

AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH ON SOCIO-CULTURAL AFFILIATIONS IN NIGERIA

Latifah Efua Anavberokhai* Peter Eshioke Egielewa*

*Department of Mass Communication, Edo State University Uzairue

Abstract

This study assesses the audience perception of online hate speech on socio-cultural affiliations in Nigeria examining specifically Nigerians' familiarity with online hate speech via social media platforms. The survey method was used to obtain data. 400 quantities of questionnaire was distributed to adult Nigerians across three states in Nigeria (Edo, Lagos and Abuja) and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Based on the Perception and Attitude Change Theories, the study found that most Nigerians (89%) are very familiar with the concept of hate speech; X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram are the dominantly used platforms in the dissemination of online hate speeches and the least used are LinkedIn, Pinterest and Reddit. The study also found out that most hate speeches are disseminated in text format (39.4%) and in picture and graphical format (24.8%) and women (62%) are the most targeted gender group, Islam (51%) are the most targeted religious group, and Hausa (33%) is the most targeted ethnic group. The study recommends sensitisation of Nigerians on hate speech, awareness campaigns to promote openness and acceptance of diversity, and technology and media companies should put measures in place to monitor their platforms and prevent them from being the hub of hate speech dissemination.

Keywords: *Audience, Online Hate Speech, Socio-cultural Affiliations, Perception, Nigeria.*

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Introduction

The concept of hate speech, according to Msughter (2024) citing the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2016), embodies a threat that damages the lives of people and increases the sense of fear in communities around the world. While the concept has been hard to define in its entirety, a common definition that has been recurrently used even decades later is that hate speech is most times considered to include communication of animosity of a person or even a group based on or because of certain characteristics such as their racial background, their skin colour, their national origin, sexual orientation, religion, gender, and even because of a disability they have (Nockleby, 2000). Typical hate speech, as stated by Curtis (2023), involves 1) epithets and slurs; 2) statements that promote malicious stereotypes; 3) speech intended to incite hatred or violence against a group and 4) nonverbal depictions

and symbols such as the Nazi swastika.

According to Futtner and Brusco (2021), many countries in the world have alarmingly witnessed an upturn in hate speech in recent years and this has birthed a situation where there is a subsequent rise in hate crimes and discrimination aimed at minority groups. Ring (2013), citing the Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC), writes that between 2001 and 2012, there has been a 69 per cent rise in the number of hate groups. This rise is attributed by Futtner and Brusco (2021) to the abuse of the human right of freedom of expression and opinion by normal citizens in a society and also by those in power who are supposed to curb the phenomenon, and the digital technologies that promote rapid spread of information and the lack of accountability which stems from an individual's ability to post anonymously on these platforms powered by digital technologies. These new (digital) technologies, majorly powered by the internet, have changed the face

of communication and culture all around the world. The de-centralised nature of the internet, according to Ring (2013), paints it as the perfect environment for both professionals and non-professionals (amateurs) to develop, create, and disseminate information, ideas, art, music, photos, and so much more. Also, Ring (2013) states, that the democratic nature of the internet makes it populated with websites and platforms that are dedicated to the incitement of hatred against particular ethnic, religious, racial, or sexually-oriented groups with several of the sites encouraging individuals to create and disseminate hateful narratives (rhetoric) in various media formats while other individuals go as far as calling for physical violence against what they consider and term the out-group of that society.

Online hate speech, is defined as any form of communication that degrades, dishonours or makes inferior a person or a group based on certain characteristics such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or political affiliation (Zhang & Luo, 2018 as cited in Castano-Pulgarin et al., 2021). It has been recognised as a growing issue which has negative effects on mental health, general well-being and online management, and in extreme cases, lead to offline harassment and violence such as physical assaults, damage to properties, and even tragedies such as shootings or bombings (eSatefy Commissioner, n.d.; Stop Hate UK, n.d.). Online hate speech goes beyond the traditional hate speech (offline hate speech) as it remains hosted on the internet which makes it usually permanent. It can spread and travel across the web to a large audience quickly and then there is the factor of anonymity which protects the “haters” who create the posts that incite hate against individuals and groups. Also, its prevalence, despite a lot of studies stating it to be a common phenomenon in the world we live in today, is difficult to assess due to the lack of appropriate date and robust measurement tools (Stop Hate UK, n.d.).

Asides all of this, studies such as that of Schäfer et al. (2022) show that online hate speech can fuel already existing prejudiced views and opinions of various groups which then leads to “increased polarization in society” where groups are divided greatly and segregated for one reason or the other. Schäfer et al. (2023) also write that because hate speech per definition usually targets social groups, it most likely affects the way social groups are viewed or perceived as stereotypes play an important role when it comes to the perception of social groups.

Hate speech in Nigeria was defined in 2019 by the National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speeches, couriered by Senator Abdullahi Aliyu Sabi, as any published material, written or visual, by an individual which is either threatening, abusive, or

insulting, or involves the use of threatening, abusive, or insulting words to stir up ethnic hatred (Nwabufo, 2020).

The phenomenon of hate speech in Nigeria, according to Adedokun (2019), is not new but one that is recurrent not just in the country but in the world at large. Over the years, speeches have been given and statements have been made - both by those in power and regular citizens - with polluted words, phrases, and sentences used to attack fellow Nigerians for one reason or the other, usually based on religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, and even sex (gender). Some of these speeches, which were based on tribal (ethnic) and religious sentiments, have led to crises in the country such as the Ilorin religious conflict of 1986, the Bauchi crises of 1992, the Jos Crises of 2001, the Kaduna crises of 2000, and the Benue Crises of 2018 (Uroko & Obiorah, 2021).

Enahoro (2017) and Alkali et al. (2017) in their research works have written that hate speech has grown with the popularity of social media where Nigerians, like other nationalities in the countries of the world, are allowed to air whatever views they have while being shrouded with the protective cloak of anonymity that these social media platforms provide despite the laws being put in place in the country to curb or at least reduce hate speech. Polluted statements that carry one agenda or the other are shared online alongside foul languages and slurs, all of which are targeted towards one individual or another, one group or the other and even one institution or another.

The implications of all of this, according to Alkali et al (2017), include unwanted censorship [as witnessed in 2020 with the ban of the popular social media platform, Twitter (now X), following the platform's deletion of a “controversial” tweet by the then President, Muhammadu Buhari, and the aftermath that had social media platforms having to be registered with the national body in order to operate in the country], geocentricism, and the isolation of minority groups. Other implications, according to Uroko and Obiorah (2021), include the further intensification of ethnic tension, ethno-religious disunity, and the calls for disintegration such as those made by the Afenifere of Western Nigeria, the Ohanaeze of Eastern Nigeria, and most recently, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

Although the impacts of hate speech in Nigeria cannot be overemphasised as it has done a lot of harm, there is a gap in the research of whether or not these hate speeches - particularly those made online due to the popularity of the various digital platforms - help influence the perception shaping process and the relationships of Nigerians with the various social

groups in the country; political groups, religious groups, ethnic groups, and even gender groups. This study, therefore, seeks to determine whether online hate speech influences the societal perceptions Nigerians have and how Nigerians relate with other Nigerians after being exposed to online hate speech posts.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To ascertain the level of familiarity of Nigerians with online hate speech.
- ii. To investigate the social media platforms frequently used in the online dissemination of hate speeches.
- iii. To determine the formats in which online hate speeches are distributed.
- iv. To identify the groups online hate speeches are majorly targeted at.
- v. To assess the audience's perception of the influence of online hate speech on socio-cultural affiliations in Nigeria.

Research Questions

- i. What is the level of familiarity Nigerians have with the concept of online hate speech?
- ii. What social media platforms are frequently used in the online dissemination of hate speeches?
- iii. What are the formats of the disseminated online hate speeches?
- iv. What social groups do online hate speeches majorly target?
- v. What is the audience's perception of the influence of online hate speech on socio-cultural affiliations in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Online Hate Speech

The concept of online hate speech, sometimes referred to as "Cyberhate" (Rudnicki & Steiger, 2020), is defined by most as hateful posts made about people or groups based on one characteristic or another; characteristics that stretch across race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or gender. Brown (2018) states that what makes online hate speech special in the broad area that is hate speech itself is that it (online hate speech) takes place in an online environment that therefore makes the perpetrators more anonymous. This anonymity paints them as less accountable and as a result

The characteristics of online hate speech which

makes it unique from that offline include: 1) permanence as it can stay online for long periods of time in multiple formats across different platforms and "like cleaning litter, it doesn't stop people from littering but if you do not take care of the problem it just piles up and further exacerbates" (Oboler, 2014); 2) Itinerance as hate speech online can move from one platform or site to the other and even when the content is removed from its original location, it can be found someplace else "where they can be visible to large audiences" (Gagliardone et al, 2015); 3) Anonymity as internet discussions are done either anonymously or "pseudonomously" which makes expression of opinion easier but can also "easily accelerate destructive behaviour" (Citron & Norton, 2011) and lastly; 4) Cross-jurisdictional Spread as the internet reach is transnational and the difficulty of this is that victims of the online hate speech are likely to face difficulties with whom to turn to for help as "different jurisdictions also have unique definitions for hate speech, making it difficult to persecute perpetrators who may seek haven in less stringent jurisdictions" (Banks, 2010).

The victims of online hate speech, from the root sources of group identities (Rudnicki & Steiger, 2020), are; 1) Gender, particularly against women in forms such as misogyny, sexual harassment, E-bile (taking voices away), Gender-trolling, and attack on social status, talent or achievements in the cases of men; 2) Race/Ethnicity/Religion with Muslims being the most targeted when it comes to religion as seen by countless researchers such as Awan and Zempi (2017) and Cleland et al. (2018), and Black and Latino People being the most targeted when it comes to race and; 3) Sexuality, particularly against the LGBTQ+ communities (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Finn, 2004; Megarry, 2014; Weaver, 2010). Rudnicki and Steiger (2020) state that the consequences of online hate speech on the victims include increased stress levels, distancing from bigger communities to form smaller communities where they - the victims - feel safe, increased insecurity, fear and vulnerability, and a decrease in the sense of belonging and the willingness to integrate into society. Dehumanisation was a stated consequence too.

Online Hate Speech in Nigeria

Ferroggiaro (2019) states that hate speech is used in Nigeria, as in other countries, as "a tool to achieve political and material ends". According to him, in a country like Nigeria where "conflicts are multiple, interrelated, and evolving -ethnic, religious, settler/indigene, resource-driven, and regionally based", hate speech is prevalent around trigger issues

and it has “potentially fuelled its (Nigeria's) conflicts”.

Just like in other countries, the introduction and popularity of internet created environments for Nigerians to disseminate hateful content, targeted at specific groups (whether ethnic or religious) and even against the country. Ferroggiaro (2019) says that in Nigeria, both political officials and citizens alike, employ social media platforms powered by the internet to mobilise followers and sentiments. These social media platforms, especially Facebook, are quite inexpensive and efficient so they are the focus of hate speech activities. While hate speech is already prevalent online, Nigeria's myriad conflicts fuel the fire, particularly during election seasons when key decisions have to be made as to who would lead the country and its states.

In recent years, there has been a rise of online hate speech in the country, to the extent that a social media site (Twitter, now X) was banned following the deletion of then President Muhammadu Buhari's tweet where he targeted the Igbo community; the IPOB in particular. The Executive Secretary of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Chief Tony Ojukwu, earlier in 2023 expressed concern over the rise in the phenomenon across the country (Soonest, 2023). According to Chief Ojukwu, the rise has been fuelled by politicians seeking political patronage and what it has led to is “ethnic and religious sentiments being used to create division, fear and hatred among people” (Soonest, 2023). The use and misuse of social media platforms, Chief Ojukwu stated on behalf of the commission, to spread hate messages against ethnic and religious groups can “lead to violence and tension, disrupt social, cultural, and religious harmony, and affect rights to associate, assemble, freedom of movement, and the right to live in any part of the country”.

The PeaceTech Lab report of 2019 (cited by Ferroggiaro, 2019) came up with several lexicons used by Nigerians online in hate speeches targeted towards groups in the country and the country. Such words and phrases that were offensive and inflammatory included: 1) “Nigeria is a zoo”, relating a large group of people to animals who are often considered “senseless, illiterate and wild”; 2) *Aboki* and *Malu* which are words used as in derogatory manner to refer to Northerners “characterising them as illiterate, unintelligent or foolish...destitute, lower-class, or without a future”; 3) *Arne*, a Kanuri word used to describe a pagan or someone who doesn't believe in God and has been used in the past decade “by some Muslims to describe Christians”; 4) Boko-haram where one who is likened to the terrorist group is seen as a threat, a danger, and a terrorist; 5) Parasites, mainly used by the Northerners against the Easterners (particularly the IPOB) and vice-

versa; 6) *Almajiri*, which is used to label a person or a group (especially the northerners) as “destitute, incompetent, vulnerable, or lacking the skills needed to take care of themselves” and; 6) Animal. Other phrases and words included *Inyamiri*, *Biafrats*, *Herdsmen/herdsmen*, “product of baby factory”, *Kafir*, *cockroaches*, *Malo*, *baboons*, *PDPigs*, “Nigeria will be burnt down”, *Karuwa*, *Ewu*, and “*Ana ta kasha man yan'uwa a kudu, mu tashi mu rama*” (They are killing our people in the North; we should counter-attack).

Socio-cultural Affiliations

Socio-cultural affiliations are explained to be the connections individuals establish and maintain with certain groups in society, certain communities, and even cultures, which help in shaping the individual's identity, belief system(s), values, and behaviour. The affiliations (relationships) that are considered socio-cultural fall along the lines of ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, and religion (Berry et al, 2002). The importance of socio-cultural affiliations, according to studies, include:

1. Identity formation: this involves an individual's internalisation of values, norms, and practices through the process of socialisation with groups in the society. This helps the individual form his or her identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).
2. Group membership: memberships in social groups come with social affiliation and it provides individuals with a sense of belonging, support, and framework for world understanding (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).
3. Socialisation and social learning: through socialisation with socio-cultural groups, individuals gain social knowledge, social skills, and social values that are necessary for proper functioning in the wider society. These are learnt from the agents of socialisation which include educational institutions, families, media, and even religious centres (Bandura, 1977).
4. Intergroup relations: social affiliations have the power to shape intergroup relations and dynamics which can tackle issues that lead to conflict such as prejudice and discrimination, social inequality, and tensions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Theoretical Framework

Perception Theory

The Perception Theory, propounded in 1964 by Berelson and Steiner, assumes that mass communication's intention is for the audience to pay attention to their messages, learn the content of the message, and make appropriate changes in attitudes or beliefs, or produce the desired behavioural responses. The theory is of the view that the process of interpreting messages tends to be complex and that these goals may be difficult to obtain (Uzah & Nyiwo, 2019). Berelson and Steiner defined perception in 1964 as the complicated process or patterns by which individuals can select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world around them (Weiman, 2000 as cited in Ikems, 2020).

In the context of this research, online digital platforms expose Nigerians to a flood of information which they observe, pay attention to, retain, and then shape their attitudes, beliefs, and even behaviour accordingly. These information floods give room for repeated selection of what the Nigerian wants, which is usually in line with his or her already existing values and beliefs, and then paves the way for the organization of the selected information and its interpretation to paint a picture of the world he or she lives in, particularly his or her immediate society. When exposed to online hate speech, the Nigerian pays attention to it and then learns more about it as well as the group(s) being hated on. This information is then organised in complex ways that activate one or more senses and when retained, it paves the way for the development of a particular perception of the hated group; a perception that may be new because of the information gotten from the hate speech or a perception that strengthens already existing views, biases, and standpoints.

Attitude Change Theory

The Attitude Change Theory was propounded in 1953 by Hovland, Janis and Kelly. The theory emphasizes attention, comprehension, and acceptance. The theory states that for acceptance of a phenomenon that brings about a behavioural change, attention has to be given to the communicated message and then it has to be comprehended. It is during the attending and comprehension phases that the individual can practice the recommended new opinion, and although practice does not automatically lead to acceptance, attitude change is likely when practice is combined with incentives (which can be financial or physical benefits or even abstract forms) and recommendations that are imbedded in the communication (The Association for Educational Communication and Technology, 2001).

The Intact One (ITO) [2019] explains that attitudes are unstable as they are associated with beliefs and behaviours towards objects and not something concretely set in stone. Communication and behaviour of other people are subject to change by certain social influences and when two attitudes or a behaviour conflict with each other, an individual becomes motivated to maintain cognitive consistency as the conflict causes dissonance because attitudes and the objects of that attitude are born out of affective and cognitive component functions. For there to be an attitude change, there have to be three processes which can be stratified as the levels of attitude change. They include 1) Compliance: the change in a person's behaviour because of a consequence or consequences; 2) Identification: which is a change in beliefs of an individual that then affects his or her behaviour; 3) Internalisation: the change in beliefs and affect when an individual perceives that the content of the attitude will be increasingly pleasurable and rewarding (The Intact One, 2019).

In the context of this study, attitudes of Nigerians towards the social groups in the country can change with hate speech disseminated online. This process begins with attention being paid to the hate speech posts on the various social media platforms and comprehension of the message being passed across. In the stages of attending and comprehending, he or she tests out the new opinion that is recommended to the followed which is likely to be a boycott of a said group or harassment due to one reason or the other. When all of this is considered and the Nigerian sees the incentive or recommendations attached to the message and movement, there's likely to be a shift in the attitude towards said group that is being hated. The process of internalisation then plays out in the Nigerian's change of attitude.

Research Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey research design to obtain the opinions of Nigerians on online hate speech and its influence on socio-cultural affiliations with groups in the country. The descriptive research design, in this study, seeks to draw out a sample of Nigerians as a representative of the general population to acquire data on the study's subject matter.

The population for this study covers the residents of three selected states: Lagos, Edo, and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). The annual growth rates of these states by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) as of November 2023 are 3.2% for Lagos, 9.3% for Abuja, and 2.7% for Edo. With this projection and the census figures of 2006, the population of each state are Lagos State = 14,071,406; Federal Capital Territory

(Abuja) = 3,627,760, and Edo State = 4,717,437. The total population of the study adds up the individual populations of the selected states. The study's population, therefore, is 22,416,603. The sample size of the study is 400. This sample size was elicited using the Taro Yamane sampling size formula which is $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$ where: n signifies the sample size being sought; N signifies the population of the study, and e signifies the margin error.

The simple random sampling technique was employed in this study, giving every member of the study's population an equal chance of being chosen until the quota for each state was reached. The Questionnaire is the study's instrument of data collection. Balogun (2020) states that questionnaires are good for research studies as they can reach many diverse audiences, save costs and time, and acquire the needed information from the research's sample size.

The test-retest method was used to test the reliability of the instrument, and this involved administering the question to a sect of the study's size and repeating the survey with that same sect at a later date. The responses obtained from both tests were compared to ascertain whether or not modifications needed to be made to the questions asked in the questionnaire to promote understanding and also to get meaningful responses.

Data was collected via physical administration of 400 copies of the research questionnaire. The physical interactions with respondents afforded the researcher the opportunity to answer questions the respondents had and to give them guidance within the confines of research ethics where it was necessary. The data collected was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) application to obtain frequencies, percentages and statistical measurements upon which data presentation, analysis and interpretations were made. The collated and analysed data are displayed in tables in frequencies and percentages.

Findings

Research Objective 1: To ascertain the level of familiarity of Nigerians with online hate speech.

Table 1: Frequency of social media

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 2 hrs	44	10.9	11	11
3-6 hours	184	46.2	46	57
6 hours & above	172	42.9	43	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 2: Familiarity (awareness) of Nigerians with online hate speech

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Familiar	248	62.2	62	62
Somewhat Familiar	108	27.4	27	89
Not Too Familiar	40	9.6	10	99
Very Unfamiliar	4	0.8	1	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 3: Belief that hate speech exists in the Nigerian online community

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	392	98.1	98	98
No	8	1.9	2	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 4: Sights of hatposts in the online community

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	376	94.2	94	94
No	24	5.8	6	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 5: Frequency of sighting online hate posts

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very often	124	31.4	31	31
Often	184	45.5	46	77
Not so often	88	21.8	22	99
Not at all	4	1.2	1	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Research Objective 2: To investigate the social media platforms frequently used in the online dissemination of hate speeches.

Table 6: Social media platforms frequently used in the spread of online hate speeches

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Ratio Percent
Facebook	156	39.1	12.9
WhatsApp	96	24.4	7.9
X (formerly Twitter)	340	85.3	28.1
TikTok	204	50.6	16.9
Instagram	292	73.1	24.1
YouTube	56	14.1	4.6
Snapchat	56	14.1	4.6
LinkedIn	4	1.3	0.3
Pinterest	4	1.3	0.3
Reddit	2	0.6	0.2
Total	1210		99.9%

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Research Objective 3: To determine the formats in which online hate speeches are distributed.

Table 7: Formats of online hate speeches

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Ratio Percent
Text (posts)	388	97.4	39.4
Audio recordings and music)	128	32.1	13
Pictures and graphs	244	60.9	24.8
Videos	224	56.4	22.8
Total	984		100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 8 Specific forms of online hate speech

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Ratio Percent
Use of derogatory statements	348	87.2	18.1
Distorted image	240	60.3	12.5
Harassment	220	54.5	11.4
Violence incitement	236	59	12.3
Identity based insults	296	74.4	15.4
Malicious comments	240	59.6	12.5
Trolling	248	62.2	12.9
Stalking	92	23.1	4.7
Religious and tribal banter	2	0.6	0.1
Slurs	2	0.6	0.1
Total	1,924		100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Research Objective 4: To identify the groups that online hate speeches are majorly targeted at.

Table 9: GENDER group most targeted by hate posts online

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Women	248	61.5	62	62
Men	28	7.1	7	69
LGBTQ+ Community	124	31.4	31	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 10: RELIGIOUS group most targeted by hate posts online

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Christianity	132	32.7	33	33
Islam	204	51.3	51	84
African Traditional Religion	20	5.3	5	89
Others (Judaism, Atheism, Hinduism, Buddhism)	44	10.7	11	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 11: ETHNIC group most targeted by hate posts online

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Hausa	132	33.3	33	33
Fulani	80	20.4	20	53
Yoruba	52	12.8	13	66
Igbo	96	23.7	24	90
Niger Delta	24	5.9	6	96
All	16	3.9	4	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Research Objective 5: To assess the audience's perception of the influence of online hate speech on socio-cultural affiliations in Nigeria.

Table 12: Presence of existing views or beliefs of the groups in Nigeria before going online

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	312	77.6	78	78
No	88	22.4	22	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 13: How Nigerians get information about hated groups from posts online.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I get my information from such posts	152	37.8	38	38
I dig up further information	248	62.2	62	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 14: How online hate speeches affect existing views and beliefs of the groups we have in Nigeria.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Unaffected	108	27.4	27	27
Slightly Unaffected	104	25.7	26	53
Neutral	140	34.6	35	88
Slightly Affected	40	10.4	10	98
Very Affected	8	1.9	2	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 15: How online hate speeches influence Nigerian's view targeted group(s).

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Unaffected	124	31.4	31	31
Slightly Unaffected	100	25	25	56
Neutral	132	32.7	33	89
Slightly Affected	36	9	9	98
Very Affected	8	1.9	2	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 16: Whether or not the changes in views affect relations with members of the hated group.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	68	16.7	17	17
No	332	83.3	83	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 17: Whether or not online hate posts have the power to influence Nigerians' views of sociocultural groups

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	384	95.6	96	96
No	16	4.4	4	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Table 18: Whether or not online hate speeches can cause problems for the Nigerian society if care is not taken.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	396	98.7	99	99
No	4	1.3	1	100
Total	400	100	100	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What is the level of familiarity Nigerians have with the concept of Online Hate Speech?

Based on the analysis of the study's data, Nigerians are generally daily users of social media platforms with 46% of respondents spending between 3 and 6 hours per day. 89% of Nigerian social media users which is approximately nine out of every ten Nigerian social media users are familiar with the idea or concept of online hate speech based on the definition provided by the researcher in the questionnaire distributed which states that online hate speeches are "hateful posts made about people or groups based on one characteristic or the other such as race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or gender". Aside from the familiarity most Nigerians have with the concept of hate speech, 98% of respondents believe hate speech exists in the Nigerian online community. 94% of respondents have come across hate posts in the online community and seven out of ten Nigerian social media users come across these hate speeches often. The findings that answer this research question align with Mohammed and Otebe (2022) where the respondents are familiar with and are exposed to hate speech and have come across them across social media platforms that they frequent.

Research Question 2: What social media platforms are frequently used in the online dissemination of hate speeches?

Based on the analysis of the study's data, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram are the most frequently or dominantly used platforms in the dissemination of online hate speeches with a cumulated approximation of 52%. This implies that at least five out of ten hate speech propagators in the

Nigerian online community use X and Instagram as their major platforms. The least used platforms are LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Reddit. The findings of the study differ from that of Uzochukwu and Okafor (2019) where Facebook WhatsApp, and Twitter (now X) were found to be the dominant platform for online hate speech propagation and dissemination. This implies that between 2018 which was the study's time frame and now, there has been a change in the dominant social media platforms used to create and disseminate online hate speeches in Nigeria. Although Uzochukwu and Okafor (2019) did not list the least used social media platforms in the spread of online hate speech, this study has found that LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Reddit are the least used platforms.

Research Question 3: What are the formats of the disseminated online hate speeches?

The study found that hate speeches posted online are majorly in text format (39.4%) and in picture and graphical format (24.8%). The least used format is audio (13%). This implies that out of every ten hate speeches online, four come in the form of textual posts and three come in the form of pictures and graphics. Regarding the specific forms of online hate speeches, the dominant form is the use of derogatory statements (18.1%) where groups and individuals are criticised disrespectfully with unflattering, unkind, and demeaning words. Identity-based insults are also majorly used (15.4%) and this involves branding a group or an individual with identities that may or may not be theirs or are used in a condescending manner such as calling Hausa workmen or merchants "abokis" or calling fully clad Muslim women and northerners "boko-haram". Such can also be seen in the branding of men who wear colours such as pink, and wear accessories such as earrings and lip gloss as "gay". The least specific forms of online hate speeches are religious and tribal banter (0.1%) and slurs (0.1%).

Research Question 4: What groups are online hate speeches majorly targeted at?

The study found, through the data collected and analysed, that women (62%) are the most targeted gender group by the hate posts made online, followed by the LGBTQ+ Community (31%), and men being the least targeted group (7%). The implication is that three out of every five online hate speech targets are women and one out of every three online hate speech targets members of the LGBTQ+ community.

In terms of religion, Islam is the most targeted religious group (51%), then Christianity (33%), then other religious groups such as Atheism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism (11%), and then the African Traditional System (5%). The implication of this is that

two out of every four victims are Muslims, and one out of every three victims is a Christian.

The Hausa ethnic group (33%) is the most targeted by hate speeches made online, followed by the Igbos (24%), then the Fulani (20%), then the Yoruba (13%), and then the Niger Delta (6%). Some respondents (4%) think that all ethnic groups are targets of online hate speeches. This implies that northerners with a cumulative percentage of 53% are the most targeted ethnic groups with five out of ten posts being against them. One out of three posts is targeted against Igbos. The least targeted ethnic group is the Niger Delta.

These findings are in line with those of Nazmine et al. (2021) where Muslims were found to be the most targeted group in terms of religion and women were the most targeted regarding gender. Nazmine et al. (2021) stressed on the need of education of users on the laws and policies of using online media to decline the trend of the hate speech online against the targeted groups.

Research Question 5: What is the audience's perception of the influence of online hate speech on socio-cultural affiliations in Nigeria?

Based on the analysed data, seven out of every ten Nigerians (78%) have already existing views or beliefs about gender groups, religious groups, and ethnic groups that exist in the country before they go online to their variously frequented social media platforms. These already existing beliefs and views are likely to have come about through information they received about such groups either through generational stories or through personal experience with members of the various groups in society. Information about the hated groups is gotten by six out of every ten Nigerians (62%) by further digging done to promote further learning and understanding about the particular groups and the reason behind the hate. Only three out of ten Nigerians - which fall below the majority-stay with the mostly superficial information provided in those posts about the hated group(s).

Most respondents (35%) are neutral when it comes to how well the hate speeches, they come across affect the already existing views and beliefs they have about the groups in the country even when these hate speeches have newly released information about the targeted group. Only a certain percentage of Nigerians (12%) have their already existing views and beliefs changed while others are unaffected in various degrees; very unaffected (27%) or slightly unaffected (26%). This finding implies that out of every ten Nigerian social media users, the existing views of five are unaffected; the existing views and beliefs of three are neutral, and the existing views of one in every ten are affected by the hate speeches they come across online.

Many respondents (33%) have their views of the

targeted group(s) neither influenced nor uninfluenced (neutral) by the consumption and understanding of the information passed across through the hate speeches. 31% of respondents are very unaffected; 25% are slightly unaffected; 9% are slightly affected and 2% are very affected. This implies that five out of every ten Nigerian social media users do not view the hated group(s) differently while three out of every ten Nigerian social media users are neutral in their views after being exposed to online hate speeches. One out of every ten Nigerian social media users have their views of the hated group(s) influenced and changed by the hate speeches they come across online.

A total of 83% of respondents do not relate differently with the members of the hated group(s) after being exposed to online hate speeches. 17% do relate differently with the members of the hated group(s). This implies that on a personal level, eight out of every ten consumers of online hate speeches do not relate differently with members of the targeted groups in the country's society. One out of every ten consumers relate differently with the members of the hated groups after getting their views changed by the online hate speeches they come across.

Majority of the respondents (96%) believe that on a general level, online hate posts have the power to influence Nigerians' views of socio-cultural groups. 4% of respondents believe otherwise. This finding implies that on a general level, when all Nigerians are taken into consideration, nine out of every ten Nigerians believe that online hate posts can influence many others in the country to view groups differently and eventually relate differently with them. One out of every four Nigerians does not believe online hate posts are powerful enough to do so.

A total figure of 99% of respondents, which is the majority, believe that online hate speeches can cause problems for Nigerian society both online and offline if care is not taken. 1% believe otherwise. This finding implies that the lack of care in tackling hate speech online is believed by most Nigerians to cause problems for the country both online and offline which can repeat certain historical offline occurrences such as the Benue Crises of 2018. One out of ten Nigerians believe otherwise.

Many respondents believe that online hate speech can cause problems for Nigeria both online and offline and this agrees with the findings of Mohammed and Otebe (2022) where respondents held the opinion that hate speech harms the national unity of Nigeria and could eventually lead to problems such as division of the country, civil war(s), and underdevelopment. It also agrees with the findings of John and Omojunikanbi (2023) where their study found that the implication of social media hate speech could be

serious enough to cause harm to people, split society along certain lines, promote prejudice, and inspire violence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study assessed the audience's perception of the impact of online hate speech on social affiliations in Nigeria. It concludes that the perception of the audience is that online hate speech has an influence on socio-cultural affiliations between groups in Nigeria. The study, through its findings, also concludes that the majority of Nigerian social media users are familiar with the concept of online hate speech; that X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram are the social media platforms frequently used in the online dissemination of hate speeches; that the dominant general media forms of online hate speeches are texts and pictures and graphics, while the dominant specific forms of online hate speeches are the use of derogatory statements and identity-based insults; that women are the most targeted group in terms of gender, that Muslims are the most targeted group in terms of religion, and the Hausas as the most targeted group in terms of ethnicity; and that the Nigerian social media audience perceive that online hate speech plays a role in how people view and relate with other members of the various social groups that exist in the country's society. The phenomenon of online hate speech is believed by many to be powerful enough to influence how Nigerians, on a general rather than personal level, view and relate with other social groups in the country after being exposed to hate posts and speeches. It (online hate speech) is also perceived as being able to amplify biases and stereotypes which can lead to problems online and offline; problems that can fuel violence and therefore affect national unity and national development.

The study, therefore, recommends:

- i. The sensitisation of Nigerians on the dangers of hate speech if left uncurbed and how it will affect individuals, groups, and society if left to continue festering. This is necessary to shed crucial light on how damaging the phenomenon can be and also to advocate for responsible behaviour from all Nigerians since a majority is familiar with the concept. This sensitisation can be carried out by media agencies, educational institutions, governmental bodies and agencies, and non-governmental organisations and agencies.
- ii. Technology and media companies should put in place measures that ensure their platforms are properly monitored to address and take down hate content when they are created to avoid the incitement of discrimination or hostility towards certain persons or groups based on characteristics they possess. These measures will also help to ensure that the discussions of social media users are kept respectful in every way possible.
- iii. Campaigns to promote openness to groups in the society to establish, build and maintain the acceptance of Nigerians to diversity. This will help in eroding biases and curb prejudice and polarisation.
- iv. Governmental and non-governmental organisations should launch programmes and create avenues or spaces to cater for the victims of hate speech for evaluation, provision, recuperation, and safety.

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