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**SOCIAL MEDIA AND U.S. VISA
APPLICATIONS: IMPACT ON NIGERIANS
AND THE QUESTION OF RECIPROCITY**



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The U.S. Department of State, under the Trump administration, introduced a new requirement for all immigrant and non-immigrant visa applicants. Applicants must now disclose all social media usernames and handles used within the last five years when completing DS-160 (non-immigrant) or DS-260 (immigrant) visa forms. The U.S. Mission in Nigeria has reiterated that this rule applies to Nigerian applicants, with noncompliance potentially resulting in visa denial or future ineligibility. According to the U.S. government, this measure is intended to strengthen national security. It allows authorities to review applicants' digital footprints as part of background checks and provides an additional method of verifying identity. While framed as a protective measure, the requirement not only raises serious privacy concerns when viewed under Nigeria's legal framework, but also in the broader context of international relations.

The primary justification for this requirement is national security. By reviewing applicants' online activity, U.S. authorities aim to identify potential risks and ensure that entrants to the country do not pose threats. However, this approach raises several challenges. Social media can be easily misinterpreted, and context often gets lost in digital communication. A casual remark, a reposted joke, or even an association with certain groups can be misconstrued, leading to unfair visa denials. For Nigerians, whose use of social media is vibrant and culturally expressive, the risk of misinterpretation is even higher. On the other hand, Section 37 of the Nigerian Constitution protects privacy rights, while the Nigerian Data Protection Act (NDPA) 2023 classifies social media posts as personal data. These laws mandate that processing or disclosure of personal data must be lawful, transparent, and consent-based. Compulsory disclosure of such information to foreign governments could therefore undermine Nigeria's data protection principles.

This development also raises the question of whether Nigeria could adopt a reciprocal law requiring foreign applicants to disclose their social media history as part of visa and entry processes. The U.S. enjoys significant travel and investment access to Nigeria without being subjected to similar disclosure requirements. Reciprocity in immigration policy is not merely a retaliatory step but a principle of sovereign equality, ensuring that citizens of one nation are not subjected to harsher scrutiny than those of another.

The impact of this rule also extends to broader policy considerations. Nigerians applying for visas must now exercise heightened caution in their digital expression, mindful that online posts may influence consular decisions. This creates an uneasy balance between freedom of expression and the desire for mobility. At the same time, Nigerian policymakers are faced with the task of determining whether to accept this asymmetry or introduce policies that assert Nigeria's sovereign standing in international engagements.

Ultimately, while the U.S. Immigration social media disclosure policy is framed as a security tool, its practical and diplomatic consequences are profound. For Nigerians, it is both a privacy issue and a national question: how should Nigeria respond in order to protect the dignity and rights of its citizens while maintaining productive diplomatic relations?
