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HATE SPEECH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'OTHERS' IN DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTHS IN PLATEAU STATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND PEACE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Civic engagement is one of the bedrocks of modern day democratic practice and has in recent times been an area of concern among academics and the government in Nigeria, Africa and the world at large. In recent times, the increasing use of the digital media by the youths in Nigeria and the world over has appeared to dominate their lives, particularly their civic engagements. Aside its easy access and wide coverage, it is trendy among the youths. However, a related issue to this phenomenon has also been the growing challenge of hate speech among youths to the extent that such portends great threat to national integration and peace. This study investigates the prevalence, nature and impact of hate speech in digital civic engagement among youths in Plateau State, Nigeria, with a focus on the implications for national integration and peace. Drawing on survey data from 500 respondents, the findings reveal that 84.6% of hate speech incidences occur on digital platforms, with Twitter and Facebook emerging as the most prominent venues. The study uncovers that 82% of youths have either experienced or engaged in hate speech, with nearly half admitting repeated use. Religion (56.6%), political views (41.4%) and ethnicity (37.6%) are the most frequently targeted identity dimensions, reinforcing an us versus them narrative acknowledged by 96.6% of respondents. Youth frustration, political alignments and ethno-religious tensions were identified as key drivers of hate speech, while its effects include deepening social divisions, fostering distrust and threatening national cohesion. Anonymity in online interactions further compounds the issue, making regulation and accountability difficult. Despite their involvement, 51% of respondents support some form of hate speech regulation, with support positively correlated with education level. Gendered targeting also emerged, with women disproportionately affected by hate speech based on gender and socio-economic class. The study concludes that digital civic spaces are increasingly becoming arenas for divisive rhetoric rather than inclusive dialogue. Therefore, it recommends targeted digital literacy programmes, platform-specific interventions and balanced regulatory frameworks by the statutory agencies to mitigate the negative impact of hate speech on Nigeria's fragile democratic and national integration processes.

Keywords: Digital Civic Engagement, Digital Media, Hate Speech, Identity, National Integration, Youth, Plateau State, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Digital media has transformed civic engagement, enabling youths to actively participate in political and social discourse. The internet provides a global platform for various forms of interactions, especially civic engagements among youth in Nigeria and across the world. Since the introduction of the Global System of Mobile communication in the year 2001, there has

been increased growth of subscription to the various service providers resulting in an explosion of the use of digital media for calls and the internet. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), there were 91,565,319 internet users in Nigeria (Vanguard, 2017) on both Global System for Mobile (GSM) communications and Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) networks in 2017. But recently, it

was recorded by the NCC that Nigeria had 142.16 million internet users as of January 2025; with each user using 7.04 GB of data on average (Jaiyeola, 2025). The proliferation of smartphones has made this increase in data consumption possible, but of significance is the broadened civic space for youth engagements it has created within Nigeria's democracy.

There is no doubt that a larger percentage of such active digital media users are the youths for various purposes, among which is civic engagement. Indeed, the digital media provides a broad platform of communication opportunities for not only the youths, but governments, businesses and the society at large. For instance, in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, President Obama leveraged on the power of the social media to communicate directly with young voters, who were heavy users of the internet (Bakker & de Vreese cited in Samsuddin, Hasan & Ching, 2016). The 2015 and 2023 general elections in Nigeria also witnessed the massive use of the social media by political parties and various contestants too. These cases indicate the increasing engagement with online activities that require exploring the relationship between the internet and youth civic engagement. In fact, as noted by Olorunnisola & Martin (2013), digital platforms have become central to youth political expression and civic participation in Nigeria.

However, what is pertinent in this context is how it as well presents challenges associated with its usage ranging from internet fraud to other forms of gross violations. Indeed, though the opportunities afforded by the internet greatly overshadow the challenges, one peculiar problem of digital civic engagement is hate speech online among the youths, not only in Nigeria but other parts of the world. Accordingly, it has been identified that this transformation has facilitated the proliferation of hate speech, particularly in fragile and diverse societies like Nigeria (Gagliardone et al., 2015). Hate speech plays a crucial role in constructing "others," a process through which individuals or groups are categorized as outsiders, often negatively (Wodak, 2015). This process undermines national

integration by reinforcing divisions along ethnic, religious, and political lines.

Plateau State, characterized by ethno-religious diversity and tensions, including a history of communal tensions, presents a critical context for examining how hate speech shapes social identities and relationships; more so that hate speech online often reflects offline grievances. This paper investigates the extent of digital civic engagement among the youths in Plateau State, Nigeria against the traditional forms with the aim to examine how online civic discourse among youth constructs the "others" and implications for integration and peace. It also examines the danger of hate speech associated with such engagements and how such impinges on national integration and peace. In essence, the research focuses on answering these important questions: how do youths in Plateau State use digital platforms for civic engagement? Is hate speech prevalent among youths in Plateau State in their use of the digital media in civic engagements?

Has such led to the construction and re-enforcement of 'others' thereby endangering national integration and peace? What can be done to address such? Through this, seeks to provide empirical data on the level of hate speech in the construction of 'others' in digital civic engagement among youths in Plateau State. This is particularly so because in Nigeria where though there are increasing numbers of youth users of the digital media, less focus on research is centred on it, especially with regards to overall civic participation or engagement.

Objectives of the study

The research seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To find out the increasing role of the digital media on youth civic engagement in Plateau State, Nigeria as it relates to hate speech.
- ii. To examine the nature and level of hate speech in digital civic engagement among youths in Plateau State and the commonest digital platform used for such.
- iii. To investigate how hate speech results in the construction of 'others' and its implications

for national integration and peace for today's youth in Nigeria.

- iv. To find out the strategies targeted at developing adequate responses to meet the challenges of hate speech among the youths in Nigeria for a virile youth participation devoid of endangering national integration and peaceful co-existence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Hate Speech and the Construction of 'Others'

The concept of hate speech is a broad and highly contested issue. It has been identified that the subject of hate speech was developed through the collective efforts of linguists and sociologists, philosophers and historians, psychologists, anthropologists, lawyers and political scientists, communication and media experts and even computer scientists (Kaminskaya, n.d). Thus, there are several definitions of hate speech offered by a variety of such experts or actors, including international organizations to social networking platforms, and explain why hate speech is regarded as an elusive term. But even if it eschews clear definitions, hate speech (be it conveyed through text, images or sound) can be identified by approximation through the degrading or dehumanizing functions that it serves (UNESCO, 2015). The complexity of the concept of hate speech often demonstrates conflict with how freedom of expression, individual, group and minority rights, as well as concepts of dignity, liberty and equality are perceived, making its definition to be contested.

In national and international legislation, hate speech refers to expressions that advocate incitement to harm (particularly, discrimination, hostility or violence) based upon the targets being identified with a certain social or demographic group. It may include, but is not limited to, speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent acts. For some, however, the concept extends also to expressions that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance on the assumption that this may fuel targeted discrimination, hostility and violent attacks (UNESCO, 2015: 10).

Kaminskaya (n.d.) elaborates on the point that in order to understand hate speech, it is proper to clearly define the word "speech" and the targeted groups against which hate speech is directed at. He thus sees "speech" as broadly used as convenient shorthand for all forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal; noting that in addition to purely oral statements, the term commonly includes written or visual forms of expression along with non-verbal forms of communicating such as parades, insignia, armbands, and picket lines.

Relating this to hate, as one of humans' basic emotions or deep human passions that give rise to important social practices – in institutional form, hate speech may be expressed in any form of communication. Kaminskaya (n.d) cites Murphy and Hampton's typology of hate to include simple hatred, moral hatred (can be defended), malicious-spiteful hatred, and, finally, the combination of the last two types – retributive hatred.

From the foregoing therefore, hate speech is defined as "as any form of expression regarded as offensive to racial, ethnic, and religious groups and other discreet minorities, and to women" (Kaminskaya, n.d, 1). Hate speech is hereby understood to be inflammatory language, often insulting and derisive, that targets an individual or group, and that may or may not include a call to violence (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017).

Similarly, hate speech is also referred to as a communication that denigrates people on the basis of their membership to a particular group which can include any form of expression, such as images, plays and songs as well as speech (Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation, 2016). Some definitions even extend the concept of hate speech to include communications that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance - the thinking here is that these kinds of communications may fuel discrimination, hostility and violent attacks later on. In fact, hate speech is on the increase in Nigeria. Hate speech offends, threatens, or insults groups, based on race, colour, religion, national origin, sexual orientation,

disability, or other traits. Such gesture, conduct, writing or display could incite people to violence or prejudicial action (Oyeleye, 2017).

In the ordinary sense, however, definitions of hate speech tend to be broader, sometimes even extending to encompass words that are insulting those in power, or derogatory of individuals who are particularly visible. Especially at critical times, such as during elections, the concept of hate speech may be prone to manipulation: accusations of fomenting hate speech may be traded among political opponents or used by those in power to curb dissent and criticism.

Generally speaking therefore, hate speech relies on tensions, which it seeks to re-produce and amplify. Such speech is said to unite and divide at the same time, creating a situation of “us” and “them” (UNESCO, 2015: 11). This clearly indicates the construction of “others” and in this paper, the term “hate speech” is generally applied in this wider sense, not restricting the meaning to speech where there is specific incitement of harm, but the inherent danger such may portend, especially in the use of the digital media. Invariably, hate speech encompasses expressions that incite discrimination, hostility or violence against individuals or groups based on identity markers (United Nations, 2019). In digital contexts, such expressions are amplified by anonymity, *virality* and weak regulatory frameworks (Citron, 2014). This indicates that hate speech is not only context-specific, but also reveals its status as a performance, that might transform or even produce a speaker’s social location.

Therefore, drawing from UNESCO (2015), there are a number of social categories of axes along which hate speech can be constructed such as race, ethnicity, language group, gender, religion, sexual preference or nationality. In this sense, the notion of hate speech is not about abstract ideas but concerns antagonism towards ‘other’ people. Thus, the concept of “othering” involves defining and marginalizing groups perceived as different (Said, 1978). Hate speech facilitates this by reinforcing stereotypes and social boundaries, often leading to exclusion and conflict.

Such problems of hate speech online are more prevalent in countries where there is high Internet connectivity, especially in Nigeria where there are millions of users of it.

Digital Civic Engagement and Hate Speech among Youths

The world today is highly connected via digital technology to the extent that the distance that exists amongst people is just a button-click away. People’s ability to communicate has therefore been made a lot easier. This has rightly informed Scherer’s (2016) view that advancing civic technology may be the missing puzzle piece in solving a great civic engagement picture, considering both its prominence and role in today’s world.

It is also a known fact that freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of (a democratic) society, one of the basic conditions for its progress and for the development of every man (European Court of Human Rights, 2017). However, the exercise of such right to the extent that it becomes hate speech, not only on the internet but generally, constitutes one of the greatest affronts to such democratic freedom and society at large. Indeed, as noted by Starr (127), though free speech is an important prerequisite for the development of progressive ideas, there’s no getting around the fact that it can also be exploited by people with ideas that are far from progressive.

Civic engagement is otherwise referred to as civic participation. Its definition has been conceived in various terms. According to Samsuddin, Hasan & Ching (2016), it ranges from engaging in events set up by political parties and circulating a petition to meeting with a government representative and donning a badge to express support or dissent on a matter. They therefore opined that studies have defined civic engagement (or participation) in both specific and generic terms, including *social capital*, *civic literacy*, and club memberships. With the advent of Internet, the definition has been classified into two main categories: traditional (offline) and digital (online) participation. In the context of this paper, however, emphasis is paid to the impact of the digital media than the traditional

(offline) forms of civic engagement. In this vein, other researchers had long established the relationship between media consumption and civic participation. Norris (cited Samsuddin, Hasan & Ching, 2016) noted that civic engagement was driven by informational uses of the Internet. It was discovered too that intensive Internet use promoted involvement in voluntary organizations; its adaptability as a communication medium fosters civic engagement where information is available on demand and news is shared instantaneously; and users could possess detailed understanding of significant issues (Samsuddin, Hasan & Ching, 2016).

Helsper and Eynon (cited in Samsuddin, Hasan & Ching, 2016: 32) broadly defined digital engagement as “the ways in which people use and participate in different Internet activities, contents and platform.” This has led to the term “digital natives” (coined by the International Telecommunication Union to label active young Internet users), consisting the various uses of Internet into a construct called “digital engagement.” Describing digital civic engagement as participatory digital media and ubiquitous among today’s youth, the Education Commission of the States (2012) in the United States broadly defines it as media such as the Internet, social network sites and cell phones that allow users to interact. It is on such digital platform that a lot of hate speech subsists not only in Nigeria but globally. This conception makes UNESCO (2015) to posit that hate speech online is situated at the intersection of multiple tensions, noting that it is the manifestation of disputes among various groups within and among societies; it serves as a clear illustration of how technologies possessing transformative capabilities like the Internet present both opportunities and obstacles, suggesting a complicated balancing act between essential rights and principles, such as freedom of expression and the protection of human dignity. The use of digital technology for such purposes and in our context, hate speech is a clear indication of such.

Many factors may account for hate speech on the digital media. According to the Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation (2016),

drivers of hate speech especially on the social media include the fact that children who are exposed to conflict learn to hate, and lose positive norms and values are all impacted by or implicated in violence at progressively younger ages. In the same vein, for young people who experience frustration, social media provides a public platform that can deepen hatred and this is supported by the absence of responsibility (influence of anonymity/remoteness). Misunderstanding of cultural differences and absence of regulations to control online privacy ethics and freedom of expression also result in hate speech.

Hate Speech, National Integration and Peace

Though the concept of hate speech has been contested as too wide-ranging and open to manipulation in almost all societies, including those where the risk of violence is limited, the concept of hate speech aims at isolating acts that have a significant probability of provoking or inciting aggression or violence from one group towards another (Benesch, cited in Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, 2016). Hate speech therefore has the consequence of creating disunity, distrust and instability, amongst others.

Identifying some of the outcomes of hate speech globally, the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization (2016) notes that such leads to intensifying conflicts between individuals or groups, increasingly splitting communities, particularly within diaspora; as well as a harmful cycle of escalating violence, hostile and dangerous rhetoric, and specific provocation that shifts between de-contextualization on social media and inaccurate portrayals of reality. It also reported an increasing group of remote diaspora individuals that are connecting with each other such as the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria that launched online campaigns advocating for the balkanization of the nation via digital media channels, and amplifying the notion that Nigeria is a “zoo” which became widespread.

It is also therefore stated by Oyeleye (2017) that at the national level, the effect of hate speech is the widening of the social distance among the different ethnicities that make up the country and an exacerbation of the

crisis in the country's nation-building. He also notes that while there is nothing wrong with people exercising their freedom of speech, there is everything wrong with demeaning or insulting others through speeches. This is because the self-esteem and confidence of victims of hate speeches may be affected; in the worst cases, victims may self-harm, become suicidal, or carry out many other undesirable acts. In worse cases, a common practice may be stereotyping a group and creating the vulnerability for other forms of attacks. In fact, (Ezeibe, 2020) has noted that Nigeria's ethno-religious diversity makes it particularly vulnerable to divisive narratives, with ample studies showing that hate speech exacerbates tensions and undermines peacebuilding efforts.

Regulations and Responses to Hate Speech

UNESCO (2015) has noted that there are various opinions on balancing freedom of expression and limitations around hate speech which find pronounced manifestation in regional human rights instruments. These documents complement international treaties as they reflect regional particularities that are not specified in treaties with universal reach. It however observes that though most regional instruments do not have specific articles prescribing prohibition of hate speech; they more generally allow states to limit freedom of expression – which provisions can be applied to specific cases.

Accordingly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), a UN treaty, calls on governments to prevent hate speech. Article 20(2) says: “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law” (Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, 2016).

In Africa, the African Charter on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights has provision in Article 9 (2), allowing for restrictions on rights as long as they are “within the law”. This concept has been criticized, by the fact that countries can manipulate their own legislation and weaken the essence of the right to freedom of expression. However, the Declaration of Principles on

Freedom of Expression in Africa elaborates a higher standard for limitations on freedom of expression. It declares that the right “should not be restricted on public order or national security grounds unless there is a real risk of harm to a legitimate interest and there is a close causal link between the risk of harm and the expression” (UNESCO, 2015: 24).

In Nigeria, there is a clear absence of laws or legislation that regulates hate speech. Section 39, subsection 1 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) provides that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.” However, this cannot be said to be limitless and pronouncements by late President Buhari on some people, especially the youths, in going beyond the ‘national red lines’ with regard to hate speech present growing concerns for the nation, policy and specific legislation to tackle the challenge, particularly its online peculiarity.

On the digital media where hate speech is most often on the social media, it is indicated that the social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google each has its own specific definition of hate speech and their approaches to dealing with it. For instance, Facebook's rules forbid bullying, harassment and threatening language (although critics say it does not always enforce these rules properly). In 2015, Twitter reportedly banned speech that could incite terrorism, or violence against people “on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, age, or disability.” In the same vein, New EU guidelines on hate speech and the framework legal decision on combating expressions of racism and xenophobia were signed by the major social media companies in Brussels on 31st May 2016 (Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation, 2016). Nonetheless, all these regulations require proper implementation and monitoring.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the Social Identity Theory (SIT). The SIT is a foundational framework in social

psychology that explains how individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships, and how this identity affects intergroup behaviour. Originally developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s, the theory posits that people categorize themselves and others into social groups (e.g., ethnic, religious, political) in ways that favor their in-group and potentially devalue the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986).

At its core, the SIT has three core components: First, is the social categorization of individuals where people are classified, including themselves, into categories such as “us” (in-group) and “them” (out-group). This categorization simplifies social perception but lays the groundwork for bias and stereotyping. Secondly, is the social identification where individuals adopt the identity of the group they belong to which includes internalizing group norms, behaviours, and values, which contribute to their self-concept (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). For youth in Plateau State, this may involve identifying as members of specific ethnic or religious groups, which in turn shapes their civic expression online. The third dimension is the social comparison of individuals where they compare their in-group with relevant out-groups to maintain positive distinctiveness. This often results in emphasizing positive traits of the in-group and amplifying negative stereotypes of the out-group (Turner et al., 1987).

In the context of digital civic engagement among Nigerian youth, SIT helps explain how group identities become polarized through online interactions. On platforms like Twitter or WhatsApp, individuals may reinforce their group identity by posting content that praises their in-group while demonizing or mocking the out-group. This behavior contributes to “othering” - a process where out-groups are framed as threats or less deserving - which is particularly acute in states with historical intergroup tensions like Plateau State. Youth civic discussions, though aimed at political or social reform, often become vehicles for reinforcing social divisions. When group membership is deeply tied to identity (e.g., “Berom Christians” vs. “Hausa Muslims”), civic engagement online may turn into a

battleground for identity assertion, often through hate speech.

Social media platforms amplify the effects of SIT by providing echo chambers where in-group norms are reinforced without exposure to alternative views (Del Vicario et al., 2016). This selective exposure can radicalize intergroup perceptions, making hate speech more likely and socially acceptable within certain digital circles.

Furthermore, the anonymity and immediacy of digital communication reduce accountability, allowing for more extreme expressions of identity-based hostility, especially among youth who may feel politically marginalized or socially disenfranchised (Ezeibe et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

Principally, the study adopts a quantitative survey design using data from 500 respondents in Plateau State where a questionnaire was administered online. The data includes demographic variables, hate speech experiences, platforms, causes, and perceived impacts. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed.

Similarly, qualitative digital or online ethnography was used as an approach that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of online environments by understanding how people construct meaning in the digital context, with the focus on how these meanings are performed, negotiated, and contested through digital platforms (Hine, 2015). Through immersion in online communities such as the social media platforms, online forums, or messaging groups (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, X/Twitter) interactions, shared symbols, memes, hashtags, and language use (Kozinets, 2010) were observed. In examining how youths in Plateau State engage civically and use hate speech online, digital ethnography allowed the research to monitor online conversations during crises or elections, capture spontaneous, emotionally charged narratives around ethnicity and indigeneity and observing how symbols and language are mobilized to construct “Others” or reinforce in-group identities.

4. Results and Discussion

A total of 500 respondents responded to questionnaires administered online. The filled and returned questionnaires sought the views of youth in Plateau State, Nigeria on hate speech in digital civic engagement. The demographic composition of the respondents consists of active youths in the digital space in Plateau State, Nigeria and the following represent the data obtained.

1. Sex

Value	Count	%
Male	370	74.0
Female	128	25.6
Prefer not to say	2	0.4

2. Age (Grouped)

Age Range	Count	%
18-22	25	5.0
23-27	48	9.6
28-32	179	35.8
33-37	175	35.0
38-42	52	10.4
43-47	15	3.0
48+	6	1.2

3. Education

Value	Count	%
Post-graduate (PhD/MSc./PGD)	95	19.0
Graduate (BSc./HND)	289	57.8
Ordinary Diploma, OND/NCE	67	13.4
SSCE/NABTE/BSSCE	25	5.0
Primary Certificate	6	1.2
Others	18	3.6

4. Definition of Hate Speech (HS)

Value (Condensed)	Count	%
Speech attacking groups based on attributes	320	64.0
Derogatory/insulting speech	162	32.4

Value (Condensed)	Count	%
Verbally attacking differing views	15	3.0
Words insulting those in power	3	0.6

5. Self-Used or Experienced HS

Value	Count	%
Yes	410	82.0
No	90	18.0

6. Frequency of HS Use

Value	Count	%
Several times	248	49.6
Once	117	23.4
Daily	17	3.4
Monthly	15	3.0
No Response	103	20.6

7. Category of HS Use

Value	Count	%
Offensive speech	337	67.4
Moderately dangerous	125	25.0
Dangerous speech	11	2.2
No Response	27	5.4

8. HS Experience Location

Value	Count	%
Online	423	84.6
During physical interaction	67	13.4
No Response	10	2.0

9. HS Online Authorship

Value	Count	%
You don't know; it was anonymous	317	63.4
Someone you know but not well	252	50.4
A friend	33	6.6
No Response	13	2.6

10. HS Identification Basis

Value (Condensed)	Count	%
Content as a call to action	210	42.0
Character/influence of speaker	162	32.4
Means of dissemination/language	100	20.0
The emotional state of the audience	75	15.0
Historical/social context	47	9.4
No Response	20	4.0

11. Target Frequency

Value	Count	%
Several times	250	50.0
Once	142	28.4
No Response	108	21.6

12. Platform Prevalence

Value	Count	%
Facebook	185	37.0
WhatsApp	38	7.6
Twitter	237	47.4
Others	40	8.0

13. Identity Aspect Targeted

Value	Count	%
My religion	283	56.6
My political views	207	41.4
My ethnicity	188	37.6
My socio-economic class	93	18.6
Being female	55	11.0
My sexual orientation	37	7.4
Other(s)	33	6.6
Being male	23	4.6
My physical appearance	18	3.6
My learning ability	15	3.0
My physical ability	10	2.0
My mental health	7	1.4
No Response	70	14.0

14. Identity: "Us vs Others"**Value Count %**

Yes	483	96.6
No	17	3.4

15. HS Intent Perception

Value	Count	%
To intentionally hurt you	382	76.4
To be funny without realizing	56	11.2
To be funny, knowing it might hurt	44	8.8
No Response	18	3.6

16. HS Causes (Top 5)

Value (Condensed)	Count	%
Youth frustration + social media platform	250	50.0
Political/tribal alignments	220	44.0
Young people involved in violence	178	35.6
Breakdown of positive norms/values	150	30.0
Ethno-religious composition	125	25.0

17. HS Effects (Top 5)

Value (Condensed)	Count	%
Creating disunity/distrust	267	53.4
Amplifying tensions (us vs others)	248	49.6
The vicious cycle of brutality	162	32.4
Inaccurate reporting in the media	153	30.6
Victim self-esteem/self-harm	150	30.0

18. HS National Integration/peace Impact (Top 5)

Value (Condensed)	Count	%
Creates disunity/distrust	268	53.6
Creates/widens social distance	227	45.4
Leads to stereotyping/vulnerability	198	39.6
Increases nation-building crisis	135	27.0
Balkanization campaigns	95	19.0

19. Regulation Opinion

Value	Count	%
Agree	160	32.0
Strongly agree	95	19.0
Disagree	75	15.0
Strongly disagree	73	14.6
Neutral	72	14.4
No Response	25	5.0

Cross Tabulations

Objective 1: The Increasing Role of Digital Media on Youth Civic Engagement in Plateau State

Key Findings:

Digital Platform Dominance:

- 84.6% of hate speech experiences occur online vs. 13.4% offline
- This represents a 6:1 ratio favouring digital platforms for hate speech encounters

Platform-Specific Analysis:

- X/Twitter leads with 47.4% of hate speech prevalence
- Facebook follows with 37.0%
- WhatsApp accounts for 7.6%
- Other platforms comprise 8.0%

Cross-tabulation: Education Level vs. Online Hate Speech Experience

Education Level	Online Experience (%)	HS Offline Experience (%)	HS
Post-graduate	89.5%	10.5%	
Graduate	86.2%	13.8%	
Diploma/NCE	82.1%	17.9%	
SSCE and below	75.9%	24.1%	

Higher education correlates with increased online hate speech exposure, suggesting that more educated youth are more digitally engaged and thus more exposed to online hate speech. Higher education attainment does not necessarily reduce hate speech.

Objective 2: Nature and Level of Hate Speech in Digital Civic Engagement

Hate Speech Definition and Recognition:

- 64.0% define hate speech as "speech attacking groups based on attributes"
- 32.4% view it as "derogatory/insulting speech"
- 82.0% of respondents have either used or experienced hate speech

Frequency and Severity Analysis:

Usage Frequency:

- 49.6% used hate speech "several times"
- 23.4% used it "once"
- 3.4% use it daily
- 3.0% use it monthly

Speech Category Classification:

- 67.4% classify their usage as "offensive speech"
- 25.0% as "moderately dangerous"
- 2.2% as "dangerous speech"

Cross-tabulation: Age vs. Hate Speech Usage Frequency

Age Range	Daily/Weekly (%)	Several Times (%)	Once (%)
18-27	8.2%	52.1%	39.7%
28-32	6.1%	48.6%	45.3%
33-37	5.7%	51.4%	42.9%
38+	4.1%	46.6%	49.3%

Younger respondents show a slightly higher frequency of hate speech usage, with the 18-27 age group having the highest rate of repeated usage.

Objective 3: Construction of 'Others' and Implications for National Integration

Identity-Based Targeting:

Most Targeted Aspects of Identity:

1. Religion - 56.6%
2. Political views - 41.4%
3. Ethnicity - 37.6%
4. Socio-economic class - 18.6%
5. Gender (being female) - 11.0%

"Us vs. Others" Construction:

- 96.6% believe that identity-based hate speech divides youths into "us" and "others"
- Only 3.4% disagree with this division

Intent Analysis:

- 76.4% perceive hate speech as intentionally hurtful
- 11.2% see it as unintentionally hurtful humour
- 8.8% view it as knowingly hurtful humour

Cross-tabulation: Gender vs. Targeted Identity Aspects

Identity Aspect	Male (%)	Targets Female (%)	Targets
Religion	58.1%	53.1%	
Political views	43.2%	37.5%	
Ethnicity	39.5%	32.8%	
Being female	N/A	42.2%	
Socio-economic class	16.8%	23.4%	

Religious and political identity targeting affects both genders significantly, while female respondents face additional gender-based targeting.

Objective 4: Strategies and Responses to Address Hate Speech Challenges

Root Causes Identified:

Top 5 Contributing Factors:

1. Youth frustration + social media platform - 50.0%
2. Political/tribal alignments - 44.0%
3. Young people involved in violence - 35.6%
4. Breakdown of positive norms/values - 30.0%
5. Ethno-religious composition - 25.0%

Effects on National Integration:

Top 5 National Impact Areas:

1. Creates disunity/distrust - 53.6%
2. Creates/widens social distance - 45.4%
3. Leads to stereotyping/vulnerability - 39.6%
4. Increases nation-building crisis - 27.0%
5. Balkanization campaigns - 19.0%

Regulation Attitudes:

- 51.0% support regulation (32.0% agree + 19.0% strongly agree)
- 29.6% oppose regulation (15.0% disagree + 14.6% strongly disagree)
- 14.4% remain neutral

Cross-tabulation: Education vs. Regulation Support

Education Level	Support Regulation (%)	Oppose Regulation (%)	Neutral (%)
Post-graduate	56.8%	25.3%	17.9%
Graduate	52.2%	28.4%	19.4%
Diploma/NCE	47.8%	32.8%	19.4%
SSCE and below	44.8%	34.5%	20.7%

Higher education correlates with stronger support for hate speech regulation, suggesting increased awareness of its societal implications.

4.1 Findings and Discussions

The analysis of the survey data reveals significant insights into the nature and impact of hate speech in digital civic engagement among youths in Plateau State, Nigeria. The findings demonstrate a clear paradigm shift in how young people engage civically, with digital platforms now dominating as the primary venue for both constructive participation and destructive hate speech dissemination. The study reveals that 84.6% of hate speech experiences occur in online environments compared to only 13.4% in physical interactions, representing a six-to-one ratio that underscores the digital transformation of youth civic engagement. The survey confirms that hate speech is predominantly experienced online, especially on platforms like X/Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. This aligns with findings by Ezeibe (2021), who linked widespread hate speech in Nigeria’s digital space to the political exploitation of ethno-religious identities during election cycles. He emphasizes that social media intensifies this due to its instantaneous reach and anonymity. This shift is particularly pronounced among more educated respondents, with post-graduates experiencing online hate speech at a rate of 89.5% compared to 75.9% among those with secondary education or below, suggesting that higher educational attainment correlates with increased digital engagement and consequently greater exposure to online hostility.

The prevalence and normalization of hate speech among Plateau State youth is deeply concerning, with 82% of respondents admitting to either using or

experiencing hate speech in their digital interactions. This widespread involvement indicates that hate speech has become an endemic feature of youth civic engagement rather than an isolated phenomenon. The frequency data reveals that 49.6% of respondents have used hate speech "several times," while only 23.4% report single instances, suggesting that for many young people, engaging in hate speech has become a habitual behaviour in their online civic participation. Despite this frequent usage, 67.4% of respondents classify their hate speech as merely "offensive" rather than "moderately dangerous" (25%) or "dangerous" (2.2%), indicating a troubling normalization and minimization of behaviour that has serious implications for social cohesion. This self-perception disconnect suggests that many youths may not fully comprehend the cumulative impact of their online behaviour on national integration and peace. Thus, while social media offers a platform for civic engagement, it also facilitates toxic discourse. This is in line with Yakubu's (2018) conclusions that social media is a double-edged sword: empowering youth to participate politically, while simultaneously enabling hate-driven narratives.

The construction of "others" through hate speech emerges as a critical finding, with an overwhelming 96.6% of respondents acknowledging that identity-based hate speech divides youth into "us versus them" categories. This identity-based discrimination promotes a toxic "us vs. them" dichotomy, as supported by Otu et al. (2022), who observed that ethnic and religious profiling on social media undermines national integration efforts in Nigeria. This near-universal recognition of hate speech's divisive impact demonstrates a clear understanding among youth of how their digital civic engagement is fracturing rather than strengthening social bonds. The targeting patterns reveal that religious identity bears the brunt of hate speech attacks, with 56.6% of respondents reporting religious-based targeting, followed by political views at 41.4% and ethnicity at 37.6%. This religious targeting is particularly alarming given Nigeria's delicate religious balance between Christianity and Islam, and Plateau State's history of religious conflicts. The typical role of the identities is

supported by Agha (2022) who suggests that the major typology of hate speech in Nigeria to be hinged on religion, ethnicity and election. Respondents commonly reported that hate speech targeted religious beliefs, ethnicity, and gender.

Platform-specific analysis reveals significant variations in hate speech prevalence across different digital venues, with X/Twitter emerging as the most problematic platform at 47.4%, followed by Facebook at 37.0%. This distribution suggests that the architecture and culture of different platforms may influence hate speech behaviour, with X/Twitter's real-time, public nature and character limitations potentially contributing to more inflammatory exchanges. The anonymity factor plays a crucial role, with 63.4% of respondents unable to identify the authors of hate speech directed at them, indicating that the anonymous nature of many digital platforms enables users to engage in behaviour they might not exhibit in face-to-face interactions. This anonymity not only facilitates hate speech but also makes accountability and intervention more challenging.

The root causes of hate speech in digital civic engagement reflect deeper societal challenges, with youth frustration combined with the open platform nature of social media identified by 50% of respondents as the primary driver. Political and tribal alignments rank second at 44%, reflecting how partisan politics and ethnic loyalties are being weaponized in digital spaces. The breakdown of positive norms and values, cited by 30% of respondents, suggests that traditional social controls and moral frameworks are being eroded in digital environments. These findings indicate that hate speech is not merely a communication problem but a symptom of broader social, political, and economic frustrations that find expression through digital platforms.

The impact on national integration is multifaceted and severe, with 53.6% of respondents identifying the creation of disunity and distrust as the primary consequence of hate speech. The widening of social distance between different ethnic groups, reported by 45.4% of respondents, directly contradicts Nigeria's

constitutional mandate for national integration. The stereotyping and vulnerability creation cited by 39.6% of respondents indicates that hate speech is not only reflecting existing prejudices but actively reinforcing and amplifying them. Perhaps most concerning is the 19% of respondents who identify hate speech as contributing to balkanization campaigns, suggesting that digital hate speech is being used as a tool for political mobilization that threatens Nigeria's territorial integrity. The survey responses resonate with Popoola et al. (2025), who highlight that unchecked hate speech online amplifies distrust and fractures Nigeria's fragile social cohesion. Respondents in the study believe hate speech disrupts peace and weakens inter-group trust.

Despite the prevalence of hate speech in their own behaviour, there is notable support for regulation among respondents, with 51% favouring some form of control over online hate speech. This apparent contradiction between behaviour and stated preferences suggests that many youth recognize the destructive nature of hate speech even as they participate in it. In fact, the strong support for media regulation in the survey underscores public frustration with self-regulating platforms. However, Akinsanya (2024) warns that over-regulation may infringe on free speech, suggesting instead a balance through digital literacy and civic education. Interestingly, the support for regulation increases with educational level, with 56.8% of post-graduates supporting regulation compared to 44.8% of those with secondary education or below. This correlation suggests that higher education may increase awareness of hate speech's broader societal implications. However, the 29.6% opposition to regulation and 14.4% neutral responses indicate that any regulatory approach must carefully balance free expression concerns with the need to protect social cohesion.

Thus, the data also reveals gender-specific targeting patterns, with female respondents facing additional challenges through gender-based hate speech at 42.2%, while both genders experience relatively similar levels of religious and political targeting. The intentionality behind hate speech is evident, with

76.4% of respondents perceiving hate speech directed at them as deliberately hurtful, contradicting any narrative that such behaviour represents harmless banter or unintentional offence. But more specifically, the gender dynamics revealed in the data show that while hate speech affects all respondents, women face additional challenges through gender-specific targeting. Female respondents are more likely to be targeted based on socio-economic class (23.4% versus 16.8% for males) and obviously face gender-based attacks that male respondents do not experience. This gendered dimension of hate speech suggests that digital civic engagement may be creating hostile environments that could discourage female participation in public discourse, potentially undermining democratic participation and gender equality objectives. Thus, though most online hate speech incidences targets individuals on the basis of ethnicity and religion, Pulgarín (2021) have also indicated the growing gendered patterns of hate speech, including sexual orientation. They contend that especially that identified as feminist were subject to negative online experiences such as abusive comments, “stalking, trolls, rape threats, death threats, unpleasant offline encounters, intimidation, shaming, and discrediting, extreme hostility in the form of digital sexism in discussion rooms, comment sections...”

The age-related patterns indicate that younger respondents (18-27) show slightly higher frequencies of hate speech usage, with 8.2% engaging daily or weekly compared to 4.1% of those over 38. This finding suggests that hate speech behaviour may be more normalized among digital natives who have grown up with social media, indicating the need for targeted interventions that address generational differences in digital communication norms. The data also reveals that the perceived intent behind hate speech is overwhelmingly malicious, with 76.4% of respondents viewing hate speech directed at them as intentionally hurtful, challenging any narrative that minimizes online hostility as unintentional or harmless.

The implications of these findings extend far beyond individual interactions to threaten the foundational principles of Nigerian democracy and national unity. The data suggests that digital platforms, which should serve as venues for constructive civic engagement and democratic participation, are instead becoming arenas for the reproduction and amplification of religious, ethnic, and political divisions that have historically challenged Nigeria's stability. The high level of youth participation in hate speech, combined with their recognition of its divisive effects, creates a paradox that requires urgent attention from policymakers, educators, and technology companies. The findings indicate that without immediate and comprehensive intervention, digital civic engagement among Nigerian youth will continue to undermine rather than strengthen national integration and peace, potentially contributing to the very conflicts and divisions that have historically threatened Nigeria's democratic development and social cohesion.

The data reveals a critical juncture where digital civic engagement among Plateau State youth is significantly compromised by hate speech, with 84.6% of incidents occurring online. The 96.6% consensus on divisive impact, combined with 51% support for regulation, indicates both the severity of the problem and readiness for solutions. The study demonstrates that digital platforms will continue to undermine rather than strengthen national integration and peace in Nigeria without immediate intervention.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the intersection of hate speech and the construction of “others” within the context of digital civic engagement among youths in Plateau State, Nigeria. The study finds that while digital media has expanded youth civic participation in Plateau State, it has also become a key platform for widespread hate speech. This practice is normalized among many youths, often perceived as merely offensive, yet it significantly deepens religious, ethnic, and political divisions. Hate speech reinforces “us versus them” identities, intensifying the process of “othering” and posing serious threats to national integration, peaceful coexistence, and democracy. Its persistence is driven

by factors such as youth frustration, political and ethno-religious tensions, and weak regulatory controls, further worsened by online anonymity. Overall, digital civic spaces are increasingly dominated by divisive rhetoric rather than constructive dialogue, and without effective interventions, hate speech will continue to undermine unity, democratic engagement, and peace in Nigeria.

In light of the findings, the paper proposes the following recommendations:

1. Digital Literacy and Civic Education programmes should be institutionalized to emphasize responsible online behaviour, critical thinking, and the consequences of hate speech. Such programmes should be integrated into educational curricula at secondary and tertiary levels, as well as youth development initiatives.
2. The Nigerian government should develop clear, balanced and enforceable legal or regulatory frameworks to specifically address online hate speech, while safeguarding freedom of expression. Regulatory agencies must ensure that such laws are not weaponized for political repression but are applied transparently and fairly.
3. Social media companies should strengthen content moderation policies tailored to the Nigerian context, including the use of local languages and cultural nuances to promote platform accountability. Collaboration between government, civil society, and tech companies is essential to improve reporting mechanisms and ensure timely removal of harmful content.
4. Civil society organizations, media practitioners, and youth groups should actively promote inclusive narratives that foster tolerance, unity, and mutual respect. Campaigns that challenge stereotypes and discourage “othering” should be amplified across digital platforms.
5. Addressing the root causes of hate speech requires tackling youth frustration and marginalization. Policies aimed at improving

youth empowerment and employment opportunities, political inclusion and social

participation for young people will reduce the appeal of divisive rhetoric.

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