



Social Media Influencing, Blurring Defamatory Boundaries and the Burden of Legal Accountability in Nigeria's Digital Space

Idemudia Edetalehn Oaihimire^{a*}, Wilfred Oritsesan Olley^b

^aFaculty of Law, Edo State University, Iyamho, Edo State, Nigeria

^bDepartment of Mass Communication, Edo State University, Iyamho, Edo State, Nigeria

ORCID iDs:

^a <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1507-2815>

^b <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5405-765X>

Corresponding email: oaihimire.edetalehn@edouniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

Social media has changed how reputation is built and destroyed in Nigeria, and the law has struggled to keep pace. This article asks whether Nigerian law holds online speakers, particularly social media influencers, accountable for reputational harm without unduly restricting freedom of expression. Combining doctrinal legal analysis with a qualitative study of five reported Nigerian disputes, it examines the law of defamation, section 24 of the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 as amended in 2024, the constitutional guarantee of free expression, advertising regulation and media ethics. Five findings emerge. First, reputation remains a legitimate interest that deserves firm protection, especially against targeted and repeated falsehoods. Second, criminal process has too often been deployed in disputes that are, in substance, civil, so that arrest and remand punish speakers before any finding of fault. Third, influencers exercise journalistic and commercial power without corresponding ethical duties. Fourth, Nigerian law offers no clear public interest defence for online speech. Fifth, the responsibility of platforms for content they monetise is only beginning to be defined by the courts. The article contends that the 2024 amendment, though a real improvement, does not by itself resolve these problems. It proposes a coherent framework in which civil remedies are primary, criminal sanctions are confined to clearly defined serious harms, influencer ethics are formalised in a code of practice, platform duties are defined through notice and takedown rules, and public interest speech is expressly protected.

Keywords: defamation, social media influencers, Cybercrimes Act, freedom of expression, platform liability

Introduction

Reputation has always carried legal, social and commercial value. Social media, however, has changed the way reputation is created, protected and damaged, because a single post can now reach a vast audience before anyone tests its accuracy (Aula, 2010; Mangan, 2015). A post on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X or YouTube is no longer a merely personal expression. Through algorithmic amplification, instant sharing and monetised visibility, online content can shape public opinion, prompt petitions to the police and inflict serious reputational harm long before a court has the opportunity to examine it. In Nigeria, these developments have been driven by the rise of social media influencing, where personal branding, celebrity culture, political engagement, consumer advocacy and digital advertising meet (Olley and Arikebi, 2022). Influencers now perform functions once reserved for journalists, advertisers and consumer advocates: they break news, review products and services, comment on public affairs and shape public perception.



Digital communication has also transformed the legal concept of publication. At common law, a statement is published when it is communicated to at least one person other than the claimant, and each communication is a separate publication (*Loutchansky v Times Newspapers Ltd*). Online, publication becomes continuous, searchable, reproducible and capable of crossing borders instantly, so that material may be treated as published wherever it is downloaded (*Dow Jones & Co Inc v Gutnick*; Mills, 2015; Sakolciová, 2021). A post, repost, screenshot or livestream can be replicated within minutes, and copies may continue to circulate long after the original is removed (Popović, 2021). The capacity for harm has grown accordingly, while effective remedies have become harder to obtain.

In Nigeria, these disputes now reach well beyond civil defamation into police investigations, cybercrime prosecutions and demands for the removal of content. Consumer reviews, celebrity reporting, political commentary and criticism of public officials and corporations have made social media a principal arena of reputational conflict (Adibe, Ike and Udeogu, 2017; Nwafor, 2024; Addeh and Konan, 2025). Two legitimate interests therefore collide. Individuals and organisations are entitled to protection against false and malicious publications; journalists, consumers, civil society and ordinary citizens must remain free to criticise, investigate, review and comment on matters of public interest. The real question in Nigeria is not whether online speakers should be accountable, but how that accountability should be structured, who should enforce it, and what safeguards should protect legitimate expression.

Statement of the Problem

In principle, Nigerian law should protect reputation through proportionate and predictable means. Section 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) guarantees freedom of expression, and section 45 permits only such restrictions as are reasonably justifiable in a democratic society. On that model, false and damaging statements are remedied primarily through civil action, correction and reply, while the criminal law is reserved for clearly defined and serious harms.

Practice has departed from that model. Section 24 of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 originally criminalised messages sent to cause “*annoyance*”, “*inconvenience*”, “*insult*” or “*needless anxiety*”, terms that gave the police wide discretion and allowed ordinary criticism to be treated as a crime (Adibe, Ike and Udeogu, 2017; Nwafor, 2024). Reputational complaints have repeatedly been converted into arrests and prosecutions, in some instances against consumers who did no more than review a product. At the same time, influencers who command large audiences, and who profit from their followers’ trust, frequently publish serious allegations without the verification, editorial control or correction that bind professional journalists.

The consequences are serious. Criminal process chills legitimate speech, and for those who cannot afford prolonged litigation, the process itself becomes the punishment. Conversely, persons who suffer genuine online abuse may be left without effective protection. Some progress has been made. The Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS Court) has twice held section 24 incompatible with regional and international human rights standards; the National Assembly amended the provision in 2024; and the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act 2022 now extends to digital promotions. What is still missing is an integrated framework. The amended law contains no express public interest defence, influencer ethics remain undefined, and the respective roles of civil, criminal, regulatory and platform mechanisms remain unclear. This article addresses that gap by analysing how these



mechanisms have operated in reported Nigerian disputes and by proposing a coherent framework of accountability.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to: (i) evaluate the adequacy of the law of defamation, and of section 24 of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as amended in 2024, in addressing online reputational harm; (ii) examine the legal and ethical responsibilities of social media influencers, digital platforms and law enforcement agencies; and (iii) propose a coherent framework that protects reputation while safeguarding public interest speech.

Literature Review

The relevant literature falls into four themes: the law of reputation in the digital age, the accountability of influencers, the regulation of online speech through cybercrime law, and the regulation of digital advertising and platforms.

Reputation and the law of defamation online

A defamatory statement tends to lower a person in the estimation of right-thinking members of society generally (*Sim v Stretch*), and Nigerian courts require the claimant to prove publication, identification and defamatory meaning (*Sketch Publishing Co Ltd v Ajagbemokeferi*). Communication scholars agree that reputation is now formed continuously within digital networks. Coombs (2007) treats reputation as an organisational asset requiring active crisis management, while Aula (2010) argues that social media creates an environment of ambient publicity in which reputation is shaped by constant interaction rather than by isolated publications. Legal scholars have traced the consequences for defamation law, particularly for cross-border jurisdiction (Mills, 2015; Sakolciová, 2021) and liability for user comments (Popović, 2021), and Mangan (2015) shows that the law increasingly treats responsibility for reputation as shared among speakers, employers and platforms. This scholarship, however, is located largely in European or corporate settings and says little about how defamation interacts with criminal enforcement in a jurisdiction such as Nigeria.

Influencers, credibility and accountability

Marketing research consistently finds that an influencer's credibility, authenticity and relationship with followers drive audience trust and consumer behaviour (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard (2020) show that commercial pressures can erode that authenticity, and Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa (2017) find that disclosure of sponsorship changes how audiences read content. On media ethics, Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) treat accountability as a feature of democratic communication rather than merely of professional discipline, and Oso (2024) shows that journalistic ethics in Nigeria are shaped by their social and political context. This work explains why influencers persuade and why ethics matter, but it treats influencers chiefly as marketers. It leaves open whether, and how far, the journalistic duties of verification, fairness, correction and reply should bind influencers who report and comment on public affairs.

Cybercrime law and freedom of expression

Nigerian scholarship on section 24 is broadly critical. Adibe, Ike and Udeogu (2017) argue that the original provision threatened online press freedom because it was invoked against critical journalism, while Nwafor (2024) accepts the need to regulate cyberstalking but finds that the framework fails to protect digital rights. The courts have divided along similar lines. The Court of Appeal upheld the provision as a permissible restriction under section 45 of the Constitution



(*Okedara v Attorney-General of the Federation*), whereas the ECOWAS Court held it incompatible with Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and ordered its amendment (*Incorporated Trustees of Laws and Rights Awareness Initiatives v Federal Republic of Nigeria; Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project v Federal Republic of Nigeria*). The 2024 amendment has yet to attract sustained scholarly evaluation.

Advertising and platform regulation

The Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act 2022 brings promotional content on digital platforms within regulatory oversight, so that influencers who promote products may be treated as advertisers. The literature supports disclosure of paid content as a consumer protection measure (Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa, 2017). Platform responsibility for user content, by contrast, remains contested: excessive liability encourages over-removal, while insufficient liability leaves harm unchecked (Mangan, 2015; Popović, 2021).

Each of the themes above has largely been studied in isolation, yet a single Nigerian post may engage defamation, constitutional rights, cybercrime enforcement, influencer ethics, advertising law and platform responsibility at once. To the authors' knowledge, no study has examined how these regimes interact in reported Nigerian disputes, or proposed a framework that allocates accountability among them. That is the contribution this article seeks to make.

Methodology

The study adopts a doctrinal legal research method, complemented by qualitative case analysis. The doctrinal analysis examines the Constitution, the law of defamation, the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as amended, the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act 2022 and the relevant regional judgments. The case analysis examines five reported Nigerian disputes. Each was selected because it involved actual proceedings on the public record and raised a direct issue of online reputation or social media accountability. Taken together, the five cover different actors (a consumer, an ordinary user, influencers, a senior lawyer and a global platform) and different legal responses (prosecution, conviction, civil injunction, and constitutional and data protection litigation). The study is confined to Nigerian law and the regional human rights system that binds Nigeria; English and Australian authorities are drawn upon only for their persuasive value.

In doctrinal research, statutes, constitutional provisions and judicial decisions are primary sources in the sense that they are the law itself. They are not primary data in the empirical sense, since the study generates no data through surveys, interviews or experiments. Secondary sources comprise scholarly literature and reputable media reports, the latter used to establish the facts of proceedings that have not yet been formally reported. Pending matters are treated strictly as allegations. No inference of guilt is drawn against any person whose case remains undecided, and such matters are used only to identify patterns in the regulation of online speech.

Analysis

Section 24 of the Cybercrimes Act and the Constitutional Problem

Criminal laws that restrict expression must be clear enough for citizens to know what conduct is prohibited, and must target serious and demonstrable harm rather than offence or criticism. The original section 24 failed both tests. Terms such as “*annoyance*”, “*insult*” and “*needless anxiety*” depend on the subjective reaction of the complainant. A politician may find legitimate criticism insulting, a company may find a consumer complaint offensive, and an official



may be made anxious by investigative reporting. Where liability turns on such reactions, freedom of expression becomes uncertain and vulnerable to arbitrary enforcement.

In *Okedara*, the Court of Appeal deferred to the legislature, holding that the provision was explicit and fell within the restrictions permitted by section 45 of the Constitution. The ECOWAS Court took a rights-based approach, holding that the provision was neither necessary in a democratic society nor proportionate. The reasoning of the ECOWAS Court is more persuasive because it applies the principles of legality and proportionality that every criminal restriction on speech must satisfy. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) (Amendment) Act 2024, signed on 28 February 2024, responded by confining the offence in section 24(1) to messages that are pornographic, or that the sender knows to be false and sends for the purpose of causing a breakdown of law and order or posing a threat to life. This is a significant improvement. The amendment does not, however, provide an express defence for journalism, consumer review or other good faith public interest speech, nor does it check the practice of using police petitions to pursue what are, in substance, private reputational grievances.

Chioma Okoli, Erisco Foods and the Consumer Review

On 17 September 2023, Chioma Okoli posted on Facebook that Erisco Foods' Nagiko tomato mix tasted too sugary. Following a petition by the company, a Chief Magistrate in Masaka, Nasarawa State, ordered her remand in September 2023. The Nasarawa State Judicial Service Commission later found that the magistrate lacked territorial jurisdiction and demoted him with effect from 6 January 2025. On 28 May 2024, she was arraigned before the Federal High Court, Abuja, on two counts under sections 27(1)(b) and 24(1)(b) of the Cybercrimes Act, alleging that she had sent false messages to cause annoyance and inconvenience to the company. She was granted bail.

Consumer reviews are a form of market speech. They allow citizens to share their experience of goods and services and to hold producers to account. A company has a legitimate interest in correcting false statements about its products, and civil damages or a correction may be appropriate where a statement is false and injurious. Where, however, a post records personal experience or opinion, criminal prosecution is difficult to justify, and the remand, travel and expense involved operate as a penalty before any finding of fault (Addeh and Konan, 2025). The charge, it should be noted, was framed on the vague 2015 wording, which governed the conduct alleged. The case thus illustrates the absence in Nigerian law of a clear public interest or consumer review defence in digital speech disputes.

Eniola Badmus, Okoye Blessing Nwakaego and Cyberstalking

Between December 2022 and July 2023, Okoye Blessing Nwakaego posted false, defamatory and threatening material about the actress Eniola Badmus on TikTok and other platforms. On 2 August 2023, she pleaded guilty before the Federal High Court, Lagos, to conspiracy and cyberstalking under sections 27 and 24 of the Cybercrimes Act, and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment with an option of a fine.

The case shows that online conduct can pass beyond criticism into sustained, targeted abuse that causes real harm to safety and reputation, and that the criminal law has a legitimate role in such cases. Its distinguishing features were repetition, falsity and threats, all admitted on a plea of guilty. Those features mark the principled line that charging decisions should follow: criminal process for persistent harassment, threats and deliberate falsehood; civil process first for a single criticism, review or public interest allegation.



Blessing CEO and the Limits of Influencer Commentary

In April 2023, Blessing Okoro, a relationship influencer known as Blessing CEO, pleaded not guilty before the Federal High Court, Lagos, to charges that included cyberbullying under section 24 of the Cybercrimes Act and criminal libel under section 375 of the Criminal Code, arising from Instagram posts about a named complainant. She was admitted to bail. The charges remain allegations, and the burden of proof rests squarely on the prosecution.

The case matters because influencers do not speak in a neutral environment. Followers often assume that an influencer has inside knowledge, so allegations spread quickly and are readily believed. Online content also blurs the line between fact and opinion. A creator may present an allegation as “what people are saying”, or rely on questions, innuendo and dramatic narration to imply what is never stated outright. Such techniques can injure reputation while evading evidential responsibility. Being an influencer does not forfeit constitutional protection, and democracy benefits from influential voices that expose abuse. The legal question, however, should not be whether a statement was embarrassing or provocative, but whether it was false, defamatory, unprivileged and malicious, and whether the resulting harm was serious enough to justify criminal rather than civil process.

VeryDarkMan, the Falanas and Public Interest Commentary

Martins Vincent Otse, known as VeryDarkMan, is a social commentator with a large online following and a vocal critic of public figures. On 24 September 2024, he published a recording alleging that Femi Falana, SAN, had demanded money to arrange a presidential pardon for a detained celebrity. Mr Falana and his son, Folarin Falana, sued him in the Lagos State High Court, claiming N1 billion in damages for defamation. On 15 October 2024, the court granted an interim order restraining further publication and directing removal of the video, and in May 2025 it dismissed his preliminary objection. The suit remains pending.

The dispute exposes the tension between the logic of online activism, which rewards speed, outrage and public pressure, and the logic of defamation law, which demands proof. A creator’s belief that he is exposing misconduct does not justify publishing a serious allegation without evidence; the graver the allegation, the heavier the duty to verify. Yet public interest commentary deserves protection in a country where secrecy and weak institutional accountability are persistent problems. The proper balance lies in the defences of justification, fair comment, privilege and public interest, supported by prompt correction and a right of reply. Courts should also distinguish criticism of conduct from attacks on character: falsely asserting a crime as fact is not the same as calling for an investigation.

Falana v Meta and Platform Responsibility

In 2025, Mr Falana sued Meta Platforms Inc. over a video on a Facebook page called “AfriCare Health Centre”, which falsely portrayed him as having suffered from prostatitis for sixteen years. The claim was brought for breach of privacy under section 37 of the Constitution and section 24 of the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023. In January 2026, the Lagos State High Court rejected Meta’s argument that it was a mere host. It held that, because Meta monetises and algorithmically manages content, it acted as a joint data controller and bore responsibility for the false content, and it awarded US\$25,000 in damages. Meta has appealed, contesting jurisdiction, the evidence linking it to the video, and the award of damages. Although the claim was framed in privacy and data protection rather than defamation, the decision is significant for accountability. It treats a platform that profits from content as more than a passive conduit, and so opens a route



to redress where the original poster is anonymous or abroad. It also raises the concern identified in the literature: if liability is drawn too broadly, platforms may remove lawful speech simply to avoid risk. The outcome of the appeal will therefore be important in defining the limits of platform responsibility in Nigeria.

Discussion

This study set out to determine whether Nigerian law holds online speakers accountable for reputational harm without unduly restricting freedom of expression. Five findings emerge. First, reputation remains a legitimate interest that the law must protect. The *Badmus* conviction shows that targeted, repeated and threatening falsehoods cause real harm and warrant a firm response. This confirms the view in the literature that the speed and permanence of digital publication magnify reputational injury (Aula, 2010; Mills, 2015).

Second, criminal process has been invoked too readily. The *Okoli* case shows a consumer remanded and prosecuted over a product review, and the disciplinary action taken against the magistrate confirms that the process itself miscarried. This supports the critiques of Adibe, Ike and Udeogu (2017) and Nwafor (2024), as well as the ECOWAS judgments. The 2024 amendment narrows the text, but the problem is also institutional: the readiness of the police and prosecutors to treat private reputational grievances as cybercrime is a matter of practice that no textual amendment can cure on its own.

Third, influencers occupy an accountability gap. The *Blessing CEO* and *VeryDarkMan* disputes illustrate the risks that arise when influencers exercise journalistic power without journalistic discipline. The marketing literature explains their persuasive power (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019) but not their duties. Viewed through social responsibility theory, which holds that freedom of communication carries a corresponding obligation to the public (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956), and through Bardoel and d'Haenens' (2004) account of accountability as part of democratic communication, influencers who trade on public trust should accept duties of verification, separation of fact from opinion, disclosure of paid content, correction and reply.

Fourth, Nigerian law lacks a clear public interest defence for online speech. Some of the most valuable online speech consists of allegations against powerful persons and institutions. Without a defence of the kind recognised in *Reynolds v Times Newspapers Ltd*, the law risks becoming a shield against accountability. Fifth, platform responsibility is emerging but unsettled. *Falana v Meta* signals that Nigerian courts will look beyond the speaker to the platform that profits from content, consistent with Mangan's (2015) account of shared responsibility, but the limits of that responsibility await the decision of the appellate court.

These findings show that reform must be institutional as well as legal, and that clear ethical standards for influencers would reduce reliance on the criminal law. Where ethics fail, the pattern is familiar: an unverified allegation is amplified by followers, the target petitions the police, and the courts are asked to resolve a controversy already distorted online (Oso, 2024).

Conclusion

Social media has reshaped the relationship between reputation, free expression and accountability in Nigeria. This study has shown that reputation deserves effective protection, but that the use of criminal process in civil disputes, the absence of a public interest defence, the ethical



gap in influencer communication and the unsettled position of platforms together prevent the law from striking a proper balance. The 2024 amendment to section 24 is a real improvement, but it cannot resolve these problems on its own. Nigeria needs neither an unregulated digital space nor a punitive one. It needs a coherent framework in which civil remedies are primary, criminal sanctions are narrow, influencers are bound by clear ethical duties, platforms carry defined responsibilities, and public interest speech is expressly protected.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, the study recommends as follows. First, civil remedies, including correction, reply, injunction and damages, should be the primary response to online reputational disputes, with criminal sanctions reserved for clearly defined serious harms such as threats, persistent harassment and deliberate falsehoods that endanger public order or life. Second, the Attorney-General of the Federation and the Inspector-General of Police should issue charging and investigation guidelines under the Cybercrimes Act that distinguish genuine cybercrime from private reputational grievances and require prosecutorial review before any arrest for online speech. Third, the National Assembly should insert an express public interest defence into the Cybercrimes Act, and the courts should develop a corresponding defence in civil defamation, having regard to the seriousness of the allegation, the steps taken to verify it, the urgency of publication, the status of the claimant, the opportunity given to respond and the contribution to public debate. Fourth, the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria, working with professional and creator associations, should adopt a code of ethics for influencers requiring verification, separation of fact from opinion, disclosure of paid content, prompt correction and respect for the right of reply. Fifth, the responsibilities of platforms should be defined by legislation or regulation, through clear notice and takedown procedures with safeguards against the removal of lawful speech, and supported by public digital literacy programmes.

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AI Use Disclosure: The authors used Claude, an artificial intelligence (AI) assistant developed by Anthropic, and Grammarly for language editing only. All arguments, analysis and conclusions are the authors' own, and the authors take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.
