Edmund S. Sosu, Gideon Boadu*, Emmanuel B. Boateng and Christopher Appiah-Thompson

Public History in Digital Spaces: Public Interpretations of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Its Implications for History Teaching

Abstract: The Transatlantic Slave Trade was one of the cruelest events in human history, with its effects spanning several centuries. Slave monuments are visible representations of the memory of the slave trade and avenues for public discourse about the event and its impacts. This study draws on YouTube videos commemorating the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Ghana, examining not only the content of the videos but also the comments that YouTube users made on the videos. Based on the videos and comments, we analyze public sentiments, interpretations, and reconstruction of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This study finds that social media presents opportunities to intensify public discourses about the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Public interpretations of the event convey a sense of optimism, forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope for a better and fairer world. Implications for the teaching of difficult histories in schools are discussed.

Keywords: public history; public memory; slave trade; social media; Transatlantic Slave Trade; slave castles

1 Introduction

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was one of the darkest events in human history. The trans-generational impact of the event is widely felt, particularly among the descendants of the victims of the event. Ghana was one of the countries that had some of the busiest slave ports and therefore has a strong connection to the event. In Ghana, people recall the Transatlantic Slave Trade through commemorative celebrations often marked by visits to slave castles, which predominate much of the coastlines of historic towns and cities in Ghana. The slave castles serve as enduring public emblems of the dark event. Millions of tourists travel to Ghana to see these castles because they feel connected Transatlantic Slave Trade. The castles were built by European merchants who traded in Ghana, and they initially served as trading posts for gold and timber. These castles were later used as places for holding people who had been captured as slaves before they were forced through the *Door of No Return* and shipped and sold in the Americas and the Caribbean. There are three main slave castles in Ghana – Cape Coast, Elmina Castle, and Christiansborg Castle. When the slave trade was abolished, there were about 76 forts and castles of various sizes along the eastern and western coasts of Ghana, making Ghana one of the nations with the highest concentration of slave posts in the world. The Cape Coast Castle was the most important in the slave trade as it served as the headquarters of English traders, who were the busiest of the slave traders in Ghana.[1] Presently, the slave castles are a site of memory for Ghanaians and millions of tourists from different cultural backgrounds who feel connected to the slave trade event. They also serve as reminders of the need to reflect on this dark period of history and take measures to prevent its recurrence.[2] In this study, we examined social media (YouTube) videos on visits to the Cape Coast and Elmina castles during the Year of Return event in 2019 and YouTube users' re-enactment and interpretation of the slave trade based on the videos. We focus on how YouTube users recall, react to, and interpret the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The question we sought to answer was: how does social media influence and intensify public interpretation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade?

*Corresponding author: Gideon Boadu, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, E-mail: gideon.boadu@rmit.edu.au
Edmund S. Sosu, Excelsia College, Macquarie Park, Australia, E-mail: edmund.sosu@excelsia.edu.au
Emmanuel B. Boateng, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia, E-mail: emmanuel_boateng@uow.edu.au
Christopher Appiah-Thompson, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia, E-mail: chrsappiah@gmail.com

1 Kwadwo Opoku Agyemang, "Cape Coast Castle: The Edifice and the Metaphor," *Matau,* 2022, 23–28.
2 Coleman A. Jordan, "Rhizomorphics of Race and Space: Ghana's Slave Castles and the Roots of African Diaspora Identity," *Journal of Architectural Education* 60, no. 4 (2007): 48–59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40480850.

2 Public History and School History in Ghana

In Ghana, public history is somewhat diffused into academic history as there is no clear, separate focus on public history, and researchers devoted to studying public representations of the past in the present are difficult to find. Cultural-historical practices in Indigenous Ghanaian society and Western intellectual discourses on African historiography might help explain the current situation.

Like academic history, the factors that account for the lack of focus on public history can be linked to the lack of Western approaches to documenting the past in earlier times. Ways of conveying and preserving information about the past in traditional communities were limited to such means as oral accounts, drum music, paintings, and other visual representations.[3] It was common for children to gather around fires in the night to listen to their elders tell them about the past using folktales, songs, and folk music. Oral tradition, whereby accounts of the past were handed down from one generation to another, was therefore a major means of preserving the past.[4] In traditional Akan communities of modern-day Ghana, drum language and music, such as those of the atumpan drum and fontomfrom drum, and horn music remain highly cherished means of recounting the past and communicating royal and dynastic messages and migration histories. For example, ethnomusicological studies of songs related to the Kple cult of the Ga-Adangme reveal that the Guan lived in the Accra plains before the arrival of the Ga and Adangme.[5] Traditional festivals are also a means of preserving and passing on cherished memories and practices in local communities. Local festivals reflect past communities' traditional, technological, social, and political organization and present useful ways of understanding and explaining the past. Further, the lifestyle and culture of the local people were important means of preserving local histories. Archaeological evidence from several African nations reveals the existence of sophisticated levels of civilization. In Ghana, excavations in the town of Begho have provided insights into the existence of copper and trade factories, as well as trade.[6] Proverbs or wise sayings present another way of preserving the past. These are often short and dense philosophical statements that communicate traditional truths and wisdom on several topics. Proverbs have been passed on from the past and remain an essential aspect of traditional life in Ghana. These means of preserving the past meant that children who grew up in traditional communities possessed some basic knowledge about important developments in their nation's past. To date, portions of some traditional Ghanaian communities' histories remain unwritten and are still transmitted via oral traditions. However, attacks on the historicity of the African past, especially Georg Hegel's and Trevor-Roper's erroneous description of Africa as having no history and as being a dark continent affected Africans' psych and appreciation of their pasts.[7] This in turn affected public confidence in written history and the study of history generally.

Over the years, Ghanaian governments have demonstrated apathy toward history, and despite the introduction of history as a subject at the primary school level in 2019, there has been a further disorientation of public perceptions and reactions to the history of Ghana. From their clear attempts to elevate their relatives in Ghana's history to the unsupervised publication of books that distorted Ghana's history,[8] the government caused a further decline in public interest in the study of history. Ghanaian historians observe that public disregard for the study of history contributes to the ailing nature of school history.[9] Despite the limited recognition given to the academic study of history, the informed Ghanaian could, without political or ethnic bias, identify distortions and misrepresentations in their nation's history regardless of who authored them, as history is an everyday lived reality in traditional and modern societies in Ghana. Recent research shows that societal memory structures such as oral histories or traditional customs, public celebrations, and recent occurrences are essential means of preserving significant past events and making them

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[3] J. K. Fynn, R. Addo-Fenning, and J. Anquandah, *History for Secondary Schools* (Accra, Ghana: Ministry of Education, 1991).

[4] Ibid., 4.

[5] Ibid., 102.

[6] Ibid., 4–5.

[7] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 117; Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), 9–11. This statement was originally made during a series of lectures at the University of Sussex. The lecture series became a book – *The Rise of Christian Europe* – in 1965. Hugh Trevor-Roper made a similar reference to Africa in 1969, describing it as unhistoric in "The Past and Present: History and Sociology," *Past and Present* 42 (1969): 6.

[8] Laud Nartey, "Akufo-Addo Supervising over Distortion of Ghana's History – Edem Agbana," *3News*, March 16, 2021, https://3news.com/akufo-addo-supervising-over-distortion-of-ghanas-history-edem-agbana/.

[9] Dwarko, D. A. "History – Our Ailing Subject: The Need for Revival in the 21st Century," in *Challenges of Education in Ghana in the 21st Century*, ed. D. E. K. Amenumey (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2007), 167–78.

available for historical study.[10] Further, the general discontent with which some sections of the Ghanaian public approached misrepresentations of certain political and ethnic groups in some recently published history textbooks demonstrates the active state of awareness and interest of the public toward their own pasts.[11] History is therefore a core feature of Ghanaian public life despite being described as an unprofitable academic venture. Gideon Boadu's article in Public History Weekly appears to have brought this issue to attention and stimulated ongoing conversations about public history in Ghana.[12]

Arguably, one of Ghana's most visible representations of public history is the slave castles, which initially served as trading posts for European merchants but later transformed into dungeons for holding enslaved people for forced migration into the Americas and the Caribbean. The slave castles "have become enduring public emblems of the atrocious event of slavery, which often bruise old wounds of anger and resentment amongst Ghanaians."[13] In 2019, the government of Ghana launched the Year of Return celebrations to mark the 400th year since the first enslaved Africans arrived in America. The event brought thousands of people of African descent to Ghana to reconnect to their roots, history, and tradition. It provided opportunities for tourists to visit slave castles and dungeons where their ancestors were kept before they were shipped to the Americas. The cultural connection that the tourists felt as they listened to accounts of their enslaved African ancestors in slave dungeons at the Cape Coast and Elmina castles presented opportunities for reflection on and re-interpretation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.[14] The Year of Return re-ignited public conversations about difficult pasts among diasporans and highlighted the importance of tracing their roots back to Africa. Aside from diasporans, local Ghanaian people considered the touring of the slave castles as offering a healing remedy.[15] This study analyzes YouTube videos on visits to the slave castles in Ghana and people's comments on these videos. We focus on how the public recalls, reacts to, and interprets the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

3 Why Social Media?

The introduction and widespread use of social media and other online platforms has revolutionized the ways people engage with history. People need not be trained historians to engage with and interpret the past.[16] For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) invited people to share memories of living in post-Second World War Britain in association with its documentary televised series, the *History of Modern Britain*, hosted by Scottish journalist and broadcaster Andrew Marr. The study revealed that people shared information that was different from what was known in mainstream media.[17] Andrew Marr described the research as an alternative history platform, which allowed ordinary citizens to upload stories missing in the official history. A similar survey in China about the Great Famine also revealed that some Chinese used Weibo, a social media application, to disseminate information that undermines and contradicts the model of historical information documented on the Great Famine.[18] Both studies reveal that the public can engage with the past through social media platforms, but there is limited historiographic work analyzing how social media provides opportunities for citizens to engage with the past. Particularly, in Ghana, public history has not gained much attention, and the utility of social media for intensifying public history has not been explored.

While many social media platforms exist, this study focused on how the public interprets the Transatlantic Slave Trade through YouTube videos on visits to the slave castles and comments on the videos. Considering that the Transatlantic Slave Trade occurred several centuries ago, no one directly impacted is still alive today. For the general public, documentaries and footage of the slave castles can provide an opportunity to learn about the Slave Trade and have meaningful conversations about it. Presently, YouTube is the most popular video hosting website with over 2 billion monthly users.[19] It is also a global forum for both formal and

10 Gideon Boadu, "Historical Significance and the Challenges of African Historiography: Analysis of Teacher Perspectives," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* (2020): 639–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1843070.

11 Laud Nartey, "Akufo-Addo Supervising."

12 Gideon Boadu, "History and Public History in Ghana," *Public History Weekly* 9, no. 3 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1515/phw-2021-18122.

13 Ibid.

14 Aaryan Morrison, "The 'Year of Return' and the Unintended Consequences for Ghanaians," *Kennedy School Review*, January 29, 2020, https://hksspr.org/the-year-of-return-and-the-unintended-consequences-for-ghanaians/.

15 Gideon Boadu, "History and Public History in Ghana."

16 Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

17 Andrew Marr, "Your History of Britain - 1990s," *The Magazine*, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/decades/1990s/default.stm.

18 Hui Zhao and Jun Liu, "Social Media and Collective Remembrance: The Debate over China's Great Famine on *Weibo*," *China Perspectives*, no.1 (2015), 41–8. https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6649.

19 Janarthanan Balakrishnan and Mark D. Griffiths, "Social Media Addiction: What is the Role of Content in YouTube?" *Journal of Behavioural Addictions* 6, no. 3 (2017): 364–77. https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.6.2017.058.; Brian Dean, "How Many People use YouTube in 2022? [New Data]" *Backlinko*, March 27, 2023, https://backlinko.com/youtube-users.

informal education.[20] YouTube was selected for this research because it has the capacity to host full-length videos and allows users to respond to the videos through comments, replies, likes, dislikes, and shares.[21] These metrics provided insight into how actively the public has engaged with specific video posts about visits to the slave castles and the commemoration of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Methodologically, the YouTube platform allowed the export of comments without restrictions compared to other social media sites. We argue that unlike traditional media and academic publishing outlets, YouTube and other social media platforms have given voice to the public in the reconstruction of the past and have brought history to the doorsteps of larger, nonexpert audiences.

Although historians such as Terry Haydn argue that social media can result in the proliferation of 'bad history,'[22] some historical studies suggest that the paradigms for understanding and engaging with the past are changing.[23] In *Archiving Cultures*, Mike Featherstone argues that the internet has "offered the potential of a new inventive relationship to knowledge that overcame the hierarchical relationship found in the traditional archive."[24] The problem with this development is that social media users can create and share stories of the past with little or no censorship.[25] The shift in this era of democratization of information implies that historians and state authorities cannot control the entire spheres of history among the public.[26]

4 Public Memory and Social Media

Public, collective memory is a contested issue between states, the public, and academic institutions. Politicians often draw on collective memory as an active unifying force in their nation-state-building projects. At other times, they manipulate collective memory to legitimize their actions.[27] As new generations emerge, some of these memories are recomposed from the recollected fragments to steer a different discourse,[28] suggesting that memories evolve as people's past becomes a central part of their conscious choices and identities. Although "memory is not history … it is sometimes made from similar material,"[29] thereby social media users' engagement with the past may offer alternative interpretations of history which may provide valuable insight into the past. Collective trauma can be a key part of the collective memory of a group. It may include the recollection of a historical event and its effects on survivors and may reflect the ongoing reconstruction and sensemaking of the event by the broader society across generations.[30] In this study, the collective recollection of the memory of the Transatlantic Slave Trade by descendants of the event's victims can result in collective trauma.

Articulation of collective memory does not only take place in a real physical environment but extends into an imagined community facilitated by social media.[31] In light of this, we argue that social media is the virtual space where the public scrutinizes and interrogates past events and traditional, static memories. However, the interrogation and scrutinization of the past are not always based on claims of authenticity or ownership but instead the immersion of oneself in the past to know what happened and the corresponding experience in the present. In explaining memories forged on ruptured modernity, Alison Landsberg argues that mass culture technologies in the form of media and films have enabled the public to not only engage with and re-interpret the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Holocaust but also to share ties with these events because of their

20 Abdul Wadood Tadbier and Abdulhadi Shoufan, "Ranking Educational Channels on YouTube: Aspects and Issues," *Education and Information Technologies* 26 (2021): 3077–96.

21 Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

22 Terry Hadyn, "The Impact of Social Media on History Education: A View from England," *Yesterday and Today* 17 (2017), 23–37.

23 Daniel J. Cohen, "History and the Second Decade of the Web," *Rethinking History,* 8, no. 2 (2004): 293–301; and, for an applied reading, Stephanie Ho, "Blogging as Popular History Making, Blogs as Public History: The Singapore Case Study," *Public History Review*, 14 (2007), 64–79.

24 Mike Featherstone, "Archiving Cultures," *The British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2006): 161–84.

25 Alice Gawthrop and Charlotte Illingworth, "The Role of Social Media in Black Lives Matter," *Redbrick,* September 12, 2022, https://www.redbrick.me/the-role-of-social-media-in-black-lives-matter/.

26 Zhao and Liu, 1.

27 Beat Meier, "Collective Memory for Political Leaders in a Collaborative Government System: Evidence for Generation-Specific Reminiscence Effects," *Memory & Cognition* 49, no. 1 (2021): 83–9. doi:10.3758/s13421-020-01076-8.

28 James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

29 Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner, "The Politics of Memory and the Poetics of History," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, eds. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 284–310.

30 Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, (2018). https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441/full.

31 Chris Weedon and Glenn Jordan, "Collective Memory: Theory and Politics," *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 2 (2012): 143–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.664969.

traumatic nature.[32] The global reach of these memories results from technologies that have enabled the public to connect with events in ways different from what was traditionally known. Jose van Dijck also argues that social media platforms enable users to share, create, and curate content that resonates with their unique voices and perspectives while fostering a virtual space where ideas, experiences, and expressions flow freely.[33] From this perspective, social media can bring people from diverse geographical locations, cultures, and backgrounds together to engage on issues of common interest. Recent evidence suggests that social media has the potential to alter the visceral experience of society by exposing hidden truths about events and developments in society. For example, the public used social media to bring George Floyd's murder to attention and to re-ignite academic and public discourse on racial injustice and institutionalized abuses against minority groups across the world .[34] This presents social media as a site of multidirectional meaning-making. Given the active role of the public in interrogating past events and static memories, this study investigates how social media can facilitate public interpretation of the sensitive history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

5 Methodology

The dataset for this study consists of user comments and replies from 20 YouTube videos on the Year of Return visits to the slave castles. We searched the term "year of return" on YouTube. We selected videos with 6000 or more views, suggesting high public interest and engagement. The videos selected included videos uploaded by well-known African Americans and videos uploaded by Ghanaians about the year of return event. We documented the YouTube video identification (IDs) for all selected videos. Using the "vosonSML" package,[35] we accessed the YouTube Application Programming Interface (API) and collected text data specific to the list of YouTube video IDs on March 23, 2020. The description of the data retrieved is shown in Table 1. Altogether, the videos had over 4 million views. The least-viewed video had more than 6000 views, while the highest-watched video had almost 1 million views (965,069). To keep the data to a manageable level, we checked the data for relevance and used 25,345 comments, including threads and replies, for our analysis. It is important to note that even though the individuals who uploaded the videos and those who commented on them may have held their own narratives about the event, this study did not focus on their backgrounds, personal experiences, age, gender, ethnicity, and other factors that may have informed their narratives on the event. All analyses, including data retrieval, sentiment analysis, and word cloud, were performed using RStudio software version 1.1.456. The videos highlighted different and revealing narratives concerning the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Table 1: Description of data.

Video	Collected threads	Collected replies	Total comments
1	120	239	359
2	16	13	29
3	157	366	523
4	1206	1072	2278
5	2005	2783	4788
6	101	264	365
7	2900	3459	6359
8	1153	897	2050
9	70	94	164
10	259	295	554
11	775	863	1638
12	459	314	773
13	112	94	206
14	907	1140	2047
15	270	323	593
16	164	128	292
17	83	117	200
18	82	128	210
19	122	102	224
20	1017	676	1693
Total	11,978	13,367	25,345

32 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

33 Jose van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

34 George Floyd was a 46-year-old man who was killed on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. George was apprehended by officers after he was accused of using a counterfeit $20 bill. During the arrest, a police officer knelt on George Floyd's neck while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face down on the street. Floyd pleaded saying "I can't breathe," yet the police officer did not remove his knee from Floyd's neck. Bystanders recorded the incident, and the video quickly spread across social media, igniting public outrage. His death became a pivotal event in American history and sparked a global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and widespread protests against systemic racism. George Floyd's murder showcases the power of social media in bringing critical issues to attention.

35 Timothy Graham and Robert Ackland, "SocialMediaLab: Tools for Collecting Social Media Data and Generating Networks for Analysis." CRAN (The Comprehensive R Archive Network), 2016.

5.1 Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis is a field of study that identifies positive and negative opinions, attitudes, emotions, and evaluations toward an entity. It is one of the most active research areas in natural language processing (NLP) and data mining.[36] The increasing interest in sentiment analysis coincides with the explosive growth in the volume of opinionated data on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Sentiment analysis is now at the core of social media research.[37] Despite the growth in the use of sentiment analysis for various social media research,[38] there appears to be no research that has employed the YouTube platform for public history research on commemorated historical events in Ghana. The rationale for using sentiment analysis for the Transatlantic Slave Trade was that it provided insights into public perceptions, emotions, awareness, and attitudes toward the event and its related developments. Given the controversial and traumatic nature of the event, it was assumed that public engagement with it would reveal both positive and negative emotions and conflicting perspectives and arguments; hence, sentiment analysis was deemed the most appropriate data analysis method. This is supported by studies that indicate that sentiment analysis is suitable for topics that are controversial in nature.[39]

Because of the volumes of unstructured data found in social media, an automated system is essential to extract the subjectivity and polarity from such data.[40] After extracting the YouTube data, we used the "iconv" command-line tool to convert the character string encoding of the text data to UTF-8 encoding. To conduct sentiment analysis of people's reactions to and interpretations of the Transatlantic Slave Trade based on the selected YouTube videos, we employed the Syuzhet package developed by the NLP group at Stanford University for R users.[41] This package includes the National Research Council (NRC) sentiment dictionary, which is a lexicon for detecting words that express specific reactions in different contexts.[42] The NRC lexicon comprises 5636 English words, and their relationship with eight fundamental emotions, such as anger, joy, disgust, fear, trust, surprise, sadness, and anticipation, as well as their associations with two sentiments, which are positive and negative.[43] The NRC dictionary categorizes the various emotions associated with a term as positive or negative. For example, if four out of the five words in a sentence denote trust, joy, and anticipation, the sentence would be classified as positive. Similarly, if a sentence has the majority of its words classified by the NRC as anger and disgust, the comment or sentence is recognized as having a negative sentiment. We employed the NRC sentiment dictionary in the Syuzhet package to calculate the incidence of negative and positive reactions and their related valence on the converted data. This process generated sentiment scores for individual user comments. Then, we computed the grand sentiment score for each reaction by finding a percentage of the total sentiments of a particular emotion from the overall sentiments.

5.2 Word Cloud

Using the sentiment scores, we separated negative comments from positive ones. For both types of comments, we created a corpus by applying the text mining framework provided by the "tm" package to denote a collection of text documents.[44] We applied the "Vector Source" function to the corpus as a means to interpret each element as a document. Next, we cleaned the text by applying various transformations from the "tm" library to the corpus. These modifications included converting all cases to lower case, removing all punctuations, all numbers, stop words, uniform resource locators (URLs), names of users, and extra whitespaces. Non-English words were also removed. Then we created a term-document matrix from the cleaned corpus. We sorted the terms in the matrix in decreasing order of frequency. We extracted all words appearing 50 times or more for both types of sentiment comments.

For the purpose of analysis, we merged the counts of words that communicated similar or related ideas. For

36 Bing Liu, *Sentiment Analysis and Opinion Mining* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2012), https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-02145-9.

37 Ibid., 1.

38 Jeff Sawalha et al., "Detecting Presence of PTSD Using Sentiment Analysis from Text Data," *Front Psychiatry* (2022): 1–15. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.811392/full.

39 Qui Jiangtao, Lin Zhangxi, and Shuai Quinghong, "Investigating the Opinions Distribution in the Controversy on Social Media," *Information Sciences* 489 (2019): 274–88.

40 Liu, *Sentiment Analysis and Opinion Mining*.

41 Matthew Jockers, "Package 'syuzhet'," CRAN, August 12, 2023, https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/syuzhet.

42 Saif M. Mohammad and Peter D. Turney. "Emotions Evoked by Common Words and Phrases: Using Mechanical Turk to Create an Emotion Lexicon," in *Proceedings of the NAACL HLT 2010 Workshop on Computational Approaches to Analysis and Generation of Emotion in Text*, Association for Computational Linguistics (2010): 26–34.

43 Saif M. Mohammad and Peter D. Turney, "NRC Emotion Lexicon," *National Research Council* 2 (2013): 234. https://saifmohammad.com/WebPages/NRC-Emotion-Lexicon.htm.

44 Ingo Feinerer, "Introduction to the tm Package Text Mining in R," CRAN, 2013, http://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/tm/vignettes/tm.pdf.

instance, from the user comments data, "captives" appeared 93 times and "captivity" appeared 75 times. The frequencies of both words were summed, and "captives" was used to represent the term. The same approach was applied to words such as "attacked, attacks," "corrupt, corruption," and "cry, crying," among others. Using the "word cloud" package,[45] we generated a word cloud based on the frequency of words. The "RColorBrewer" package provided the color schemes for the word counts.[46] Large font sizes and distinct colors correspond to highly frequent words. The use of sentiment analysis and word cloud tools helped to establish connections between segments of the public perception of the historical event. While the word cloud allowed for the clustering of key words that were closely connected, the sentiment analysis helped to categorize these clusters of words as either negative or positive.

To ensure that the study reported in this article is ethical, we de-identified all data and comments extracted from YouTube. The names of the YouTube channels from which the videos were derived were not mentioned. Also, care was taken to ensure that the views expressed in the videos, as well as comments made by YouTube users, were accurately represented.

5.3 Content Analysis of Videos

In this phase of the analysis, we analyzed the content of the YouTube videos selected for the study. We were interested in what the people in the videos, who visited the slave castles, said about the slave trade and the emotions they expressed as they toured the castles. We draw on excerpts of what they said to support the findings about comments on the videos. It must be noted that the people in the videos were mostly African American tourists who had come to Ghana as part of the Year of Return program.

6 Results and Discussion

6.1 YouTube Commentaries on the Selected Videos

Our findings revealed that YouTube provided a space for people to post their reflections on and reactions to the

Transatlantic Slave Trade during the commemoration of the Year of Return. This ultimately resulted in the articulation and dissemination of public narratives about the horrific event.

As shown in Figure 1, we observed more positive reactions and interpretations in the comments of users than negative posts. The sentiments were motivated by how YouTube users thought about and reacted to the narratives of slavery in the present. In example 1 in Table 2, a user mentioned that modernity should be used as a tool to
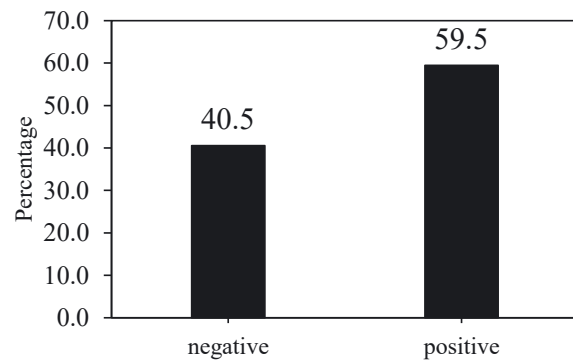

Figure 1: Sentiment analysis of the data.

Table 2: Examples of YouTube user comments on the slave trade.

Example 1	Example 2
I do think remembering history is important so that we can learn from it, but I do not really get this talk of "lineage" and "ancestors". Our great-grandparents are no more, yet it should not influence our identity. Culture might play more of a role, but it does not nowadays since modern culture is vastly different from the one our ancestors experienced. Why would you get emotional over someone *just because* you share some genes?	In reading and learning about slavery from childhood until now, it brings so many tears to my eyes. It is so hard to comprehend that it is four hundred (400) years since our ancestors were taken against their will to a strange land. Separated from their love [SIC] ones never to be seen again … There was no room to show them human kindness and compassion. Slavery was the greatest atrocity that was ever done to the human race.
Example 3	**Example 4**
This was real pain [as] I felt … my ancestors on me. I felt at peace, I felt all my ancestors and I were reunited. It was just a wonderful feeling.	It still baffles me to think that anyone could feel so entitled and cruel that they would actually kidnap and take ownership of human beings. Imagine how terrifying it was to be forced onto a ship, held in chains on the floor, not understanding the language, not knowing what is going to happen to you and your family, and if you happen to survive the journey, the real nightmare begins. It's too evil to even imagine.

45 Ian Fellows, "Package 'wordcloud,'" CRAN, 2018, https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/wordcloud/index.html.
46 Erich Neuwirth and R. Color Brewer. "R Color Brewer's Palettes." R Package Version, 2014, https://r-graph-gallery.com/38-rcolorbrewers-palettes.html.
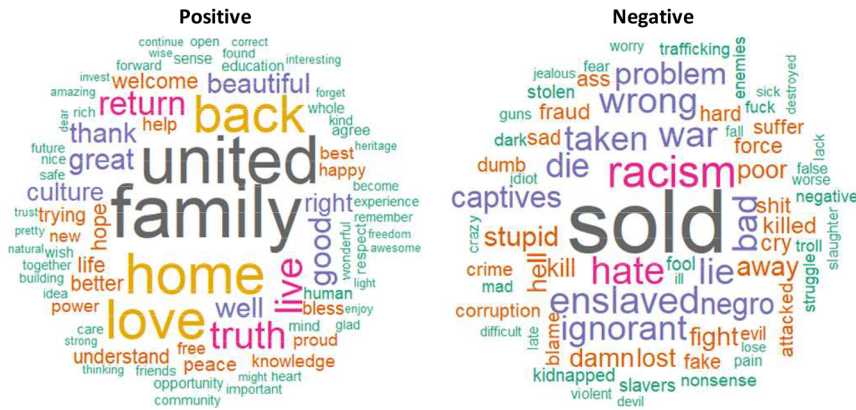
Figure 2: Frequently used words in the YouTube commentaries.

overcome happenings of the past due to the vast difference between past and present cultures. Hence, the narrative on slavery was to remain in the past and not be of so much importance in present-day discourses. This user's interpretation suggests that the emotional displays that often come with the commemoration of the slave trade are misplaced, given that those who display the emotions did not know their so-called ancestors. This comment seems to downplay the pertinence people attach to their lineage, which often shapes who they are and where they originate from. Other users considered slavery as traumatic based on the pain and distress it produced. In both cases, the communicative discourse on slavery was variant, subjective, and indicative of how people in the present approached the past using their present-day experiences. From example 2, slavery, even though it happened centuries ago, left remarkable imprints on the consciousness of the present generation, and so recalling such an event is important to correcting the injustices meted out to people in the past. Even though those who visited the slave castles did not experience the event first-hand, the obvious trauma that is associated with slavery could be interpreted with modern notions of pain and distress. As Rüsen argues, the traditions of the present are always at work in the historical reflections about the past.[47] With the awareness that cultural orientation about present-day life ultimately results in different reactions to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, we explored how these reactions and interpretations were represented.

Analysis of the frequent words and terms used in the user comments reveals the central ideas in user interpretations of the event. As represented in Figure 2, words such as *peace*, *love*, *hope*, and *happiness*, were often

mentioned in the comments to connote mental wellness and healing upon visiting the slave castle, while words such as *united*, *family*, *home*, *forward*, *forget*, *new*, *community*, *together*, *identity*, *build*, and *grow*, were used to promote the message of progress and closeness. Other expressions were used that communicated altruism and nation-building. In contrast, there were words that illustrated stronger negative sentiments such as *pain*, *evil*, *suffer*, *crime*, *racism*, *wrong*, *hate*, *kill* and *attack*. Other profane words were used largely to depict negative reactions to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The disparate nature of the words reveals that users differed in their interpretation of the event, with interpretations reflecting positive and negative reflections and understandings of the slave trade.

Further analysis of the contexts within which the words were used was undertaken to get to the depths of the reasoning behind such interpretations. One user maintained, "[although] there are numerous slave narratives we have to live in the present and think of the future [and] should not *forget* our history." Another comment read "A lot [of people] do not want to flip that coin … our ancestors are reaching out and saying forgive and not forget. Otherwise, history will repeat itself." These comments highlight the users' expression of letting go of the pain of the past but not forgetting the slave trade and the consequences it had on their ancestors. This communicates the value of living in a manner that reduces the likelihood of such an event reoccurring, suggesting that by remembering the past, we can safeguard the present and the future. A comment that "… the world can find some racial *peace* as humans return to the lands of their ancestors" connotes a notion of harmony or perhaps points to racial equality and reconciliation with the perpetrators of the slave trade. Another comment from a user read, "we are changing the narratives of Africa through these videos," suggesting a deliberate interest to change the discourse on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and project a new image of Africa.

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47 Jörn Rüsen, "Tradition: A Principle of Historical Sense-Generation and Its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture," *History and Theory* 51, no. 4 (2012): 45–59. https://philpapers.org/rec/RSETAP.

Other commentaries focused on telling views that appeared to promote peace and create awareness that the past cannot be changed; neither can the negative trauma associated with the Transatlantic Slave Trade be ignored. These commentaries communicated the idea that as humans we are connected in a global community, so it is important not to be swayed by the negative emotions of the slave trade but rather work together and build our common humanity.

> All of our histories are built on wars. What should we do now? Should we fight? Or should we work together in a peaceful future? We cannot change the past. It is easy to blame the other side, and it will solve nothing. It takes great people to forgive someone. I am white and Dutch, so my ancestors are also responsible for a part of the slave trade. Am I responsible? Hell no, […] we all should help and make this world a better place for everyone … I am white, but I do not see myself as White, I am human, not my skin colour. We are all human.

Several other comments pointed toward the conclusion that it is needless to take the side of an Afrocentric or Eurocentric perspective regarding the people responsible for the violent human trade. This issue was contentious, but the referent replies were always calling for peace and a forward-looking approach.

> It is pointless blaming another culture because they happened to have the upper hand. The past is the past, [and] it can't be changed. Instead, let us try to improve the world as it is than blame history for everything wrong in our life now.

> My point is that no one race or religion should be held accountable for dirty industries such as slavery. No time to complain anymore. We still have more than what is taken from us. We need intellectual freedom to take over.

Results revealed that some users used external sources and provided URLs to related scientific articles to support their comments while other users 'liked' other people's comments to indicate agreement. Users seemed to disagree on the point that politics informed the representation of the slave trade in books and the media and that political agents fueled the slave trade. These divergent arguments prompted users to attempt to validate their argument with external sources to challenge dominant discourses about the slave trade. This reflects the active agency of the public in not only remembering but also reconstructing accounts of the slave trade. As Boadu notes, history in Ghana is not deemed a preserve for historians alone, but the public is actively involved in negotiating and interpreting the past.[48] It is evident that users' emotions and feelings emanating from viewing the videos informed their interpretations of the slave trade with

modern notions of right and wrong. Nevertheless, it can be argued that slavery cannot be justified by any means and that certain past 'wrongs' remain wrong even under present-day values.

6.2 Narratives in the Content of the Videos

The previous section presented findings based on our analysis of the comments of the public on the videos about visits to the slave castles. This section of the findings reports on selected content from the videos to corroborate the public commentaries reported earlier. We analyze what people who visited the slave castles said about the slave trade and their experience visiting the castles. Generally, the videos showed heightened levels of emotion among the people who visited the slave castles. The emotions were mostly evident in their tour of the slave dungeons. The phrase "never again" was common in participants' reactions to the slave trade. They expressed the need to avoid a future recurrence of the atrocities meted out to victims of the slave trade. The following comment provides an illustrative example.

> You can either be bitter, which means you can leave here weak or you be better, which means you leave here stronger. And so, I thought about what that meant. That meant we've so much agony, and we've so much pain, but we've also seen so much hope and much promise, and glory. So, let's tell the whole story, but let's put much emphasis on the hope, on the glory, and on the optimism as we tell the story. So, I am going to leave here better.

Another comment focused on finding the lost history and feeling empowered to make a difference.

> Since we have this great enlightenment, this moment of encouragement and engagement, we may go back home with evidence for all, to the marginalised, the looked over, the left behind, the least of all. Then we will become an instrument of God's divine power, and through our commitment, there will be a new day in the hood of America. No more would we bow to the slave delusions that came from our captors.

These comments reflect the view that within the atrocious and traumatic memory of the slave trade, there were opportunities for reflection and growth. Not only did the visitors to the castles feel the need to tell the story of slavery but they also stressed the need to foster a cohesive and enlightened outlook following their visit. The comments also reveal the view that the accounts of the slave trade were moments of pain and healing.

Other comments from participants in the videos suggested frustration about the event and conveyed participants' condemnation of the actions of the perpetrators of the slave trade. A participant shared:

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48 Boadu, "History and Public History in Ghana."

> I just thought about the evil that it would take to treat human beings like that. And the consequence is that we've paid for this for 400 years, and we still paying for it. I just can't understand human's capacity to do that evil. Then I found out there was a massive grave for my ancestors. I do not know where I come from, and this is why I am here. I do not know who my people are. I don't know what my language is. This is overwhelming.

Within this comment lies a desire to connect to one's roots and develop an identity that was lost to the slave trade. It further highlights the transgenerational pain and agony associated with the slave trade. Overall, the reflections of visitors to the castles display a mix of pain and optimism, but it is evident that despite the emotions that naturally accompany such visits, they communicated hope for a better world that is accepting of all peoples. The interpretations of the slave trade in this context, therefore, show a view of remembering the past to create a fairer and more equitable world.

In other comments, the need to discuss topics that communicate belonging and acceptance was pressing. This was reflected in comments that were linked to *family, home,* and *community*. To participants, remembering the Transatlantic Slave Trade meant talking about predominant narratives, which have significantly influenced and shaped their lens about the past. For some, it was about acknowledging the different ways things have changed and identifying the issues that remain constant over time. Dominant in these views were the connections to a place they could call home.

> I realised how much racial stress I am under every day even when I do not realise it. When I walk into spaces where I am in the minority, I am constantly checking myself, but here, in my ancestral home, I feel that I am at home.

> Our ancestors were pushed through the door of no return as they awaited the ship. However, being here, taking my shoes off, getting into the water, the Atlantic Ocean, I felt at peace, I felt at home. Our grandparents wished they could have gone back, but we are doing it for them.

Many reactions to the Transatlantic Slave Trade were expressed, including about its brutality, segregation, and social injustice. Key reflections centered on how victims of the slave trade went through the door of no return: "They said we were never going to return, but we have returned." This reflection was associated with words like *pride, optimism, unity, love* and *hope* and was dominant in the comments on videos about "Door of No Return" or the "gate of return." Visitors to the slave castles expressed satisfaction in reuniting with their roots and establishing links with their ancestry.

It is evident from the foregoing discussions that the public interpretation of and engagement with the slave trade was informed by their connections with, knowledge of, and memories about the event. The public imagined and condemned the perpetrators of social injustice but considered the present as providing an opportunity to reflect on the past and develop a better future. It was clear that focusing on the negative aspects of the slave trade would create hatred and divide society instead of seeing it as an opportunity for reconciliation. These findings have provided insights into how social media, particularly YouTube, can inform public engagement with and interpretation of the past. The results show a deliberate attempt to recompose the narrative on the Transatlantic Slave Trade by spreading the message of peace, hope, love, togetherness, and kindness. Reconciliation has been shown to play a key role in peace-building and restoration in post-conflict communities, even though there seems to be a disconnect between its theoretical framing and practical attainment.[49] Nevertheless, the public commentaries give the hope that while the effects, pains, and trauma of the Transatlantic Slave Trade cannot be undone, the public is prepared to learn from the trauma narrative, reconcile with each other, and create a world in which similar events will have no place.

7 Conclusion and Implications for Teaching Difficult Histories

As community members, members of the public are active producers and users of historical information. The presence of social media has enhanced public agency and confidence in engaging with several issues that confront society. This study has shown that social media presents an accessible platform for the public to interpret and reconstruct the past, challenging each other's views on a common sensitive topic. This study found that YouTube user commentaries and comments from visitors to the slave castles in Ghana portray optimism and positivity in the public discourse on the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The display of genuineness, regard, and empathy in commentaries suggests that not all online commentaries about the traumatic event project hatred and division. Analysis of both the positive and negative sentiments about the slave trade points to one crucial direction: the need to create an awareness of our common humanity and the development of consensus, harmony, tolerance, and reconciliation. This can generate pride and solidarity in our past, foster a sense of common

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49 Angelika Rettberg and Juan Ugarizza, "Reconciliation: A Comprehensive Framework for Empirical Analysis," *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 6 (2016): 517–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010616671858.

historical consciousness in sensitive narratives, and overcome hegemonic narratives of 'divide and rule' and foreign domination. This in turn could be beneficial for the teaching and historicizing of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and constitute an antidote to the prevailing challenge of racial inequality.

Based on the findings of this study, we argue that teaching sensitive and traumatic histories in schools should be a liberating experience for students and should be aimed at fostering unity, forgiveness, strength, and pride. In light of this, teachers and history educators should emphasize the narratives that bring societies together despite our differences rather than narratives that lead to division. As the analysis in this study has revealed, social media users reinterpreted the degrading and sensitive history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade against a new narrative of hope, glory, and optimism. If given thorough attention, such a new way of reflecting on the past can be used to analyze and discuss the representational practices that characterize historical sense-making about sensitive histories in the classroom. Students can be encouraged to compare public interpretations of past traumatic events on social media against historians' accounts to obtain different perspectives from the scientific and public communities. History students can understand that not all victims of traumatic histories or their descendants hold on to the pains and losses of the past; rather, traumatic events can present opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation. Nevertheless, as the digital revolution continues, information and interpretations obtained from social media must be critically assessed for validity in students' attempt to *do* history. As Wineburg argues, teachers need to direct history teaching towards evidence-based truths as unverified information on the internet can limit historical thinking. This would also prevent students from getting "lost in the digital weed".[50]

Teachers need to guide students to understand that victims bestow forgiveness. Forgiveness can facilitate harmonious living between victims and perpetrators of conflicts, but it does not always lead to reconciliation since victims and society may forgive without wanting to reconcile, and perpetrators may confess without necessarily aiming to restore previous relationships.[51] Understanding the complex relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation is critical to students' understanding of post-conflict relationships. Further, in teaching about sensitive and traumatic histories, teachers can highlight ethical and moral consciousness, guide students to contextualize past actions, and derive evidence-based judgements and reflections on what was good, right, wrong, bad or ethical, which is often complex. Also, highlighting the need for empathy and sympathy can present opportunities to promote discourses that foster healthy social change. Engaging students in these reflections when teaching traumatic histories can be crucial if history education is to develop students who are knowledgeable of public and academic discourses and critical and active national and global citizens.

In sum, the interpretation and reinterpretation of sensitive histories such as the Transatlantic Slave Trade should not be the preserve of only historians, but the public should be encouraged to engage actively with such histories. This study has demonstrated that social media can be a useful tool for public engagement with history. The utility of social media in public engagement with the past has critical benefits for history education and should be further explored through future research.

50 Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 147.

51 Charles Kabwete, "Towards Justice and Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Countries: Meaningful Concepts and Possible Realities," *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 18, no. 1 (2018): 65–91. https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajcr/article/view/175830.