



SOCIAL MEDIA PRANK: A DANGEROUS PHENOMENON MILITATING AGAINST MEDIA CREDIBILITY

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this research letter is to bring attention to a trend of harmful social media contents disguised as pranks. It is intended to inform and engage stakeholders from multiple sectors, including social media, content producers, academia, human rights, and related fields. It emphasises the necessity of establishing standards to regulate this practise. The prevalence of distressing complaints on the presence of various forms of unsettling content on social media platforms, and the subsequent detrimental effects it has on individuals' emotional well-being, physiological health, national and personal security, is a matter of great concern. This paper urges the diverse range of stakeholders and participants, including content creators, security personnel, social media platforms, regulators, academics, and government entities, to fulfil their respective and shared obligations as experts, professionals, and members of society. The central objective of the article is to ensure effective oversight in the production and consumption of social media pranks. Furthermore, it necessitates engaging in scholarly discourse and doing thorough investigation in order to comprehend the issue at hand and provide potential solutions.

Keywords: Pranks, social media, content creation, prank and skit.

Introduction

The prevalence of social media pranks has witnessed a notable surge in recent years, affording individuals a medium through which they can exhibit their ingenuity and wit. Although seemingly innocuous and characterised by a playful nature, it is imperative to recognise the inherent risks linked with the occurrence of such prank (Ayodele, 2022). Jarrar et al. (2020) observed that social media pranks now affect a nexus of issues which include; the emotional and psychological health of people, spread of misinformation, cyber bullying and harassment among other dangers it poses.

Reports of dangerous pranks have filtered the news media. In June of 2023 the Oyo state police invited, detained and charged a social media content creator Abdullahi Maruf Adisa also known as Trinity for a prank that involved a minor. Earlier he had caught the attention of the police for a prank posted on social media where he scared passers-by with gunshots sounds (Apanpa, 2023; Olonilua, 2023).

Instances have been seen in which the individual engaging in prank activities assumes the role of the victim of those pranks. In the state of Virginia, located in the United States of America, an individual who operates a YouTube channel with the intention of engaging in prank activities within a shopping complex ultimately had an unfortunate incident when they were subjected to gunfire by an individual who was the target of those pranks and did not get amusement from them. Tanner Cook was engaged in the process of recording content for his YouTube channel in a customary manner within the premises of a shopping mall, when his performance of various stunts resulted in his admission to the intensive care unit (Jakhwal, 2023). In 2021, a Nigerian social media prankster spent one year nine months in police custody after almost being lynched by a mob while shooting a one man stunt robbery prank Video in Epe area in Lagos state (Ikeji, 2023).

Victor Osuagwu, a renowned Nigerian actor, advocated for the regulation of social media pranksting. The primary concern he raised was the lack of regulations, resulting in persons engaging in inappropriate behaviour. Skit-makers have been known to occasionally induce heart attacks through pranks targeting elderly individuals (Akpobome, 2023). Although Mark & Anyanwu (2023), noted that Prank videos have become the new-normal on social media. Due to the potential for rapid recognition, celebrity status, and financial gain, content creators are willing to engage in extreme behaviours, even at the expense of their personal safety, in order to garner

views, likes, shares, and the associated rewards of wealth, fame, and notoriety that accompany the creation of material on social media platforms.

Dangerous instances like smashing a stranger's phone, eating cow dung, and eating poisonous insects, have gone viral on social media sites like Facebook and Tiktok. While many have raised concerns over viral prank videos that are anti-social on social media, their comments on such pranks indicated they liked both pranks and identified with the situations they portrayed even though dangerous (Asabor, 2023).

Social media pranks engage in acts of provocation and employ various props that have the potential to elicit feelings of terror. According to a report published in June 2023, the Nigerian police have stated that those engaging in social media pranks involving the use of either fake or real firearms are at risk of being fatally shot. This observation highlights the gravity of pranks and their potential to involve criminal behaviour or compromise security if precautions are not exercised. Furthermore, it has been argued that the utilisation of disguises might also be employed by those involved in malevolent activities (Sahara, 2023).

According to Section 24 of the Criminal Code of Nigeria, engaging in a prank does not qualify as an exculpatory act. The sole legal defence that may be invoked by the one engaging in pranks is when the target of the prank has provided explicit authorization to participate and the prank itself is performed with the intention of entertaining the observing audience. An act of assault remains classified as such, unless the victim explicitly waives their right to pursue legal action (Okezie-Okeh, 2022).

While pranks should be fun and entertaining, it's important to consider the feelings and comfort of the participants. It is recommended skitmakers should opt for pranks that do not cause distress or discomfort to anyone involved. But majorly to stop the tide of vicious pranks, deliberate laws must be made to address specifically the trend of harmful pranks for their health, emotional and even security disadvantage (Asabor, 2023).

Recent prankstings, such as the ones carried out by individuals or groups pretending to be journalists or experts in order to deceive the media, have had a detrimental effect on media credibility. These prankstings often involve spreading false information or manipulating news stories in a way that undermines the trustworthiness of the media. For example, in the case of the

"Plandemic" video that went viral in 2020, a discredited scientist made false claims about the COVID-19 pandemic, which were then shared widely on social media and picked up by some news outlets (Zadrozny & Collins, 2020). This led to confusion and misinformation among the public, as well as damage to the credibility of those media outlets that reported on the video without verifying its accuracy. Similarly, prankstings such as fake interviews or fabricated news stories can erode trust in the media by casting doubt on the reliability and integrity of journalists and news organizations. When the public is exposed to these deceptive practices, it can lead to skepticism and cynicism about the information presented in the media, making it more difficult for legitimate news sources to be taken seriously. Overall, recent prankstings have highlighted the importance of fact-checking and verifying information before reporting it, as well as the need for media consumers to critically evaluate the sources and credibility of the news they consume. By being vigilant and discerning, both journalists and audiences can help combat the spread of misinformation and preserve the credibility of the media.

Call to Action: It is imperative to engage in sensitization, scholarly discourse, and extensive study into the regulation and potential solutions to address the adverse consequences arising from excessively extreme pranks. Especially in Nigeria, where the proliferation is currently at its highest level. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the discourse can adopt an international perspective, considering that pranks initially emerged as an imported phenomenon. However, it is important to acknowledge that cultural idiosyncrasies have a significant role in shaping the nature of these pranks. There is a need to organise town hall meetings, conferences, seminars, and other similar events to facilitate discussions on various subjects. These topics may include the intersection of pranks and the law, the sexualisation of minors in media content, the role of social media platforms in regulating content and pranks, and the unique aspects of Nigerian society (as well as other regions in Africa and the Global South) in relation to content creation and pranks, in comparison to other regions around the world.

In conclusion, the entertainment value and personal enjoyment derived from social media pranks should not overshadow the need to acknowledge the inherent risks they present. Social media pranks have the potential to inflict several negative consequences, such as emotional pain, the dissemination of disinformation, cyber bullying, legal ramifications, and strained interpersonal relationships. The practise of demonstrating empathy, respect, and concern towards others is of

utmost importance when participating in pranks on social media platforms. In the final analysis, it is incumbent upon each individual to assume the duty of ensuring that their activities do not engender anguish or inflict harm upon others.

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