That representation, thus, helps the subjects of the perception to understand and event to some extent explain the external material world. Some authors call this kind of perception “representative realism” (Zigman, 2018).

Perceptual experience involves two components: The sensory and the conceptual. The sensory component is a conscious internal state that possesses phenomenal qualities which are known through the human senses of touch, sight, smell, hearing, and taste. The conceptual component involves the classification of concepts. Here, one can be to separate apples from oranges because of the qualities experienced at the sensory level. This enables one to put things in their proper perspective and place them in their proposer contexts (Zigman, 2018).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The descriptive survey design was used in the study with the tool of the questionnaire with structured questions sent via Google Form to students of Edo State University Uzairue Nigeria between 1<sup>st</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> April 2022. The questionnaire was distributed to 200 students with only 120 returned for analysis.

**DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

**Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	30	25
Female	90	75
Total	120	100

**Table 1:** Respondents' gender

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
17-29	39	32.5
21-25	78	65
25-30	3	2.5
Total	120	100

**Table 2:** Respondents' age

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
100	16	13.4
200	17	14.3
300	21	17.6
400	61	50.4
500	5	4.2
Total	120	100

**Table 3:** Respondents' educational status

RQ1: To what extent did you follow the Russian-Ukraine war?

Time	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	14	11.6
Weekly	27	22.3
Sometimes	73	60.3
Never	6	5.8
Total	120	100

Data from Table 4 above show that Nigerians did not follow the Russian-Ukraine war as 66.1% of the respondents paid little or no attention to the war while 33.99% of Nigerians followed the war. In other words, 2 out of every 3 Nigerians were not interested in the

Russian-Ukraine war while only 1 out of 3 Nigerians paid any serious attention to the war.

RQ2: Through what media platforms do the students follow the Russian-Ukraine war?

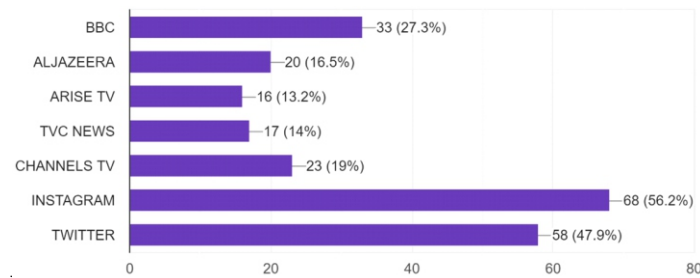


Figure 2. Media platforms through which respondents followed the Russian-Ukraine.

From Figure 2, data show that a significant percentage (54%/n=126) of Nigerians who followed and monitored the Russian-Ukraine war got their information majorly from online sources, particularly Instagram and Twitter. A quarter of respondents (24%/n=56) for their news on the war from local TV news channels such as Arise, Channelstv and TVC. The least source of information on the war came from the International TV sources such as BBC and Aljazeera (22%/n=50). This implies that Nigerians are increasingly trusting online sources and particularly social media (Instagram and Twitter) for important international news. In other words, 2 out of every 4 Nigerian rely on social media for information on the Russian-Ukraine war.

RQ3: To what extent do you trust the information on the platforms that you used?

Depth	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Large Extent	24	20.7
Large Extent	80	66.1
Low Extent	15	12.4
Very Low Extent	1	0.8
Total	120	100

Table 5: Extent to which respondents trust the information received on the Russian-Ukraine war.

While Figure 2 indicates that Nigerians rely on social media for their news on the Russian-Ukraine war, data from Table 5 above show that most Nigerians trust social media sources for information on the war. In fact, an overwhelming 86.8% (n=104) trust social media sources. In other words, approximately, 9 out of 10 Nigerians who got their information on the war from

Instagram and Twitter trust those sources for credible information on the war.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Findings show that, in general, Nigerian undergraduates were not interested and did not follow the war as only one in three Nigerian undergraduates followed the war. This is maybe connected with the finding of Adeoye (2022) that Africans in general saw the Russian-Ukraine war as a proxy war between Russia and the West and did not want to get involved in the fight of the titans. Findings also reveal that most Nigerian undergraduates get their information on the war from social media, particularly Instagram and Twitter. This aligns with the findings by Cherkaoui (2022) and Flanagan (2022) who found that social media especially social media, was the major source of information for Ukrainians. Similarly, the use of the social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which the most used by the Ukrainians to get information on the war. This finding negates studies by Egielewa (2021a) and Egielewa et al (2021c) that established that Whatsapp was the most consumed by Nigerian undergraduates.

This shows that increasingly Nigerian undergraduates are increasingly relying on social media for vital and critical information in times of crisis. This was revealed by findings that an overwhelming 9 and of 10 Nigerians trust information from social media despite the possibility and inherent dangers that fake news can be easily disseminated on social media.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings above it can be concluded that Nigerian undergraduates are not following the Russian-Ukraine war because they believe it is a proxy war between Russia and the West and has nothing to do with them and that they needed not to get entangled in it. It can also be concluded that Nigerian undergraduates who followed the war do so mainly via social media platforms particularly, Instagram and Twitter and Nigerian undergraduates use social media to get information on the war because they trust information from social media sources.

Thus, the study recommended as follows:

1. Nigerian undergraduates should follow the war as the crisis has wider implications for Nigerians and the global community.
2. Nigerian undergraduates should learn to use

social media with caution as the possibility of fake news being disseminated is higher with social media than with mainstream media.

3. There should be further research on the perception of the Russian-Ukraine war by the generality of Nigerians.

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