



## **Electorates' Analysis of Hate Speech Dynamics on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election Campaigns**

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### **Abstract**

The pattern of political communication in the past decade has been dramatically altered by the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, among others. These platforms are used by politicians and political stakeholders for political communication. They leverage the unique characteristics that social media offer such as accessibility, connectivity, interactivity, speed, wider reach, and cost advantage when compared to mainstream media, among others, to disseminate their political views, mobilise the electorates and canvass for their votes, especially during the campaign period. While some of the political information shared helped the electorates to make informed political decisions, others have not but rather spread hate targeted at their political opponents with the intent to discredit him/her, particularly on Facebook. Hence, this study investigates the nature of hate speech spread on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaigns, its influences on the electorates' choice of candidates and its implication on the democratic development in Nigeria. The survey was used as the research design, the questionnaire as an instrument for data collection and the population was 41.6 million (Facebook users in Nigeria as of May 2023). The sample size was 400 determined using Taro-Yamane's formula. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were adopted. The study found that the health status of the candidate, ethnicity of the candidate, religion of the candidate, and cyberbullying or malicious content were the leading nature of hate speech shared on Facebook during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The study also revealed that these hate speeches influenced the electorates' voice of candidates, hence, undermining national security and cohesiveness, stifling free speech, and threatening the consolidation and survival of democracy in Nigeria. The electoral law enacted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be strictly enforced to prevent hate speech, especially among Facebook users from being used during political events and campaigns. This will serve as a guide for politicians regarding their behaviour during a campaign.

**Keywords:** Election, Hate Speech, Political Communication, Social Media, Facebook and Political Development.





## Introduction

The use of social media for political communication among political aspirants across the world has been on the ascendance in the past decade (Babac & Podobnik, 2018; Barnhart, 2022; Dzisah, 2018; Jibrin, 2023; Jonathan 2023; Ngange; 2020; Narasimhamurthy, 2014; Mare & Matsilele, 2022). This form of media has become a convergence point for both the electorates and political actors because it serves as the fulcrum of political activism, the melting pot of political debates and the crucible of political wrestling (Peterside, 2022).

Candidates for political offices employ social media for communication, engagement and canvassing for votes due to its unique characteristics such as accessibility, connectivity, conversationality, interactivity, speed, wider reaches, and massive storage (Dennis & Merrill, 2006; Graham & Schwanholz, 2020).

Similarly, the emergence of social media has decentralised communication channels (Livitckaia et al. 2023). The decentralised nature of the media has given access, devoid of discrimination, to political aspirants previously silent air their political views, project themselves, mobilise and canvass for votes from far and near without distance being a limitation (Ortiz, Young, Myers, Bedeley & Carbaugh, 2019; Segado-Boj, & Díaz-Campo, 2020; Zhuravskaya, Petrova & Enikolopov, 2020). Calderaro (2018) posits that in the modern political era, social media has gained increased significance because it plays a crucial role in disseminating politicians' views via multimedia platforms devoid of geographical and cultural barriers.

Social media is indeed a viable medium for political communication and engagement because political aspirants can use it to receive prompt feedback from the electorates, gather data about public opinions on specific societal issues, gauge their popularity and acceptance among the people, raise funds for campaigns and tailored political messages can be disseminated at a given time to different demographics cheaper than the mainstream media.

The use of social media for political communication and campaigns did not have any significance in the political space until the 2008 United States of America (USA) presidential elections (Barnhart, 2022). According to Mueni (2014) cited in Dzisah (2018, p. 30), "the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections of the USA demonstrated the use of social media as powerful tools for governments and political parties to mobilise their supporters." The innovative way Barack Obama and his presidential campaign team





utilised social media to mobilise the electorates, raise funds and canvass for votes brought it to the forefront as a viable political communication medium (Barnhart, 2022; Dzisah, 2018).

The impact of social media as evident in Barack Obama's presidential campaigns and elections led to increasing usage in other political climates' elections such as the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America and the United Kingdom's "Brexit" referendum (Fujiwara, et al., 2020). Its usage and impact were also recorded in the 2015 general election in Croatia (Babac & Podobnik, 2018), and the 2014 Indian elections (Narasimhamurthy, 2014).

In Africa, the use of social media for political communication and campaign is well documented (Dwyer, et al., 2019; Dzisah, 2020; Dzisah, 2018; Ngange; 2020; Mare & Matsilele, 2022; Mthembu & Lunga, 2020). This form of media played a significant role in the outcome of different elections on the continent such as the Ghanaian 2012 and 2016 elections (Dzisah, 2020; Dzisah, 2018); the direction and outcome of the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon, Zimbabwe "Post-Mugabe" elections and in Sierra Leone's 2018 election (Dwyer, et al., 2019; Ngange; 2020; Mare & Matsilele, 2022; Mthembu & Lunga, 2020).

In Nigeria, social media have also made inroads into politics. In the last four general elections (2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023) in the country, the use of social media by politicians witnessed a trajectory (Jonathan, 2023). During the 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria, political aspirants from local to national elections used social media for political communication, engagements and campaigns (Jonathan, 2023). The 2023 presidential election, in particular, recorded an increase in the use of social media for political communication, engagements and campaigns, especially by the four leading candidates: Bola Tinubu of the 'All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the 'Peoples Democratic Party', Peter Obi of the 'Labour Party' and Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso of the 'New Nigeria Peoples Party' (Jonathan, 2023).

Political actors in Nigeria's usage of social media does not come as a surprise. Beyond its characteristics, this form of media boasts approximately 31.6 million users (Statista, 2023). From this figure, the majority are youth between the age range of 18-24 (voting age) and they constituted 39.65% of registered voters before the 2023 general election (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020; Suleiman, 2023). The enormous number of Nigerians on social media, particularly the youths make it a vital political frontline for political actors to use to persuade voters, mould public opinion, set an agenda and contest elections (Jibrin, 2023; Olaniran & Diepeveen, 2023; Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020; Peterside, 2022).





As important as social media is in politics and for the dissemination of political information, it also remains a very controversial channel of communication, especially when it is used to spread hate and attack political opponents (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Apuke & Apollos, 2017; Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). Studies (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2021; Bader, 2018; Giglietto et al., 2022; Olaniran & Diepeveen 2023; Wardle, 2023; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) have shown that beyond the benefits and potentials of social media, particularly to politicians and political stakeholders, it has also found to be used to manipulate public opinion, spread misinformation, disinformation, hate speech as well as attack political opponents.

The use of social media to spread misleading information about political opponents was recorded in the 2016 US election campaign (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) study, for instance, identified 115 pro-Trump and 41 pro-Clinton misleading stories that were disseminated in the three months before the election. The study also found that they were widely shared on Facebook. Relatedly, Silverman (2016) cited in Zhuravskaya et al. (2020) asserted that during the 2016 US election campaign, false stories were shared on Facebook with those slanted in favour of Donald Trump of the Republican Party shared approximately 30 million times, while those in favour of Hillary Clinton of the Democratic Party amounted to approximately 8 million shares.

The spread of misleading political information and hate speech, particularly on Facebook, is a worrisome issue that needs attention. Although it is a global phenomenon, it has, however, remained more worrisome in Nigeria due to the country's complex and fragile political structure of the country; a political structure built around the questions of how to manage heterogeneous people as well as allocate resources equitably and these have made political contest 'a do or die' affairs in this part of the world (Owen, 2020). The country's political terrain is divided along ethnic and religious lines (Olaniran & Diepeveen 2023) and these factors frequently come into play as political parties and politicians try to win over various regional, ethnic, and religious constituents (Opara, 2013).

Nigeria is described as having weak institutions which the political institution is a subset of (Azoro et al., 2021) and the spread of political hate speeches, including on social media during general elections has further heightened the political tension in the country which often lead to pre, during and post-election violence in the country (Ezeibe, 2013; Ezeibe, 2015). This political crisis caused by the spread of political hate speech on social media, especially on Facebook, heats the polity and





threatens and undermines the democratic foundation of the nations. Hence, this work seeks to investigate the phenomena, specifically focusing on its spread (hate speeches) on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential campaigns.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The characteristics of Facebook, no doubt, make it one of the easiest communication platforms for people to air their views on different issues in society, including political matters. It has also provided a gateway for the spread of misleading information and hate speech. Doyle and Luna (2023) assert that concerns over Facebook's influence in elections and the global spread of hate speech have grown with the company's rise.

Several studies on social media and electioneering have been conducted (Nwozor, et al., 2022; Soloev & Prollochs, 2022; Wiana, 2019). The study of Nwozor et al. (2022) focused on social media in politics: interrogating electorate-driven hate speech in Nigeria's 2019 presidential campaign. Soloev and Prollochs (2022) were on hate speech in the political discourse on social media: disparities across parties, gender, and ethnicity, while Wiana (2019) analysed the use of hate speech in social media during the presidential election in 2019. Despite all these studies and their contribution to literature, none of them addressed, in particular, hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaigns and its implication on the democratic development of the country. Hence, this study is conducted to analyse the electorates' views on hate speech dynamics on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaigns to bridge this gap and provide a new body of knowledge.

### **Research Objectives**

The broad objective of this study is to investigate electorates' views of hate speech dynamics on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election campaigns. Specifically, the objectives are as follows:

- i. To determine the nature of hate speech spread on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaigns.
- ii. To ascertain the influence of hate speech on electorates' choice of candidates on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaigns.
- iii. To find out the implication of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaigns on the democratic development in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Clarification**





## **Hate Speech**

The international human rights organization Article 19 of the UN Hate Speech Strategy and Action Plan (2019) defines hate speech as any expression of prejudice that targets someone because of a specific feature of their identity. An extreme and illogical sense of animosity toward an individual or group of individuals based on an identifying trait acknowledged by international human rights law is known as discriminatory hatred (Ismanovet et al., 2023). The United Nations (UN) (n.d.) considers hate speech any kind of communication, verbal, written or behavioural, that is hostile or uses derogatory or discriminatory language against any person or group of people based on who they are, or, in other words, based on their religion, ethnic origin, nationality, race, skin colour, social origin, gender and other identity factors. Hate speech is any sort of discriminatory communication intended to degrade, offend, or provoke someone based on their race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status.

### **Classification of Hate Speech**

United Nations classified hate speech based on international documents which has been adopted in this paper thus;

#### **a. Soft Hate Speech**

This includes (i) the creation of a negative image of a certain ethnic or other group; (ii) mentioning the name of a vulnerable group in a disparaging context; (iii) statements about the inferiority of a certain group, mention in a humiliating context; and (iv) quoting xenophobic statements or publishing texts of this kind without an appropriate comment that distinguishes between the opinion of the author of the statement and the journalist, allocating space in the newspaper, airtime for nationalist propaganda without editorial comment or other controversy (Inga, 2014; UN Hate Speech Strategy and Action Plan, 2019).

#### **b. Medium Hate Speech**

This includes the following (i) justification of historical cases of discrimination and violence; (ii) publications and statements that call into question the generally accepted historical facts of violence and discrimination; (iii) allegations of historical crimes by a particular ethnic or other group; (iv) indications of the connection of a certain group with foreign political and state structures to discredit it, (v) allegations about the criminality of a particular group; (vi) reasoning





about the disproportionate superiority of a certain group in material well-being, representation in power structures, etc.; (vi) accusations of the negative impact of any group on society, the state; and (vii) appeals to prevent certain groups from gaining a foothold in a region or city (Inga, 2014; UN Hate Speech Strategy and Action Plan, 2019).

### **c. Harsh Hate Speech**

This is categorised as (i) direct and indirect calls for violence, as well as calls for violent actions using common slogans; (ii) direct and immediate calls for discrimination, as well as calls for discrimination using general slogans; and (iii) veiled calls for violence and discrimination (for example, propaganda of contemporary or historical experience of violence or discrimination) (Inga, 2014; UN Hate Speech Strategy and Action Plan, 2019). Hence, any publications or statements in which there is a contrast between “we” and “they” most often contain hate speech. They form stereotypes, provoke hatred and discriminate against people or a group of people on various grounds (Inga, 2014; UN Hate Speech Strategy and Action Plan, 2019).

### **Democratization**

Democratization is the process of bringing a society's political structure closer to one that permits peaceful, competitive political engagement within a framework that protects citizens' rights to civil and political freedoms. This idea encapsulates the dynamic nature of democratic progress in every society, but it is particularly applicable in developing nations (Samarasinghe, 1994).

Democracy and democratization are two strongly related and mutually reinforcing concepts. This is because you cannot talk of democracy without democratization. While democracy is the state of existence or being, democratization is a process that brings democracy into being and also allows it to take a stronghold of society (Alumona, 2010).

According to Nwabueze (1993), the process of democratization must specifically involve the following twelve things: (i) multi-partyism, under a democratic constitution, having the force of a supreme, overriding, law; (ii) a complete change of guards and the exclusion of certain other categories of persons from participation in democratic politics and government; (iii) a genuine and meaningful popular participation in politics and government; (iv) a virile civil society; (v) a democratic society; (vi) a free society; (vii) a just society; (viii) equal treatment of all citizens by the state; (ix) the rule of law; (x) an ordered, stable society; (xi) a society infused with the spirit of liberty, democracy, and justice; and (xii) an independent, self-reliant, prosperous market economy. It is from this conceptual premise that we proceed to evaluate the implication of hate speech on



democratization in Nigeria. For instance, some of the Facebook hate speech includes; (i) the Facebook Dino Melaye account which tagged Kashim Shettima, the running mate of Bola Tinubu, with a post about the "grand commander of bandits (GCOB)" and (ii) Facebook post shared by supporters of Senator Tinubu when he reportedly said "Yorubas must deliver 95% of their votes to me (iii) Dele Farotimi refers to those who are not in support of Labour Party as "idiots, foolish and stupid".

### Selected Facebook Hate Speeches during the 2023 General Election Campaigns in Nigeria



Figure 1: Femi Fani-Kayode referred to Atiku Abubakar as a politician that murdered and buried PDP, with the political party having no hope of rising again.

[Facebookhttps://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=804656777893248&set=a.397684388590491](https://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=804656777893248&set=a.397684388590491)



Figure 2: Femi Fani-Kayode described Bishop Feyi Daniels as "An Obidiot sexual and a 419 scammer" for



prophesying that Bola Tinubu would rig the presidential election and would be “illegally declared winner by INEC” and Peter Obi would be sworn in as the Nigerian next President.

<https://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=793461759012750&set=a.397684388590491>

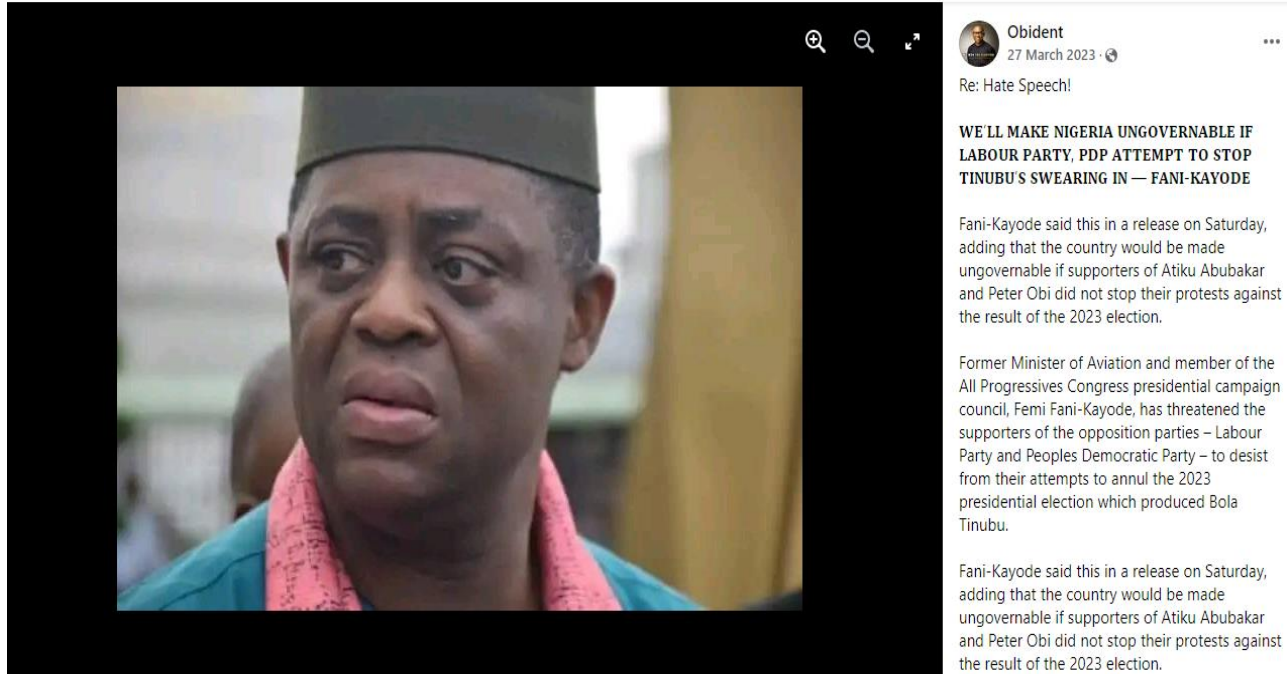


Figure 3: Femi Fani-Kayode threatens to make Nigeria ungovernable if Labour Party and PDP attempt to stop Tinubu’s swearing in after the 2023 Presidential election in the country.

<https://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=785917689767157&set=a.397684388590491>

Others include an attack on the former Governor of Delta State and Vice-Presidential candidate of the ‘Peoples Democratic Party’ (PAD), Ifeanyi Okowa and the Presidential aspirant of the party, Atiku Abubakar in the 2023 presidential election. The Facebook post described Abubakar as:

...a voraciously corrupt and morally bankrupt Nigerian whose criminal mishandling of Nigeria's privatization of some of her critical national assets plunged the country into total darkness for his Generator importation business to grow geometrically in financial stature and immunity against government regulations.

[\(https://web.facebook.com/groups/527744685493740/permalink/546660723602136/\)](https://web.facebook.com/groups/527744685493740/permalink/546660723602136/)

Another post states, “If you reject the indirect presidential ambitions of Shettima, and support the presidential ambitions of Atiku, you are still supporting the Fulanizations agendas of the jihadist.”

[https://web.facebook.com/groups/2794792987238958/permalink/5577849855599910/\)](https://web.facebook.com/groups/2794792987238958/permalink/5577849855599910/)





A related hate speech post read:

If I speak about Atiku, Russians will come for his arrest within 24 hours, Atiku committed the worst fraud in the history of the Russian Federation. If I release a statement about Tinubu, Singapore will declare him wanted immediately, Pablo Escobar, the drug lord, is a child compared to the crime Tinubu committed in Singapore. Because of Tinubu Singapore had a collapsed economy for 15 years.  
(<https://web.facebook.com/groups/peterobiforpresident2023/permalink/1222552621682425/>)

## **Literature Review**

### **Facebook and the Dissemination of Hate Speeches during Election**

Hate speech is a global issue. It is an issue that often gets to its peak during electioneering both in the global north and the global south. It is used to achieve political objectives (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022). One of the most common forms hate speech takes is 'fake news' and in the context of politics, this harmful information is aimed at discrediting opponents influencing the voting process, and falsifying or manipulating polling data, among others (Bader, 2018). In the information disorder space, hate speech has become a common feature, particularly during elections in many countries around the world, influencing and impacting the outcome of elections negatively, including threatening the democratic foundations of nations (Bader, 2018).

In Africa, harmful information like hate speech has been acknowledged to be prevalent, particularly during national elections and its ascendance in Africa has been recognised as one of the contributory factors putting pressure on the democratic experience on the continent (Bedar, 2018; Wasserman, 2020). Studies (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2021; Ndavula, 2018) conducted on the continent revealed that harmful information is common during electioneering, particularly in the online environment. Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022, para. 5) posits:

Over time, disinformation campaigns in Africa have become increasingly sophisticated in camouflaging their origins by outsourcing posting operations to local “franchised” influencers who are supplied content from a central source. These strategies are making it both harder to detect and to remove such insidious influence campaigns.





Research has indicated that the way hate speech spreads on Facebook is consistent with historical trends. As Nwozor et al. (2022) assert, citing the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 2008 post-election violence in Kenya, hate speech is frequently motivated by ethnicity and religion in most African nations. Scholars such as Mohan and Barnes (2018); Asogwa and Ezeibe (2020); Ezeibe (2021); and Chekol, Moges, and Nigatu (2021) agree with the nature of hate speech as expressed above.

In a similar vein, the use of hate speech in African politics by politicians during elections on Facebook follows the same historical trend. Specifically, politicians hate speech targeting the religion and ethnicity of the opposing candidate, their health status with diverse malicious content or cyberbullying of gender (MacAvaney et al., 2019; Bahador, 2020; and Bahador, 2020). Nigeria is also not immune from the spread of hate speech on Facebook, particularly during election campaigns. Also, hate speech is not a new trend in Nigeria but rather has a history, particularly during election season (Kabir & Dahiru, 2022) and the use of social media platforms such as Facebook has made it more problematic (Rogers, 2020). The effects of hate speech in Nigeria are extensive and diverse.

According to research (Terfa et al., 2017), it aggravates inter-ethnic and interreligious tensions, which can result in violence, fights between communities, and even fatalities. Hate speech impedes national development, impairs social cohesiveness, and encourages prejudice. Additionally, it has profound psychological consequences on people and communities, feeding feelings of fear, worry, and insecurity (Terfa et al., 2017). However, none of these studies exclusively investigate the effect of Facebook hate speech on the democratization process in Nigeria. More so, none of these studies assess the influence of hate speech on Facebook with emphasis on the 2023 presidential election which had created a knowledge gap. To do this, this study focused on studying the influence of the nature of hate speech on Facebook and its implication on the democratization process of Nigeria.

### **Empirical Review**

The study of Jimada (2023) was conducted to determine social media hate and misinformation campaigns in the Nigeria 2023 elections. In particular, the study looked at how political candidates running in the Nigerian elections of 2023 and their supporters used social media to promote hate and hazardous messages. Analyses and critical studies employing qualitative techniques are part of the study. The study concluded that despite the plethora of electoral guidelines that have been





created to safeguard elections and ensure that they are free from religious and ethnic division, social media has unquestionably become a key player in Nigeria's politics, especially during elections, and it is being used to further polarize and divide the society.

In a related study, Abdulazeez, Nasamu and Asemah (2023) investigated the influence of Hate Speech on the Choice of Candidates in the Edo Electorate during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. The study concluded that hate speech was seriously used by political players during the 2023 election campaign. Nevertheless, despite its widespread use, hate speech did not affect voters' opinions of the presidential contenders. This shows that factors other than hate speech influenced or shaped the electorate's decision.

Suemo, Kusugh and Okonkwo (2023) adopted mixed research methods to investigate how ideological themes in social media political campaigns have influenced voters' education and participation in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The study found that Facebook was used for political campaigns in Nigeria more frequently than Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, Facebook, WhatsApp, and blogs during the most recent general elections in 2023. The study concluded that when it comes to spreading political campaign messaging during elections in Nigeria, Facebook is the most popular social media site, followed by Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, Facebook, WhatsApp, and blogs. Since these social media platforms are the most accessible to users, they were widely used during the Nigerian elections as tools for political campaigns. However, the ideological themes that dominated social media political campaigns in Nigeria during the general elections of 2023 were largely unfavourable, as evidenced by insults, abuse of opponents, hate speech, falsification, shifting of blame, undertones of ethnocentrism and religion, anxiety, and apathy, among other things, thus fostering sentiments of an ethno-religious and cultural nature.

Hassan (2023) investigated the dissemination of disinformation on political and electoral processes in Nigeria. Hassan's study explores the influence of the content of social media on traditional media and the proliferation of disinformation in the context of elections and accountability in Nigeria. Data were collected from 60 interviews and 18 focus group discussions with key stakeholders across Nigeria's geo-political zones. The study concluded social media's content is shaping traditional media and exacerbating pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions. However, no known empirical finding has been linked with the hate speech spread on Facebook about the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria among those studies. Consequently, this study sought to fill the





knowledge gap by investigating electorates' analysis of hate speech dynamics on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election campaigns.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is premised on the political economy of social media. The political economy of communications is a branch of communication studies or media studies that studies the power relations that shape the communication of information from the mass media to the public (Flew & Smith, 2014). Arora (2022) argues that the political economics perspective on media analysis focuses on how media companies act and produce material that is influenced by the political and economic environment in which they operate.

Iosifidis and Wheeler (2016) assert that the political economy of social media could be viewed as capitalism's political economy on a larger scale. When the Internet and social media are viewed through the prism of capitalism, it becomes clear that the method in which online media gains its audience as a commodity sets it apart from traditional media in terms of capital accumulation. The work of Roy (2021) titled, *The Political Economy of Working-Class Social Media Commerce: Digital Capitalism and the Engelsian Concept of Working-Class "Property"*, focused on political economic analysis of activities through sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter reveals the integration of social media and e-commerce into the broader contours of the general structure of the capitalist economy that revolves around profit generation.

The political economy of social media is worth examining because communication has always been the foundation upon which the socioeconomic fabric of society is constructed since it is the process through which individuals become parts of social groups, relations, and other collective social institutions (Arora, 2022). Arora (2022) buttressed the aforementioned when he stated that social media plays a significant role in the 21st century when information is not just a technology but also a techno-social system. Roy (2021) states that communication cannot be considered inferior as an analytical tool in theorizing the contemporary modes of capitalist exploitation and is critical to evaluate contemporary social relationships, which are now products imposed upon society by digital capitalism. Such an analytical perspective is especially important when certain forms of technology become so normalized and integral to human sustenance itself, as they have become in recent years (Arora, 2022).

This political economy of social media facilitates power dynamics that influence how information is disseminated to the public through social media, particularly Facebook. Facebook is a popular





social media platform among political players in Nigeria because the platform boasts 41.6 million, accounting for 18.5 per cent of the population in the country with young people (18 to 34) being the majority (64.4%) (Statista, 2023). Facebook's contemporary messaging platform and its massive users give political players a viable platform to disseminate their political and campaign messages.

The political economy of social media theory is related to the study because the content generated and or published therein, including on Facebook is often influenced by the political and economic environment in which they operate and, therefore, may impact the outcome of an election, especially when the information shared is not only misleading but contain hate and or directly or indirectly attack a political opponent.

## **Methodology**

The study used a survey research design and an online questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. It has a population of 41.6 million (about twice the population of New York) Facebook users in Nigeria (Statista, 2023) and a sample size of 400, statistically determined using Taro-Yamane's (1967) formula. Relatedly, the purposive and snowball sampling techniques were adopted for this study. First, the researchers purposively identified some selected Facebook users and thereafter, the identified users recruited others using a snowball sampling technique. The choice of snowball sampling technique is because the researchers could not identify all the Facebook users at the same time. The data collected for the study was presented in simple tables. It was analysed using a simple percentage. The analyses were based on responses by respondents to the questionnaire which always answered the research questions.

## **Results and Discussion**

Although the sample is four hundred (400), to eliminate the mortality rate, the researchers purposely shared the link with 440 Facebook users. As a result, 428 users filled-in copies of the questionnaire. Out of the 428 copies filled in properly, 400 were again purposely selected for analysis. This means the study recorded a 100% return rate.





**Chart 1: Users Exposure to Hate Speech during the 2023 Presidential Election**

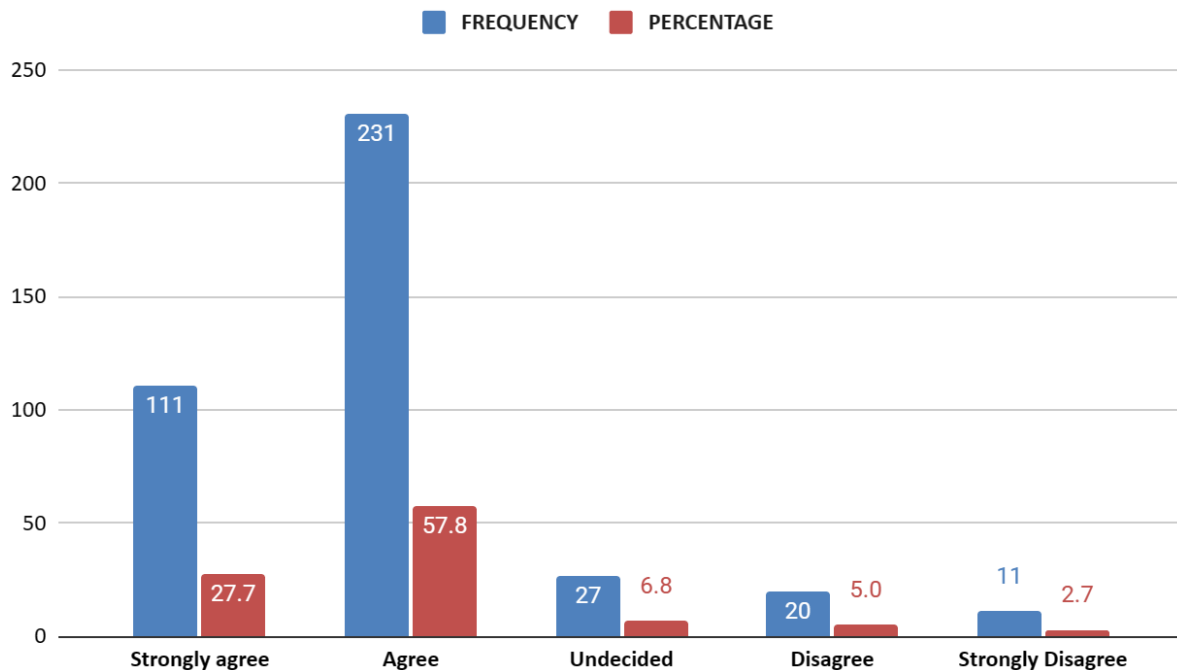


Chart 1 presents data on users' exposure to hate speech during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. Accordingly, 85.5% of the respondents either strongly agree or agree that they were exposed to hate speech during the 2023 presidential election while 7.7% were not. However, 6.8% of the respondents were undecided. From the data, it revealed that Facebook users were significantly exposed to hate speech during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This finding agrees with the conclusion of Abdulazeez et al. (2023), as they established that hate speech was seriously used by political players during the 2023 election campaign. Research indicates that hate speech is widespread on Facebook and targets a range of marginalized groups (Kabir & Dahiru; 2022; Laub, 2019; Rogers, 2020; Sinpeng, 2021).





**Chart 2: Frequency of Users' Exposure to Hate Speech during the 2023 Presidential Election Campaigns**

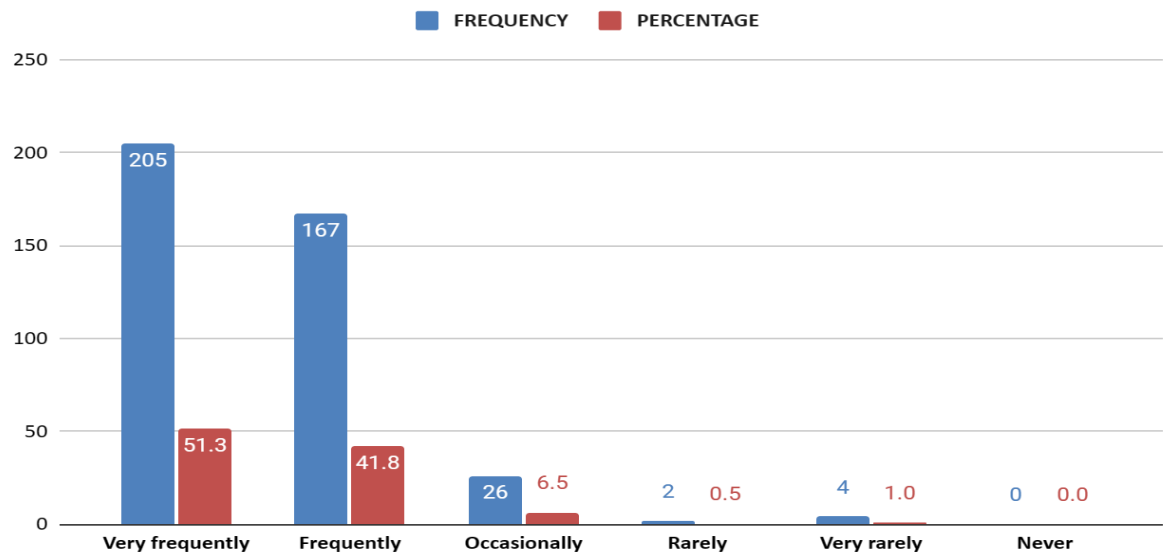


Chart 2 presents data on the frequency of Users' Exposure to Hate Speech during the 2023 Presidential Election. As a result, 93.1% of the respondents were either exposed to hate speech very frequently or were exposed frequently, 6.5% were exposed occasionally, and 1.5% respondents were rarely exposed. The above data implies that Facebook users were constantly exposed to hate speech during the 2023 presidential election and this level of exposure tends to leave an impression on them. In addition, hate speech is not a recent development in Nigeria; rather, it has a long history, especially around election seasons (Kabir & Dahiru, 2022). The use of social media sites like Facebook has also contributed to the problem (Rogers, 2020).



**Chart 3: Nature of Hate Speech users were exposed during the 2023 Presidential Election**

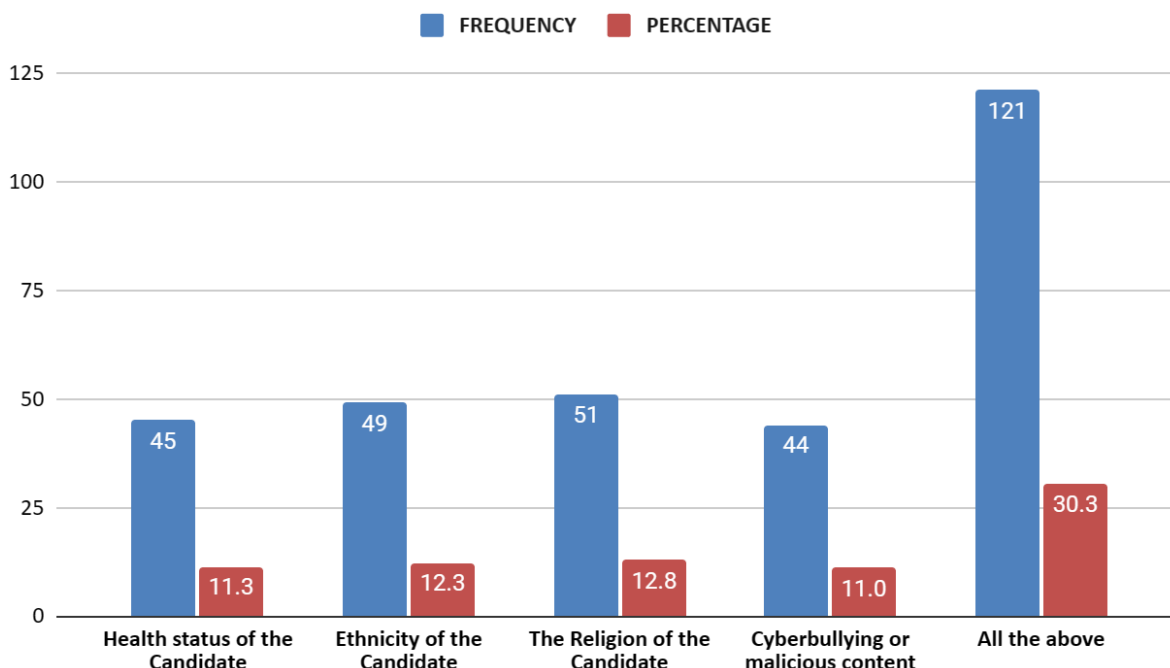


Chart 3 presents data on the nature of Hate Speech users who were exposed during the 2023 Presidential Election. Consequently, 11.3% were exposed to hate speech about the health status of candidates, 12.3% were exposed to hate speech with regards to the ethnicity of candidates, 12.3% were exposed to hate speech with regards to the religion of candidates, 11.0% were exposed to hate speech with regards to cyberbullying or malicious content and the remaining 30.3% were exposed to all the nature of hate speech mentioned on the table. This means users were exposed to hate speech centred on candidates' health status, ethnicity, and religion, as well as cyberbullying and malicious content. This finding is expressed in the categorization of the United Nations Hate Speech Strategy and Action Plan of 2019. In addition, the above finding is encapsulated by the UN's definition of hate speech as any kind of communication, verbal, written or behavioural, that is hostile or uses derogatory or discriminatory language against any person or group of people based on who they are, or, in other words, based on their religion, ethnic origin, nationality, race, skin colour, social origin, gender and other identity factors (UN Hate Speech Strategy and Action Plan, 2019).



**Chart 4: Likelihood of the Influence of Hate Speech on Electorates' Choice of Candidates during the 2023 Presidential Election**

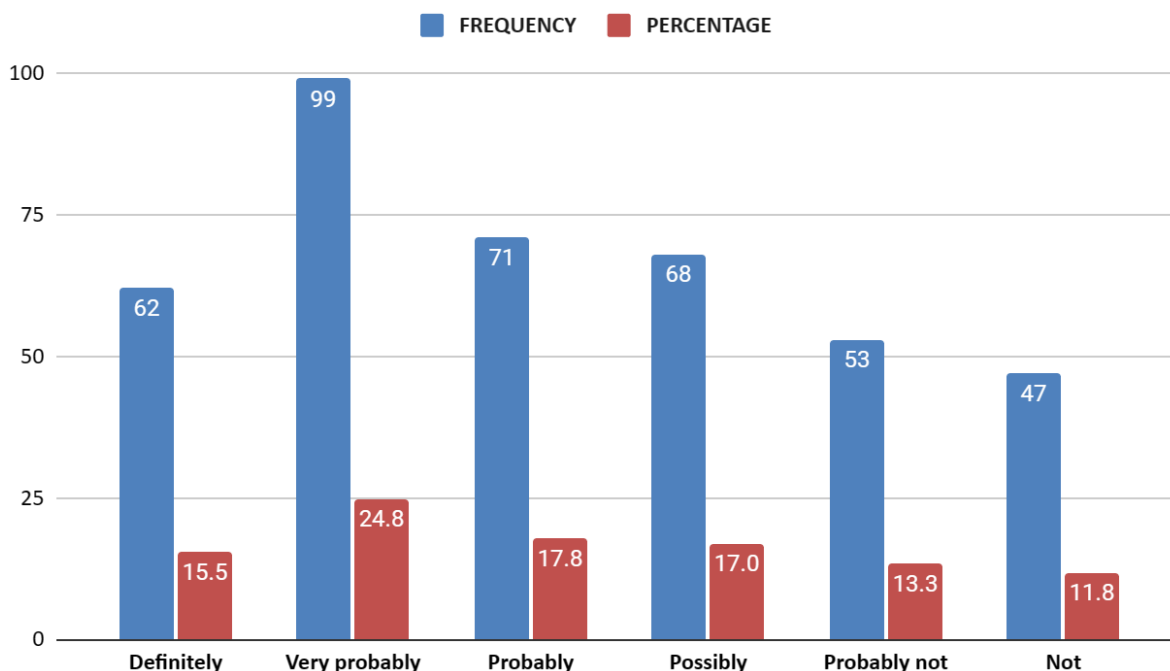


Chart 4 presents data on the likelihood of the influence of hate speech on electorates' choice of candidates during the 2023 Presidential Election. As a result, 15.5% were influenced, 24.8% were very probably influenced, 17.8% were probably influenced, 17.0% were possibly influenced, 13.8% were probably not influenced and 11.8% were not influenced. Information from the above table revealed that most respondents were (very probably) influenced by hate speech. This is followed by probably and definite. This means that the majority of the respondents were influenced by the hate speech in the choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This finding disagrees with Abdulazeez, Nasamu and Asemah (2023) as they concluded that despite its widespread use, hate speech did not have an impact on or affect voters' opinions of the presidential contenders. This shows that factors other than hate speech influenced or shaped the electorate's decision.

In addition, this study resonates with the tenet of the social judgment theory. Social judgment theory proposes that people make evaluations (judgements) about the content of messages based on their anchors or stance on a particular message (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam, 2017). This means that hate speech that influences users reinforces their disposition about a particular





candidate before the exposure to hate speech. Accordingly, when we receive persuasive information, we use our categories of judgment to judge the information; thus, as individuals evaluate incoming information, they decide which category of latitude it belongs to. There is latitude of rejection, latitude of non-commitment and latitude of acceptance. The one that falls within the latitude of acceptance will influence the receiver positively (Sherif & Hovland, 1961, cited in Asemah et al., 2017).

**Chart 5: Implications of Hate Speech to Democratic Development in Nigeria**

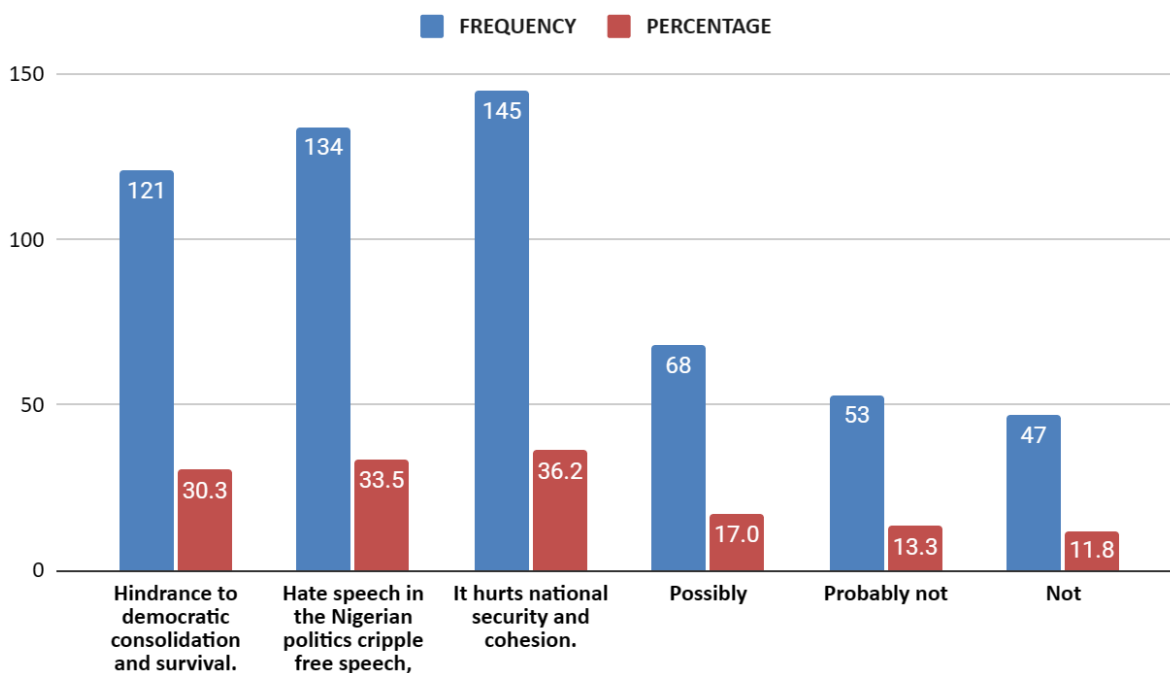


Table 5 presents data on the implications of hate speech on democratic development in Nigeria. From the above table, 30.3% of respondents indicated hindrance to democratic consolidation and survival as the implication of hate speech, 33.5% went for the option that said hate speech in Nigerian politics cripples' free speech and 36.2% of respondents held that hate speech has a negative impact on national security and cohesion.

According to an analysis of the above table, hate speech undermines national security and cohesiveness, stifles free speech, and threatens the consolidation and survival of democracy in Nigeria. This finding agrees with several studies. First, this study agrees with Msughter's (2023) study which found that hate speech used during electioneering can seriously harm social cohesiveness, public confidence in democratic institutions, and the general well-being of people





and communities. It can exacerbate differences, stir up violence, and obstruct productive political conversation.

The effects of hate speech in Nigeria are extensive and diverse. According to research (Terfa et al., 2017), it aggravates inter-ethnic and interreligious tensions, which can result in violence, fights between communities, and even fatalities. Hate speech impedes national development, impairs social cohesiveness, and encourages prejudice. Additionally, it has profound psychological consequences on people and communities, feeding feelings of fear, worry, and insecurity (Terfa et al., 2017).

### **Conclusion**

This study has established that Facebook users were significantly exposed to hate speech during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria with the nature of hate speech being the health status of the candidate, ethnicity of the candidate, religion of the candidate, and cyberbullying or malicious content. In addition, the work had shown that exposure to political hate speech on Facebook influenced electorates' choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The study, therefore, concludes that the dissemination and electorates' exposure to hate speech on Facebook undermines national security and cohesiveness, stifles free speech, and threatens the consolidation and survival of democracy in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusion, this study makes the following recommendations:

- i. This study recommends that to foster positive ties between the various ethnic groups, policies and programmes should be put in place to reorient Facebook users who are split along ethnic lines should be developed.
- ii. The electoral law enacted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be strictly enforced to prevent hate speech, especially among Facebook users from being used during political events and campaigns. This will serve as a guide for politicians regarding their behaviour during a campaign.
- iii. Facebook already prohibits hate speech, but this paper recommends going further by mainstreaming cultural quirks to make it easier to spot and remove hate speech. Considering the right to free expression, it also recommends that domestic legislation be strengthened to make hate speech illegal.





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