

# Social Media in Politics: Interrogating Electorate-Driven Hate Speech in Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Campaigns

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*Abstract: Social media has become an indispensable and dominant means of communication and dissemination of information worldwide. This paper focuses on the use of Facebook by political supporters and electorates to canvass for support for their preferred presidential candidates in the 2019 general elections and the underlying hate speech that emanated therefrom. In this context, this paper seeks to critically evaluate how political supporters and electorates used the instrumentality of Facebook to share hate messages during the 2019 presidential election and its impact on Nigeria's political space. The results of this paper indicate widespread dissemination of hate comments by political supporters and electorates in the furtherance of their support for their preferred presidential candidates. The paper advocates responsible use of Facebook in electioneering and the imperative of regulation to guard against the circulation of hate electoral comments that could heat up the political arena and trigger electoral violence.*

*Keywords: Social media, Facebook, hate speech, elections, Nigeria*

## 1. Introduction

The expansion of access to internet services across the world has provided open doors for individuals and groups to engage its limitless capacity to disseminate all kinds of information to designated target audiences at micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (societal) levels. In this context, individuals and groups have used social media in its diverse forms to engage in political discourses and locate targets for their political views and preferences. However, users of social media have turned it into a two-edged sword, which is used for positive social communication in form of information dissemination and negative social communication, like spreading misinformation and hate messages, as well as maligning and impugning other people's character (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Citron, 2014; Alkiviadou, 2019). Thus, social media has been transformed into a source of psychological violence through the instrumentality of hate speech. Generally, hate speech is a speech that is envisaged to create division within the society as it promotes hatred on the basis of individual or group affiliation to race, gender, religion, ethnicity or national origin. Thus, hate speech employs communication strategies that use prejudiced labels to slight and condemn others (Brown, 2017; Alkiviadou, 2019).

Among the various platforms on social media, Facebook has carved a strong niche for itself by commanding enormous patronage in terms of subscription base. Thus, Facebook's subscription base makes it the biggest social network worldwide. It is estimated that as of the second quarter of 2020, Facebook had over 2.7 billion monthly active users (Tankovska, 2021). The composition of active users includes a growing number of virtual communities. Facebook has private and public messaging forums and blogs, which provide avenues for the dissemination of informational contents. Some of these virtual groups use their platforms to spread and share hate messages, especially during election campaigns. The major challenge with hate speech is the uncritical willingness of people to comment on, share and amplify it.

As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, Nigeria has been grappling with how to unite its diverse peoples and reduce tensions that often emanate from the country's primordial diversity. Over the years, following Nigeria's political independence in 1960, there have been sporadic outbreaks of tension and conflicts, that are linked not only to the country's multiethnic and religious diversity but to the use of hate speech to fan the embers of acrimony. Asogwa and Ezeibe (2020) observe that ethnic-based hate speech promotes hostility that eventually degenerates to violence and civil wars. Interestingly, social media platforms have become veritable tools in amplifying and expanding the tensions associated with Nigeria's multiethnic and multi-religious character in real time. Scholars have contended that, hate speech as a driver of tension and conflicts in Nigeria is not new. Asogwa and Ezeibe (2020) point out that Nigeria's military coups of 1966 and the unfortunate civil war that followed, and the various election-related violence are linked to hate speech. What is new about contemporary hate speech in Nigeria is the means of its dissemination. Prior to the emergence of social media, hate speech utilized the rumour mill of informality through the instrumentality of oral anecdotes, songs and pamphlets. Often, ethnonational and religious platforms provided the necessary mechanisms for the dissemination of hate speech. The nature of social media, especially its wide access, unlimited reach and instantaneous messaging capability, has deepened the significance and impact of hate speech within the Nigerian polity.

In Nigeria, politicians often leverage their ethnicity to garner identity-based support for elections and to incite violence. This political strategy for aggregating support, essentially promotes hate speech in the process, as opponents and their supporters exchange volatile comments targeted at denigrating each other (Auwal, 2018; Ezeibe, 2021). The danger that hate speech poses to the polity is far-reaching. Apart from radicalizing individuals, which leads to extreme hateful thoughts and public unrest or disorder, hate speech can find concrete manifestation in physical assault and violent actions and reactions (Ikeanyibe et al., 2017; Ezeibe, 2021). This tendency is particularly evident in the period leading to elections, and spilling over to the election and post-election phases.

The use of social media for electioneering is relatively new in Nigeria. While Nigeria connected to the web in 1996, it was later in 1998 that full accessibility to the internet was achieved (Adomi, 2005). However, real expansion in access to the internet in Nigeria started from 2001, when the country granted the global system for mobile communications (GSM) licenses to designated telecommunication companies. In other words, access to the internet began to evolve and expand from 2001 following the introduction of the GSM. It is estimated that over 100 million Nigerians are currently connected to the internet, with internet penetration standing at 50 percent (Russon, 2020).

Notwithstanding the recency of the incorporation of social media in the political architecture of Nigeria, some studies have been carried out to understand its impact on electoral mobilization, including the employment of hate speech in the process. The focus of such previous scholarship on hate speech, with regard to the Nigerian political system, generally centred on how political actors deployed hate speeches to advance their political interests, especially in maligning their opponents in the pre and post-election periods, as well as, in precipitating violence (Alakali, Faga & Mbursa, 2017; Fasakin et al., 2017; Ikeanyibe et al., 2017; Asogwa & Ezeibe, 2020; Ezeibe, 2021). Thus, very little attention has been devoted to the use of hate speech by political supporters and electorates, to advance their diverse political agenda and its witting or unwitting consequences on peaceful elections.

The 2019 presidential election witnessed an increased deployment of social media by political supporters and electorates, to canvass support for their preferred presidential candidates, often employing the subterfuge of misinformation and hate messages in the process. Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) cleared a total of 73 candidates to contest the 2019 presidential election (INEC, 2019). Notwithstanding the large number of political parties that fielded candidates for the presidential election, political analysts held the view that only two political parties and their candidates, namely Muhammadu Buhari of All Progressives Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of People's Democratic Party (PDP), possessed the political structures and relevant resources to win the election. Hence, this paper narrows its spotlight on these frontline candidates. The focus of this paper is to contextualize hate speech during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election campaigns, from the perspective of political supporters and electorates. The issue examined by this paper is, whether the deployment of social media during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election by political supporters and electorates intensified the incidence of hate speech.

The seeming popularity of social media appeared to have accounted for its patronage by the frontline presidential candidates, namely, Muhammadu Buhari of All Progressives Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of People's Democratic Party (PDP) and their supporters. This popularity could

be linked to the massive increase in social media usage, due to enhanced access to the internet. In 1999, Nigerians had not established much presence on the web. By late 2003, Nigeria had “a total of 750,000 internet users that represented 0.5 per cent of the population (Adomi, 2005). Since then, there has been consistently exponential growth in the sector, with about 100-120 million Nigerians connected to the internet as at 2019 (NOIPolls, 2019; Russon, 2020). With the exponential growth in internet connectivity in Nigeria, social media has assumed a new significance in the country’s political process, both positively and negatively. Now, it is easier to reach a lot of people on various social media platforms by a click of the button, with everyone having the latitude to create and disseminate their contents. In the same vein, the freedom to create contents has opened the floodgate of abuse and misuse of social media through the dissemination of contentious contents such as hate speech.

This paper is divided into seven sections. Following the introductory section is section 2, which deals with literature review. Section 3, provides the theoretical scaffold for the study while section 4, outlines the methods deployed to motorize the study. Sections 5, presents and analyses the data. Section 6, provides a nuanced discussion of the wider implications of hate speech and section 7, concludes the study.

## 2. Brief Review of Literature

In the global context, the meaning and attributes of the concept of hate speech have not achieved a consensual resolution. There is still disputation among scholars, concerning when comments or messages should be considered hateful (Brown, 2017; Alkiviadou, 2019). Notwithstanding the lack of consensus about how hate speech should be defined, there is one aspect of convergence of views – it is a global problem. According to the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, “around the world, we are seeing a disturbing groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance – including rising anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred and persecution of Christians. Social media and other forms of communication are being exploited as platforms for bigotry”. (United Nations, 2019, p.1).

Hate speech takes diverse forms that range from communications or expressions, composed records, advertorials, musicals to write-ups. Hate speech could also be distributed through a number of mediums, including spoken words or utterances, text, images, videos, and even gestures (MacAvaney et al., 2019; Bahador, 2020). Bahador (2020) observes that, the attempt by scholars to unbundle the concept of hate speech and bestow it with definitional preciseness has thrown up multiple interpretations. Often, hate speech is deployed to achieve several objectives that range from inciting hatred, sustaining discrimination, deepening hostility, to unleashing violence.

In an attempt to capture the various nuances and manifestations of hate speech, the United Nations defined it as: "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor" (United Nations, 2019, p. 2).

The importance of the UN definition of hate speech is that, it provides a common benchmark for global understanding of the concept. There is human rights angle to hate speech, considering the reference to such factors as religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other forms of identity. Auwal (2018, p. 58) asserts that hate speech could be equated to “verbal terror” or “a war waged on others by means of word”, due to its psychological impacts and the possibility of reactions that could degenerate to societal violence. Thus, hate speech has negative effects on targeted persons or groups as it undermines their rights to equality and freedom from discrimination (Pálmadóttir & Kalenikova, 2018; MacAvaney et al., 2019).

Despite the recognition of the dangers posed by hate speech, there is a polarization among analysts concerning its regulation. The key bases for the polarization include, lack of definitional consensus, issues of rights to freedom of speech guaranteed under liberal democracy, and cultural divergences or peculiarities (Brown, 2017; Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017). There are two prominent sides to the debate, with divergent positions: one side is in support of, and the other side is opposed to, the overall idea of regulating social media, in order to rein in hate speech.

The pro-regulation group contends that, hate speech is a descendant of free speech. As noted by Chetty and Alathur (2018, p. 108), “hate speech usually opposes freedom of speech and violates fundamental rights of a human being”. Thus, the regulation of hate speech requires distinguishing between legitimate freedom of speech and hate speech, considering that freedom of speech is protected in the constitutions of most countries around the world, as well as in major international human rights treaties (O’Regan, 2018). The state owes its citizens the duty to delineate clear boundaries of free and acceptable speech. Such a delineation must specify, when a speech is to be considered “insulting, degrading, defaming, negatively stereotyping or inciting hatred, discrimination or violence against people in virtue of their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity” (Brown, 2017, p. 419-20). In other words, a critical component would be the establishment of clear procedural rules, including an operational definition of hate speech in order to eliminate ambiguity in what constitutes hate speech and the penalties for it (Pálmadóttir & Kalenikova, 2018).

The anti-regulation group argues that, hate speech regulations are harmful to democratic ideals as they undermine and erode multifarious liberal and democratic values, including respect for self-realization and autonomy, exposure of government incompetence and malfeasance (Weinstein, 2017). In view of the foregoing, hate speech regulation would likely be ineffective at best and often counterproductive, and damaging to democracy and legitimacy, amongst other things (Brown, 2017). Weinstein (2017) avers that, what is called hate speech, has not been demonstrated to be capable of harming political participation to justify regulation. A related contention is that regulation would provide leaders with authoritarian inclinations, to adopt repressive policies that would limit the rights of their citizens to freedom of speech (O’Regan, 2018).

The debate is still on, with strong points for and against the regulation of online spaces to contain the negative impacts of hate speech. A resolution of the debate would be, in balancing hate speech and free speech to avoid encroachments that might undermine the spirit and letters of national constitutional provisions and global conventions with regard to human rights. Both proponents and opponents of online space regulation recognize the imperative of addressing the negativities of hate

speech. Hate speech is linked to “incitement to harm” which is likely to result in actual injury to those being targeted, as well as “degrading of individuals and groups” which portray them as unfree and unequal members of society, thus eroding their human dignity and self-worth (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017; O’Regan, 2018; Chetty & Alathur, 2018). Some countries are in the process of introducing or strengthening existing legislations, to achieve the balance between hate speech and free speech.

The internet has become a vital platform for the propagation of political ideas, as well as initiating political discussions and securing political participation in modern democracies (Ahmad et al., 2019). Nigeria is no exception to the countries that have leveraged the internet to further their democracy. The deployment of internet in Nigeria’s political arena is due to enhanced internet connectivity. There has been a geometric expansion in internet connectivity, as well as access to various social media platforms. From a total of 750,000 internet users in 2003, Nigeria currently has 187.9 million mobile connections (Adomi, 2005; Jacob, 2021). Considering Nigeria’s estimated population of 208 million, it means that about 90.34 percent of Nigerians are connected to the internet with about 104 million categorized as regular internet users (Jacob, 2021). According to Statista, as at January 2021, Nigeria had 33 million active social media users, with WhatsApp being the most popular, as it was preferred by 93 percent of internet users aged 16 to 64 years. Facebook, Youtube and Instagram followed in that order with 86.2 percent, 81.6 percent and 73.1 percent respectively (Sasu, 2022; Kamer, 2022).

A study by Omotayo & Folorunso (2020) reveals that youths leveraged social media in Nigeria’s recent elections, especially Facebook, to participate in the political processes. The active involvement of youths in the 2019 politics through social media platforms, especially Facebook was described as a paradigm-changing development in political participation (Mustapha & Omar, 2020). In driving political engagement on Facebook, sometimes hashtag tools are used for campaigning and mobilizing participation for elections. According to Ofori-Parku and Moscato (2018, p. 2482), “the hashtag (#) symbol is often used to mark conversations on social media... [and] serves as an indexing system, making it easier to store, search for, and collect information”.

The active engagement of social media in politicking in Nigeria came with its own challenges. A major challenge was how to moderate the use of hate speech by both political candidates, their supporters and electorates in order to contain, if not eliminate, its incendiary effect. The danger posed by hate speech in the 2019 elections was real, considering the volatility of Nigeria’s political arena and the ubiquity of electoral violence as recorded in previous elections since 1999. The height of election-related violence in Nigeria was the post-election violence of 2011, in which an estimated 800 to 1,000 people perished (Nwozor & Oshewolo, 2017). Although the violence was instigated by hate speech, there was no evidence indicting social media in its dissemination. This was probably because of low internet access at that time. However, between 2011 and 2019, there was an exponential rise in internet access as millions of Nigerians came online (NOIPolls, 2019; Russon, 2020).

Politics in Nigeria is a power game that is akin to war, due to the high premium attached to political power and attendant benefits. With this mindset among the political elite, it is no surprise that violence tended to characterize all segments of the electoral cycle since 1999 (Nwozor & Oshewolo, 2017; Ezeibe & Ikeanyibe, 2017). In the context of the foregoing, the purveyors of hate

discourse during electoral periods range from elected officials, political parties, party candidates, party stakeholders, the media to the masses (Aboh & Odeh, 2021). The electioneering periods provide the most fertile ground for hate speech and widespread incitement to hatred. In the run-up to the 2015 presidential election, Muhammadu Buhari threatened that “dogs and baboons would be soaked in blood” should the presidential election be rigged (Binniyat, 2012; Ezeibe, 2021). This threat was in the aftermath of the 2011 post-election violence and it heated the polity.

Hate speech is outlawed in Nigeria, especially in political campaigns, because of its capacity to spawn violence. Nigeria’s Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) explicitly forbids hate speech or foul language in electioneering in section 95, thus: "(1) No political campaign or slogan shall be tainted with abusive language, directly or indirectly likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings. (2) Abusive, intemperate, slanderous or base language or insinuations or innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions shall not be employed or used in political campaigns" (see Federal Republic of Nigeria, Electoral Act 2010 (as amended)).

Despite the prohibition of hate speech in Nigeria, its regulation has remained very weak with no recorded convictions. Ezeibe (2021) attributes the weak legal regulation of hate speech to multiethnic and multifaith nature of the country as well as ethnic and class bias. Hate speech in Nigeria is often expressed in line with ethnicity and religion. In other words, there is no distinction in the nature of hate speech generally disseminated, as it is framed in ethnic and religious colours, even when the motive is to achieve political objectives. Political hate speech is often sponsored by political parties and their elites (Ferroggiaro, 2018). The idea is to leverage the sentiments produced by hate speech, to mobilize support and achieve their political goals. The popularity of social media, as a means of disseminating hate speech is linked to its efficiency and inexpensiveness. Efficiency in this context, also connotes the limited censorship of hate speech due to several factors, especially the adoption of a different lexicon that could circumvent detection (Ferroggiaro, 2018). This is unlike the traditional media spaces where operations are guided by a code of conduct and there is a strict demand on media houses to scrutinize materials before dissemination.

Hate speech has also posed a serious challenge in countries around the world. The political violence in several African countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia and Nigeria have links to hate speech (Somerville, 2011; Mohan & Barnes, 2018; Ezeibe, 2021). Ikeanyibe et al. (2017, p. 93) corroborate, “Rwanda’s genocide in 1994, Kenya’s post-election violence in 2008, Burundi’s marred election of 2015 and South Sudan’s unending conflicts are examples of hate-induced violence in Africa”. Interestingly, hate speech in most African countries follows the same pattern: they are often motorized by ethnicity and religion. Asogwa and Ezeibe (2020, p. 2) observe that “ethnic-based hate speech promotes hostility and rejective behaviours which, in turn, become fodder for ethnic rivalry, violence and civil wars”. In Kenya, like Nigeria, the nature of politics is divisive as politicians tend to mobilize along ethnic lines. Politicians in both countries have the penchant of using hate speech as a campaign strategy. Thus, the use of social media in deploying hate speech follows the same pattern. The deployment of hate speech to achieve political ends in Kenya preceded the age of social media. According to Xavier Ole Kaparo, Chair, Kenya’s National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC),

*"Hate speech is so ingrained in day to day relations at all levels of society in Kenya, even though it is often attributed to politicians. The use of negative or derogatory ethnic speech is sometimes associated with the advent multi-party politics in Kenya in the early 1990s, which were characterized by virulent verbal campaigns, often accompanied by insults and demeaning comments against proponents of a multi-party system. It is in this context, that use of hate speech and other forms of negative stereotyping has assumed a central role in Kenya's politics, leading to periodic electoral cycles of violence since 1992" (National Cohesion and Integration Commission, 2017, p. 5).*

The traditional media, particularly the vernacular radio stations, were indicted in the violence that erupted in Kenya following the 2007 elections (Somerville, 2011). Kenya has made some advances in trying to tame hate speech in its body politic by enacting a specific anti-hate speech legislation, the NCIC Act of 2008 (Asogwa & Ezeibe, 2020).

In Ethiopia, hate speech also follows the path of ethnicity. The Ethiopian federation was organized on the basis of ethnicity in 1991. Thus, ethnic cleavages have been used by politicians to intensify and fuel hate speech, with the practical implication being the creation of divisiveness and attendant social fissures and resentment in the country (Chekol, Moges, & Nigatu, 2021). Like in Nigeria, Facebook is a dominant social media platform in Ethiopia, as it accounts for 83.65% users compared to other social networking sites (SNSs) (Workneh, 2020). Facebook's popularity and reach made it a choice platform for public discourse, ventilation of views on events, dissemination of information and connection in the virtual space. However, "the blessing of free speech afforded by Facebook was accompanied by a plethora of counter-democratic challenges, including disinformation/misinformation, political extremism, incitement, and hate speech" (Workneh, 2020, p. 4). Hate speech has also been indicted, as motorizing and sustaining violence in Ethiopia. Workneh (2020, p.4) corroborates, "ethnic-based hate discourses have become rampant to the extent of instigating violence [in Ethiopia]".

The impact of hate speech, goes beyond the direct actors in electoral contests. According to Asogwa and Ezeibe (2020), the election season rhetoric motivated the xenophobic attacks on immigrants in South Africa. Thus, election management bodies (EMBs) across the world have tended to develop codes of conduct and legal instruments to prevent a wide spectrum of actors in the political arena from employing hate speech in their campaigns. The overall objective is, to prohibit the use of hate speech and discriminatory rhetoric aimed at vilifying opponents or inciting groups in the course of campaigns. For instance, in Japan; its Public Offices Election Law demands candidates to refrain from delivering speeches that damage the dignity and honour of others (Mohan & Barnes, 2018). Political parties and EMBs in several African countries, have developed guidelines aimed at outlawing hate speech. These countries include Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Cote' Ivoire, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Nigeria (Asogwa & Ezeibe, 2020).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the public sphere theory, to illuminate how political supporters and electorates leveraged social media platforms to canvass for support for their preferred presidential candidate, while disparaging the opponents and their supporters. The basic conceptualization of the public sphere is linked to Jurgen Habermas. The public sphere implies spatiality, that is, a social site or arena where meanings are articulated and distributed to the collective body, constituted as the public. The public sphere denotes, the “domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open, in principle, to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public” (Habermas, 2019, p. 143). The public sphere provides a seemingly egalitarian platform for mass participation. Although the major promise of the public sphere lies in the possibility of “using reason to further critical knowledge which, in turn, leads to political change” (Kruse, Norris & Flinchum, 2017, p. 62-3), this is not necessarily so. The egalitarian nature of the public sphere neither indicates logicity in the trends of discussions among participants nor necessarily coalesce to consensus.

Social media is akin to the public sphere, due to its pervasiveness and communicative attributes. These communicative attributes enable the formation of communities through the instrumentality of multiple platforms, for the advancement of diverse interests, including political interests. As Kruse et al. (2017, p. 63) have pointed out, “the public sphere requires unlimited access to information, equal and protected participation, and the absence of institutional influence, particularly regarding the economy”. Social media is organized along the line of the aforementioned conditions. Social media, as an embodiment of the public sphere, has been converted into indispensable and ubiquitous communication channels for both political candidates, their supporters and electorates, to directly and indirectly reach out to prospective voters, mobilize supporters, and influence the trend of the public agenda (Stier et al., 2018). Thus, political actors deploy the various social media platforms, especially Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to advance their political campaigns and mobilization.

The vastness of the internet has facilitated the creation of hundreds of social networking sites, thus making it possible for the web to be a truly public sphere. Available user statistics have indicated that the most popular social networks by virtue of active users include Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram and TikTok among others (Pew Research Center, 2021). Social media networks provide communication channels to billions of people daily. In line with the core attributes of the public sphere, which include open dialogue, unlimited access to information, equal and seemingly protected participation, social media represents “a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates – ideally in an unfettered manner – and also the formation of political will” (Dahlgren, 2005). In this context, social media as a public sphere is deployed by individuals and groups, to canvas for support for their ideas and ideals, including political convictions.

The intrinsic attributes of the public sphere are embedded in social media. In the milieu of social media, people enjoy the rights related to freedoms of association, thought, expression, including the privilege to uninhibitedly participate in civic discourses and deliberative democratic conversations

which promote participatory democracy (Dahlgren, 2005; Adut, 2012; Kruse et al., 2017). The contemporary relevance of social media, is the dismantling of walls of traditional media operations, which has enabled private people to come together as a public. Social media as a public sphere is a new form of mediated publicness, due to the reconstitution of the boundaries between public and private (Thompson, 1995). The distinctions between the traditional media and new media are embedded in several factors, namely, despatialized simultaneity, characterized by the rupture of spatiotemporal restrictions, making it possible for people to share the experience of simultaneity despite the fact that events occur in remote locales; and interactive and dialogical relationship (Thompson, 1995; Adut, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Gak, 2016; Men et al., 2018). Specifically, social media platforms provide linkages for interactivity, for wider and more diverse audiences across national boundaries.

This public sphere theory, enables a superior understanding of public spaces and events, including the communications through the instrumentality of Facebook. In Nigeria, Facebook is the most used social media platform after WhatsApp (NOIPolls, 2019), making it a choice tool among political actors. Facebook's modern messaging platform provides avenue for political actors to circulate campaign messages. Social media, as a critical element of deliberative democracy, can both enhance and derail liberal democracy, especially in the context where an individual engages in coercive tactics, which often degenerate to hate speech, to sway opinions or denigrate opponents.

#### 4. Methods

The data for this study were generated from the survey of Facebook posts, which covered the period 18th August 2018 to 21st February 2019. The reason for choosing this timeframe was because it coincided with the window provided for electioneering by Nigeria's election management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). In the election timetable approved by INEC, specific periods were set aside for electioneering, both for party primaries and the main elections. A total of 73 political parties fielded presidential and vice presidential candidates for the election (INEC, 2019). Out of these 73 political parties, only three, namely APC, PDP and All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), have governors at the state level and representatives at the National Assembly. The rest of the political parties have no real political foothold, as such. Of these three parties under reference, APGA controls only one state - Anambra state - and therefore, could be regarded as a regional party. The APC and PDP are truly national parties, as they have state governors and representatives at the National Assembly from across the six geopolitical zones of the country. The national spread of the two parties formed the basis for analysts and scholars to see the 2019 presidential election as a straight fight between APC and PDP. This consideration also formed the basis for the choice and focus of this paper.

The sources of data for this study were the comments made by political supporters and electorates on the verified Facebook walls of the two major presidential candidates for the 2019 presidential election, namely, Muhammadu Buhari of All Progressives Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of People's Democratic Party (PDP). The two presidential candidates also have their vice presidential counterparts. However, this study did not capture them in its focus and analysis.

The criteria used by this study to designate comments as hate speech expanded the narrow, traditional conceptualization of hate speech. The study went beyond hate speech “as attacks or uses of pejorative or discriminatory language against a person or a group, based on identities linked to their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor” (United Nations, 2019, p. 1). It broadly conceptualized hate speech to include personal attacks, insults, discriminatory and dehumanizing comments, demonization, peddling of falsehood and incitement to violence.

This study initially identified and evaluated 3,500 comments contributed by political supporters and electorates, on diverse political issues on the verified Facebook walls of these two major presidential candidates, within the period under study. The broad basis for identifying the initial 3,500 comments was their general relevance to the posts being commented on. After sifting through the posts, 472 posts were chosen as meeting the criteria of hate comments. Although videos, images, emojis and other forms of data accompanied some of the textual data, the study limited its focus to textual materials in its analysis. The number of hate comments analysed in this study was determined, based on the conditions of adequacy and representativeness as well as considerations of manageability.

The study used thematic qualitative text analysis as its analytical framework. As an analytical tool, thematic analysis is used in qualitative studies to analyse texts in terms of frequency of themes (Kuckartz, 2014). Thus, it provides the framework for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns, or common themes, within data in order to evolve deeper insights (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). The process involves a systematic coding and categorization of data, based on consistently recurring topics, ideas and patterns of meaning in order to determine the trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and the structures and discourses of communication (Figgou, & Pavlopoulos, 2015).

## 5. Data Presentation and Analysis

This study applied three conditions in determining the eligibility of comments for inclusion. The first, was that prospective comments must be made by political supporters and electorates registered as Facebook users, with functional accounts, in line with the stipulated policy criteria of the platform. The second condition, was that, such comments must come from political supporters and electorates following either Buhari or Abubakar or both on Facebook. The third condition, was that, such comments must have been made directly or indirectly on the walls of the candidates in connection with the 2019 presidential election. The timeframe of such comments, was within the 190 days approved by INEC for campaigns, and which formed the period of focus in this study that is, 18th August 2018 to 21st February 2019. It is worthy of note, that there was no personal contact with the participants, as the setting was the virtual space (Facebook). The issue of privacy concerns informed the decision of the authors, not to display the screenshots of representative posts mentioned in the study. Thus, these posts were reproduced without any identifying tags. Additionally, some of the comments written in Pidgin English and interspersed with vernacular have been slightly modified to make them intelligible to the global audience.

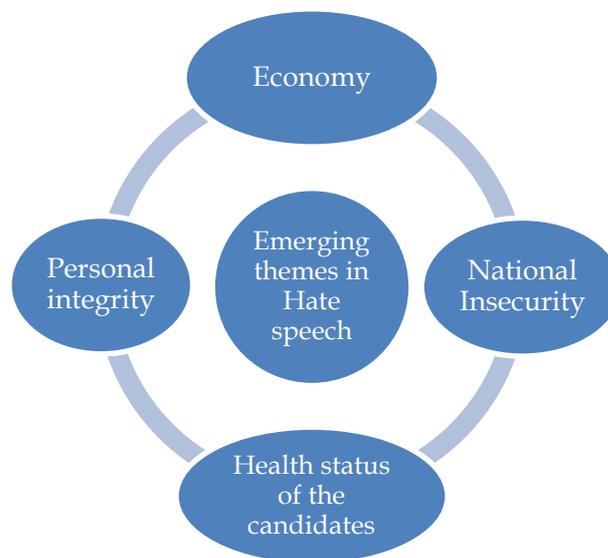
Table 1: Detailed analysis of content manifest as at February 2019

Presidential Candidates	Date Created	Followers	Photos	Videos	Likes
Buhari’s Facebook Page as at 8th May, 2019	22 Dec. 2014	788,166	3,875	42	777,167
Abubakar’s Facebook Page as at 8th May, 2019	27 May 2008	764,000	3,544	37	764,000

Source: Authors' compilation

This study identified, reviewed, and processed 472 posts considered as, satisfying the criteria for hate speech and they were also classified and used for this study. A critical examination and categorization of these posts, showed trends that have been crystalized into themes. Figure 1 below, shows the emerging themes from the hate speech posts.

Figure 1: Emerging themes from hate speech contents. Source: Compiled by the authors



### 5.1. Economy

The Nigerian economy is essentially reliant on crude oil. Thus, fluctuations in the price of oil in the international oil market have always had domino effects on the Nigerian economy. The paradox of the Nigerian economy was (and still is) that, despite the huge earnings from oil, the country is still entrapped in serious structural challenges manifesting in widespread poverty. According to Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) sources, Nigeria earned US\$ 614.61 billion

from its oil and gas sector between 1999 and 2016 (Nwozor et al, 2020a). Similarly, Nigeria reportedly earned US\$206.06 billion from crude oil exports, from 2015 to 2019 (Adegboyega, 2020).

Yet, despite these enormous financial inflows, Nigeria occupies a dominant position on the global poverty map. In 2018, Nigeria earned the unenviable status of poverty capital of the world after having overtaken India as the country with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty (Adebayo, 2018). The major reason for Nigeria's descent to extreme poverty has been attributed to poor management of oil earnings by successive governments (Eboh, 2020). Successive Nigerian budgets have preponderantly focused on recurrent expenditures, mainly political governance, rather than capital expenditures (Eboh, 2020). A report by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) estimated that, 82.9 million Nigerians were living below poverty in 2019. Interestingly, the poverty benchmark used by the NBS was N137,430 (US \$381.75 at the exchange rate of N360/US\$1) a year (National Bureau of Statistics 2020).

Thus, in the run up to the election, the question of how to revamp the economy and effectively address poverty in the country was central to the campaign policies and promises of both presidential candidates. The question of economic recovery was extremely important, considering that Nigeria had only exited economic recession in 2018. The Nigerian economy had slowed down in 2015, as the growth in its annual real gross domestic product (GDP) declined from 6.2% year-on-year to 2.7% year-on-year (PwC, 2017). The impact of this decline was that, by 2016, the Nigerian economy recorded its first recession since 1991. However, by 2018, Nigeria exited the recession.

A large amount of hate comments reflected on this issue, as several Facebook posts displayed exasperation of various dimensions. A representative Facebook post parodically and derisively displayed: "BUHARIYA means recession, BUHARIYA means poverty, BUHARIYA means hunger, BUHARIYA means high cost of living... Only brainless person will support this evil government". Another post read, "only bloodbath and death will await those who support this ethnic bigot, Buhari, to win a second term. So vote for Buhari, vote for more suffering. This man has destroyed our economy".

Following Nigeria's exit from recession, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that, even though the country had exited recession, it was still vulnerable, as government economic policies had not "yet, boosted non-oil non-agricultural activity, brought inflation close to the target range, contained banking sector vulnerabilities, or reduced unemployment" (International Monetary Fund, 2018). More comments derided Buhari and his government. One comment read, "clueless Buhari and his monkey cabinet are not capable of fashioning workable economic policies. Vote this bigot out!" And yet another hate comment flagged: "God forbid Buhari's second term. It will be next level of recession, hunger and death for Nigerians".

Atiku Abubakar was also not spared. His message of "Let's get Nigeria Working Again" was variously distorted and his person attacked. For instance, a post displayed, "you are a non-Nigerian. Go to your fatherland, Cameroon and make its economy work". "Another post read, "Atiku, you are a corrupt man. You will sell the economy and all of us to the highest bidder...". The use of such terms as "brainless person", "evil government", "bloodbath", "death", "suffering", "non-Nigeria",

and “corrupt man” among others, depicted extreme emotions designed to explicitly and deliberately trigger hostility.

Both candidates have antecedents of being in the presidency at some point in time. While Buhari was military head of state, between 1984 and 1985 and later, elected a democratic president in 2015, Abubakar was vice president, between 1999 and 2007. Thus, the hate comments referenced their various performances and achievements, as perceived by the commentators. Performance is an important indicator in the political realm and is used to measure the extent to which a political officeholder has actualized their agenda, as encapsulated in their campaign promises. Thus, performance entails the achievement of set goals. Such an achievement must have direct impact on the wellbeing of the masses. In other words, the perception of the performance of an administration is linked to, the extent to which its programs have been leveraged to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest majority, rather than for the privileged few. Although government entities have evolved tools with which to measure their performances (Newcomer, 2007), in Nigeria, such government-supervised measurements have lacked credibility due to manipulations that result in a disconnect with realities. Thus, satisfactory performance will always provide basis for evaluations and projections.

## 5.2. Personal integrity

The personality of both Abubakar and Buhari were put under the searchlight of critical evaluation by posts bordering on hate speech. Within this context, their personal and political integrity came under scrutiny. Essentially, one’s personality defines the totality of their being. An individual’s behaviour reflects their personality and informs how different they are from others. Notwithstanding the scholarly disputations of what integrity means, this study generally conceptualizes it as consistent honesty, exemplified by, uncompromising adherence to the highest moral and ethical principles and values. The key attributes of integrity from this context will include honesty, incorruptibility, impartiality, justice, and accountability (Huberts, 2018). Thus, the paramountcy of integrity in political leadership has been emphasized. As Christie (n.d) has stressed, “a leader’s actions are indeed central to integrity, but followers and stakeholders are those who assess this integrity on a daily basis”. In political context, integrity means the exercise of political power honestly and truthfully, in a consistent manner, for the greater good of the people.

The importance of political integrity in the Nigerian context is due to, the pervasive negative impact of corruption in the polity, especially its detrimental impacts on national development (Nwozor et al., 2020b). A major virtue of Buhari, which endeared him to the masses in the 2015 presidential election was his fabled personal integrity. Like in 2015, the integrity question was central to the 2019 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. There was no public indictment of Buhari’s personal integrity in the area of embezzling or diverting state resources to fund personal and group agenda. However, the controversy surrounding his educational certificate, his support for Fulani herders and the condonation of political associates, suspected to be corrupt, were flagged and used by the opposition political parties in their campaigns, as well as, political analysts. These controversies provided the ground for hate comments. Some of such posts include: a comment that displayed the picture of Buhari with the caption, “clueless president...certificate forger, a disgrace 2 (sic) Nigeria as a whole”. Another comment recorded, “God forbid for this useless man to win again.

Sir, you wasted the 4 years we gave you. U (sic) have no integrity even if U (sic) pretend to do so. Go back to ur (sic) useless village in Daura". And yet another post called Buhari "father of certificate forgery and fraudster".

Several posts also attacked Abubakar's person on the score of integrity. A post against Abubakar read, "Let's get Nigeria working again so you can loot it... Atiku-looter". Another post read, "Atiku will sell the NNPC [Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation] and pocket the money with his fellow corrupt friends. Corrupt man, you have lost already". Buhari was dubbed clueless, which in the Nigerian context, meant that he was incapable of asserting presidential authority in addressing national challenges. These hateful posts against Buhari on Facebook appeared to resonate in the camps of opposition political parties, albeit in subtle manner. For instance, the former senate president, Bukola Saraki was quoted, as asserting that, Buhari had no integrity on account of his unwillingness to prosecute, supposedly corrupt, people that were part of his government (Busari, 2019). Similarly, a political analyst commenting on various areas of concern posited, the "issues of President Muhammadu Buhari's educational qualification and alleged sectionalism in his pattern of appointments have combined to cast a cloud of doubt on the president's supposed integrity" (Uwugiaren, 2016).

### 5.3. Health status of the candidates

The demands associated with being the president of a country could be quite tasking. Thus, the health status of candidates jostling for such positions is a major factor in the campaign process. In 2010, the former president of Nigeria, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua died in office. During the campaigns for the 2007 presidential election that brought Yar'Adua to power, his health was showing obvious signs of deterioration but the leadership of his party then, was in denial, until he died in office on 5th May 2010. Yar'Adua's intermittently prolonged absence, as a result of his sickness created a political vacuum that projected the country negatively to the international community (Al Jazeera, 2010). In addition, Yar'Adua's absence sparked a political and constitutional crisis when his prolonged absence left the country more or less rudderless. Constitutionally, the president is expected to hand over to the vice president when he is on vacation or incapable of discharging his duties (see Section 145 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, as amended). However, Yar'Adua did not transmit any written declaration to Nigeria's National Assembly, as stipulated in the constitution. The Nigerian senate had to resolve the political imbroglio by invoking the doctrine of necessity, to appoint the then vice president, Goodluck Jonathan, as acting president.

Buhari spent a large part of his first term in office on medical tourism to the United Kingdom, which created a vacuum in governance in the country. The disappointment of Nigerians was that during his campaign in 2015, he criticized medical tourism and promised to revamp Nigeria's dilapidated healthcare system. Some Facebook comments read, "This Buhari man is a walking corpse, he can't be president", "He [Buhari] will only be a vegetable president", and "it is clear that Nigerians don't need lifeless president again". It is estimated that Nigerian elites spend US\$1 billion annually on medical tourism (Elebeke, 2014; BBC News, 2016). However, Buhari never kept his promise to reverse medical tourism and its detrimental effect on Nigeria's economy. Soon after assuming office in 2015, Buhari embarked on trips to London for medical reasons. According to reports, within eight months of assuming office, Buhari took his first six-day medical trip between February 5 and

10 2016 (Yusuf, 2021). By the end of his first tenure in 2019, Buhari had spent a cumulative period of one hundred and seventy-seven days in the UK for medical treatment (Yusuf, 2021). In addition to medical tourism, there has been consistent “brain drain” in the medical sector, which aggravates the precarious situation in the country’s healthcare delivery system (Guardian Africa Network, 2016).

Thus, Buhari’s health status and attendant medical tourism were big issues in the run up to the 2019 presidential election. It appeared to have opened the door to all manner of hate posts, including those wishing him dead. Some of such Facebook posts read, “dead man walking”, “why didn’t the National Assembly impeach this man while he was lying lifeless in the UK”, “Lifeless president. I am ashamed to call this man without WAEC [West African Examination Council’s School Certificate] president”.

Abubakar’s health profile was not much of an issue. The reason could be that, since he left public office in 2007, issues about his personal life were not in the public domain and, therefore, not subjected to public scrutiny. So, there were few comments on his health status that could be categorized as hate speech. Most of the comments tended to centre on whether he was as healthy as his team had portrayed him. One hate comment had queried, “we know that Atiku is an old man and as such, does he not have one leg in the grave already? How healthy is he?” Another commentator posted: “Atiku and Buhari are the same one and one pence. Is Aso Rock now an old people’s home?” There was also a Facebook post that read: “what have we not seen in this country? After stealing our money as VP, how are we sure that his own karma of medical condition will not explode in the presidency?”

As already noted, the issue of revamping the country’s health sector was considered a serious campaign issue. The agitation against medical tourism was anchored on the belief and simple logic that, a president who would not embark on medical tourism would be concerned about resuscitating Nigeria’s healthcare system (Guardian Africa Network, 2016).

#### **5.4. National insecurity**

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) explicitly provides, “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government” (see section 14, subsection 2(b)). In the run up to the 2015 presidential election, Buhari promised Nigerians that he would deal with the security challenges in the country by destroying the Boko Haram Terrorist group. As a retired military general, there was no reason to doubt him. Internal security was under serious threat considering that total fatalities from insecurity were enough to classify Nigeria as a country in a civil war. The conventional fatality threshold to classify a country as being in a civil war is, 1,000 battle deaths (Guseh & Oritsejafor, 2019). However, under Buhari, insecurity intensified between 2015 and 2019.

From 2014 when Fulani herders killed 1,229 people (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), fatalities linked to them were upswing such that “between 2016 and 2018, Fulani herders reportedly organized an estimated 312 attacks across 22 states and Abuja, which resulted in the death of between 3,641 and 4,000 people” (Nwozor et al., 2021, p. 1). Thus, by 2019, the security crisis in Nigeria had become far more complex than what Buhari inherited. Nwozor et al (2021) aver that the exacerbation of insecurity was aided by access to military-grade weapons, widening spheres of attacks,

and nonchalance of the government to the pseudo-military expeditions of Fulani herders across Nigeria. Since every part of Nigeria had felt the negative impact of insecurity, it was a serious issue in the 2019 elections. Thus, hate comments relating to insecurity were not only numerous but profoundly venomous. Additionally, the hate comments targeted the candidates, as well as negatively profiled the Fulani. Interestingly, both presidential candidates are from the Fulani ethnic group, notwithstanding the disputations about who was more Fulani than the other (Aworinde, 2019; Janah, 2019).

With specific reference to insecurity, a Facebook comment directed at Buhari rhetorically asked, “you promised to end insurgency within 3 months in office. What are you still waiting for? Refund whatever money you have spent as president and resign. Blood sucker, you are a disappointment”. Another hate comment read: “No to Buhari’s second term. Buhari and his Fulani murderers will face God’s judgement”.

Apart from attacks alleged to have been masterminded and executed by herders, insecurity was worsened by the targeted abduction of school children by Boko Haram. The first of such abductions, was in 2014 when 276 schoolgirls were kidnapped by Boko Haram (Ajakaiye et al, 2021). The Chibok girls’ abduction sparked an international outrage that mobilized support on social media for the release of the girls, with the hashtag #bringbackourgirls (Auwal, 2018; Ajakaiye et al, 2021). The question of how to rescue these girls constituted one of the hottest topics of the 2015 presidential campaigns. Buhari continually promised that, if elected president, he would facilitate the reunion of the abducted girls with their families. Apart from the girls that escaped from their Boko Haram captors and were found fortuitously, the only achievement of Buhari in resolving the Chibok girls’ abduction was the negotiated release of only 82 girls in 2017 (Reuters, 2021). The implication was that the whereabouts of about 113 Chibok schoolgirls could still not be accounted for (Reuters, 2021).

While the Chibok girls’ abduction was still unresolved, Boko Haram struck again, abducting about 110 schoolgirls from Government Girls' Science and Technical College, Dapchi, Yobe State on February 19, 2018. Although most of the girls were released a month later, about nine of them could not be accounted for (BBC News, 2018). Apart from these major abductions targeted at schoolgirls, there were other sundry incidents. In fact, under Buhari, kidnapping became a major security threat. According to Statista data, while 245 people were kidnapped in terrorist attacks in 2017, 445 and 390 persons were abducted in 2018 and 2019 respectively by unknown gunmen and bandits (Varrella, 2021).

Facebook comments mirrored the frustrations of Nigerians, and accounted for the pungency of the hate posts. One post read, “For being a failure, Buhari ought to have resigned instead of seeking a second term. Shame on his shameless person”. Other representative hate comments against Buhari displayed: “4+4 = failure. Old man, return to Daura your village to babysit your grandchildren, senile old man”; No positive minded Nigerian will support this trash man again”; and “God forbid! Affliction shall not rise up the second time. Buhari is an affliction”.

Atiku was equally attacked by hate commentators. One comment displayed: “Atiku is a Fulani man. He is clannish like them. The murderous blood runs in his vein”. Yet other representative hate comments that tended to negatively profile the Fulani proclaimed: “Sir, as a Fulani man, u (sic) are

part of the problem” and “Can anything good come from a Fulani man like Atiku? With your brothers on murderous campaign to steal peoples land, can you stop them?”

There were several bases for the frustrations that spawned the hate comments. The Nigerian government allowed Fulani herders to move around with military-grade weapons, even when Nigerian laws outlawed civilians from handling weapons of such calibre without a police permit (Nwozor et al, 2021). The federal government’s noncommittal response to the Fulani herders’ attacks on farming communities was interpreted as Buhari protecting his “brothers”, being a Fulani himself. Several posts mirrored the feeling of many Nigerians, albeit in hateful manner. A hate comment against Buhari read, “security was the pillar of your campaign & here we are 4 years after with worst security, you are indeed a useless man. I wonder why you wanna (sic) remain in power”. Another post read, “seriously, does this man from the nomadic tribe want to remain president after his colossally failed first term in office?”, Yet another said, “Buhari is a Fulani militant and Boko Haramist (sic) combined”.

## 6. Discussion

Social media, especially Facebook, which is the focus of this paper, played a prominent role in Nigeria’s 2019 presidential election. Almost all the political parties and their presidential candidates maintained a presence on Facebook. In the same vein, political supporters and electorates used Facebook positively, to mobilize support for their preferred candidates, and negatively, to dispense hate speech. The volume of hate speech churned out was quite alarming and tended to heat up the polity. The acrimonious exchanges between the two major political parties (APC and PDP) in the course of the campaigns on various platforms, including Facebook, created a possibility of violence. This necessitated the signing of peace accord by the presidential candidates (Mbah, 2019).

The hate speech posted on the two candidates’ Facebook accounts was in connection with their various posts. These posts included the display of their various campaign posters with messages on specific areas of national development, updates on their campaign tours through pictures and videos, piecemeal release of their manifestoes, and sundry thoughts on national issues. The feedback/comments on these posts were not generally hateful. There were as much positive and encouraging comments as there were spiteful and hateful ones. Beside the comments, there were also hundreds of likes for the various pictures and videos.

There are common features in the hate speech posted on the walls of Buhari’s and Atiku’s Facebook accounts by political supporters and electorates. One, the hate comments attacked their persons instead of discussing political issues. Two, the hate posts negatively profiled their ethnic affiliation and presented them in their hate-inspired categorization. And lastly, the cultural peculiarity of the Nigerian setting, including the use of Pidgin English, often masked hate speech, making them undetectable by Facebook’s algorithm and automated processes. Although social media companies, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube use automated detection tools and have increasingly reported flagged and/or removed content, there are still limitations that are embedded in detecting culturally peculiar slangs and jargons that reflect hate speech.

Interestingly, most of the commentators did not overly leverage the features on Facebook such as “like” and “share” in disseminating their posts. The various original posts by the presidential candidates on their Facebook walls attracted both comments and expressions of “likes”. While the “likes” for all the posts by Buhari for the period under study totalled 777,167, those of Abubakar were 764,000 likes. For the comments from political supporters and electorates, the “like” emoji was sparingly deployed. The average number of “likes” for both positive and negative comments hovered around eight “likes” per comment. It was obvious that political supporters and electorates preferred to make comments than to perfunctorily express solidarity through the use of “like” or “share” features. Thus, most of the followers and supporters of these presidential candidates tended to prefer commenting on posts. Most of the 472 comments used for this study were not directly in response to the original posts by the presidential candidates. Some of them were reactions to other people’s comments, thus, creating threads and sub-threads to the original posts by the presidential candidates.

A point to be noted is that social media hate speech alone, does not necessarily translate to hate crime in the absence of physical expressions of violence. However, the danger that hate speech poses to society is its propensity to catalyse violence, including violent expressions of hate in real space, or to serve as a lubricant to the machinery of political violence (Ikeanyibe et al., 2017). The direct impact of hate speech through social media, especially Facebook, was its contribution to heating up the Nigerian polity and paving the way for projections and speculations of violence-prone elections. The continuous flow of hate speech from various SNSs sustained the prophecies of political armageddon in Nigeria. This contributed to the peace accords, signed by the major presidential candidates, to refrain from violence and the use of hate speech directly or indirectly. The high prospects of violence had a negative impact on voter turnout. At 34.75 percent, voter turnout for the presidential election was appallingly low, in comparison with previous presidential elections in Nigeria, as well as, in Africa (Onapajo & Babalola, 2020; Angerbrandt, 2020). Although a combination of factors contributed to the abysmally low voter turnout, which ranged from initial postponement of the election, growing public disenchantment to mistrust in the electoral process, the widespread deployment of hate speech on SNSs, including Facebook, contributed enormously in creating fear of violence and negatively affecting voter turnout (Onapajo & Babalola, 2020; Angerbrandt, 2020; Ezeibe, 2021).

## 7. Conclusion

The advances in ICT have found practical anchorage and usage in the realm of politics. Social media currently provides platforms for political mobilization and participation. It is estimated that about 104 million Nigerians are connected to the internet and are regular users (Russon, 2020; Jacob, 2021). The fast penetration of internet in Nigeria means that, almost half of the country’s population can be reached virtually. Interestingly, youths constitute the bulk of the population with access to the internet.

Nigeria’s 2019 general elections recorded the highest rate of social media deployment. The Nigerian politicians, their supporters and electorates deployed social media for all forms of political activities. Nigerian youths were quite enthusiastic in the use of social media to drum support for the

candidates, especially for the presidential elections. As Omotayo & Folorunso (2020) have observed, youths leveraged social media, especially Facebook to actively participate in Nigeria's 2019 electoral processes. The two frontline candidates, Buhari and Abubakar, equally utilized Facebook to market their candidature and manifestoes as well as mobilize support.

As a public sphere and by its nature, engagements on Facebook are quite interactive, thus providing the right platform for people to air the views uncensored. It is the uncensored nature of social media, especially Facebook, that provides opportunities for extremism in exercising freedom of speech. As already noted, the two frontline candidates in the 2019 presidential election used Facebook to outline their manifestoes and canvass for votes. Facebook walls of these candidates were replete with hate comments from supporters and non-supporters, as they brawled on this virtual space. Thus, the nature of hate speech that played out in Nigeria's 2019 presidential election was electorate-and-supporter-driven. The political supporters and electorates promoted hate speech in an effort to impugn or discredit non-preferred candidates to the benefit of preferred candidates. In other words, there was a widespread dissemination of hate comments by political supporters and electorates in the furtherance of their support for their preferred presidential candidates. Although Facebook has a policy against hate speech, this paper recommends deepening this policy by mainstreaming cultural peculiarities, in order to easily identify and pull down hate speech. It further recommends, the strengthening of domestic laws to ensure the criminalization of hate speech within the context of rights to freedom of speech.

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