PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA (FACEBOOK) DURING THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *In the contemporary global landscape, the advent of information and communication technology has interconnected societies, fostering increased civic engagement. Notably, social media platforms, a manifestation of this technological innovation, play a vital role in political discourse, drawing active participation from politicians, political parties, and their supporters. However, the utilization of these platforms in the context of electoral campaigns, particularly in nations like Nigeria, has raised concerns due to the dissemination of political information carrying adverse repercussions. This study delves into the examination of the public's perceptions regarding hate speech on Facebook during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Employing a survey research strategy and leveraging convenient sampling, data were collected from residents within the geographical scope of Kwali Area Council, Abuja, Nigeria. The research framework drew upon the public sphere theory to elucidate its core objectives. Findings underscored the prevalence of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 elections, attributing it to factors such as financial inducements, conspiracies, lack of citizen journalist training, religious interests, and sectional, tribal, and political influences. Notably, Facebook emerged as a platform for disseminating speeches that fueled animosity toward politicians, tribes, religions, and sections, instigating widespread antipathy without substantial knowledge of the targeted individuals or candidates. The research also highlighted the use of Facebook for insults, harassment, and the propagation of divisive narratives, contributing to tribal and religious conflicts, heightened tensions, attacks, disparities, and internal discord. This study's implications suggest a potential undermining of Nigeria's democratic progress. As a remedy, the study advocates for the responsible and positive use of social media platforms by users, especially during critical events such as elections.*

KEYWORDS: Facebook, Hate speech, Perception, Public sphere, Election, Social media.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread influence of digital technologies in the 21st century has permeated various facets of human activities, leaving an indelible mark. These technologies have found applications across diverse sectors, and their effects are extensively documented in the literature. In ways previously unimagined, digital technologies, as highlighted by Das (2020), have not only transformed society but also continue to reshape it through their arrival and utilization. Ayhan (2017) underscores that the diffusion of digital technologies has instigated changes in all aspects of society, enhancing lives, enriching experiences, and bolstering the operations and efficiency of institutions. Within the spectrum of digital technologies, Mohamad-Noor et al. (2020) contend that social media platforms, among the various forms of digital media (such as websites and social networking sites), distinguish themselves for their significant and diverse societal impact. The transition from the static web 1.0 to the interactive web 2.0 has facilitated the emergence of these novel media formats, thereby democratizing the global media landscape. This transition enables both professionals and amateurs to engage in the creation, access, consumption, and sharing of information, as highlighted by Ejiga, Dapiya, and Sase (2020), and Ejiga and Atime (2019). The inherent democratizing features of social media have dismantled the previously monopolized 'one-way information flow' of traditional media, ushering in a 'multi-way' dialogue, as observed by Lenhart et al. (2007), as cited in Ejiga, Dapiya, and Sase (2020).

This new media paradigm fosters interactivity among users and with content, ensures speed, massive storage capacity, and promotes pluralism of voices, including those previously silenced, according to Ortiz, Young, Myers, Bedeley, and Carbaugh (2019). Bekafigo and McBride (2013), cited in Segado-Boj and Daz-Campo (2020: 234-235), succinctly capture this by affirming that "Social media are a useful channel for alternative parties, minorities, or outsider groups frequently silenced in major legacy media to circulate their ideas and attitudes." Social media provides individuals, equipped with digital tools such as mobile phones, tablets, and laptops, along with internet connectivity and social media accounts, the ability to both create and consume information concurrently. It facilitates global connectivity in a manner unparalleled by any previous technology (Ejiga & Atime, 2019). This transformative media has given rise to a new societal structure and an information-centric community (Das, 2020). The capability of users to establish an account, possess a platform (social media), generate content, and share it with a worldwide audience reinforces the concept of online freedom of speech. With the advent of social media, anyone equipped with digital tools now possesses a voice, significantly enhancing the freedom of expression, a fundamental human right that grants individuals the liberty to communicate through various forms of media, with the only constraint being to avoid causing harm to others character or reputation through false or misleading statements (Brian, 2014).

Despite the significant role of social media in facilitating communication for individuals and institutions and serving as a platform for free speech, there are associated concerns. These concerns encompass privacy issues (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Fox & Moreland, 2015), the presence of inappropriate content, and the dissemination of harmful information, including misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, leading to physical and psychological harm and posing threats to the democratic foundations of nations (Giglietto, Olaniran & Mini Grucci, 2022). The use of social media platforms, ensuing debates on how they are used, by whom, for what purpose, and against

whom, represent new realities that are globally discussed across various disciplines, including media studies.

Particularly, Facebook, among the widely used internet applications (Lee, 2014), stands out with the largest global user base, reaching 2.99 billion in the first quarter of 2023 according to Meta, its parent company (Oberlo, 2023). This social networking giant also boasts one of the highest user counts in Nigeria (Statista, 2023). In terms of the propagation of hate speech, this platform has experienced numerous instances, including within Nigeria, notably during national-level election campaigns. The 2023 presidential election campaigns vividly illustrate the impact of hate speech in the Nigerian political arena, characterized by divisions along religious and tribal lines. While these occurrences are not novel, the utilization of Facebook has significantly amplified the scope and speed at which detrimental information reaches diverse target audiences online and influences them. The dissemination of misleading or harmful information online has become a global concern and topic of discussion, exacerbated by the absence of a universal treaty outlining how social media platforms like Facebook should address this issue (Hulin & Stone, 2013).

In accordance with Rajaratnam et al. (2020), recognising the significant role of the media in influencing public perceptions, it is contended that the right to freedom of expression is not absolute. There exist valid justifications for curtailing its excessive and abusive exercise. Consequently, nations possess the legitimate authority to institute regulatory frameworks to tackle this issue, provided they comply with the three-part test criteria: (i) these mechanisms are established by law; (ii) they serve the genuine welfare of society or the nation; and (iii) they are indispensable for the advancement of a democratic society rather than constituting a threat to it (Human Rights Committee, 2011). The escalation of hate speech among Nigerian users on Facebook, particularly during electoral campaigns, perpetuates tensions within the political sphere and undermines the democratic foundation of the country.

Therefore, it is imperative to critically examine and address the dissemination of harmful information, such as hate speech under the guise of free speech, on Facebook during political campaigns in Nigeria for the greater good of society. As this research cannot encompass the entirety of Nigeria, the study focuses on Nigerians residing in the Kwali Area Council, Abuja, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Undoubtedly, the distinctive features of Facebook render it a highly accessible communication platform for individuals to express their opinions on various societal issues, including politics. While this aspect has garnered praise from various quarters, it has concurrently provided a channel for political figures and their supporters to generate and propagate hate speech against their adversaries. The researcher observed instances of such misuse of Facebook for bullying political opponents, particularly during the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria, prompting the need for an in-depth investigation.

Several studies have been conducted on the intersection of social media and electioneering (Nwozor et al., 2022; Soloev & Prollochs, 2022; Wiana, 2019). Nwozor et al.'s (2022) research dredge into "Social Media in Politics: Interrogating Electorate-Driven Hate Speech in Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Campaign." Soloev, and Prollochs (2022) focused on "Hate Speech in Political Discourse on Social Media: Disparities Across Parties, Gender, and Ethnicity." Wiana (2019) analyzed "The Use of Hate Speech in Social Media in the Case of the Presidential Election in 2019."

Despite the existence of these studies, none specifically addressed the public perception of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. This research aims to fill this gap by investigating the nuances of public perception regarding hate speech on Facebook during the mentioned electoral period.

Research Objectives

The overarching objective of this study is to investigate the public perception of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The specific objectives are delineated as follows:

1. To ascertain the frequency and prevalence of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

2. To investigate the factors that contribute to the dissemination of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections.

3. To assess the ramifications and influence of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hate Speech, Facebook, and Nigerian General Elections

The global concern over the impact of hate speech is pronounced, with Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, not exempt from its effects (Guterres, 2019). This literature review delves into existing scholarly works on hate speech in Nigeria, aiming to analyze the available body of knowledge and academic publications. The examination sheds light on the origins, consequences, and potential defense mechanisms associated with hate speech.

Numerous research studies have identified various factors contributing to the prevalence of hate speech in Nigeria. Socioeconomic disparities, historical grievances, political manipulation, racial and religious intolerance, and inadequate legislation are among the primary contributors (Virginia, Alabi & Olanrewaju, 2017). The emergence of social media platforms has exacerbated the issue, providing a fertile ground for the rapid dissemination and amplification of hate speech (Burnap & Williams, 2015; Chiluwa, Taiwo & Ajiboye, 2020; Aduko, 2021). Given Facebook's widespread usage and influence, the platform has become a focal point of concern and academic inquiry

regarding hate speech. Scholars have extensively explored various aspects of hate speech on Facebook, including its prevalence, impacts, and the effectiveness of moderation efforts (Laub, 2019).

Research findings indicate the pervasive nature of hate speech on Facebook, targeting a range of underrepresented groups (Sinpeng, 2021). Investigations into user-generated content, comments, and public posts have been pivotal in identifying and quantifying instances of hate speech (Reiners & Schemer, 2020). Concurrently, studies have examined the broader effects of hate speech on individuals and communities, revealing increased discrimination, prejudice, and unfavorable attitudes towards specific groups. According to Saha, Chandrasekharan and De Choudhury (2019), hate speech fosters a toxic online environment, contributing to psychological distress, anxiety, and disengagement from online activities.

The effectiveness of Facebook's efforts to moderate hate speech has been a subject of debate. Researchers, such as Gongane, Munot, and Anuse (2022), have scrutinized the challenges faced by content moderators, the role of automated systems, and potential biases and constraints in the moderation process. Several countermeasures against hate speech on Facebook have been proposed and evaluated by researchers. These include enhancing user awareness and education on hate speech issues, developing more efficient content moderation algorithms, promoting counter-speech, encouraging positive online engagement, and more (Windisch, Wiedlitzka, Olaghere & Jenaway, 2022).

The repercussions of hate speech in Nigeria are extensive and varied, exacerbating interethnic and interreligious tensions, leading to violence, community conflicts, and fatalities (Terfa, Hemen & Jinatu, 2017). Hate speech hinders national development, undermines social cohesion, and fosters prejudice, with profound psychological consequences, instilling fear, worry, and insecurity in individuals and communities (Terfa, Hemen & Jinatu, 2017).

Scholars and policymakers have proposed various strategies to address hate speech in Nigeria. Strengthening legal frameworks and enforcing existing rules against hate speech have been suggested (Chiluwa, Taiwo, & Ajiboye, 2020). Educational and awareness initiatives promoting tolerance, empathy, and cultural understanding are deemed essential to combat hate speech (Isola & Mohan, 2018). Programs teaching critical analysis of content and distinguishing between free speech and hate speech are recommended (UNESCO, 2023). Successful monitoring and countering of hate speech necessitate collaboration between the government, civil society organizations, and social media companies (Ilori, 2023).

Similar to electoral processes in various nations, the Nigerian presidential election campaign constitutes a period characterized by intense political discourse and widespread public engagement. Notably, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, serve as arenas for the dissemination of hate speech, false information, and polarizing narratives during this period (Nwozor, Ajakaiye, Okidu, Olanrewaju & Afolabi, 2022).

As asserted by Kalnite (2022), political campaigns often revolve around conflicting ideologies, party affiliations, and policy debates. Regrettably, some individuals or entities exploit these conflicts by employing hate speech to advance their own agendas. This may involve targeting

specific racial, religious, or social groups, perpetuating stereotypes, or utilizing provocative language. Elections, as noted by Colomina, Margalef, and Youngs (2021), provide fertile ground for the proliferation of rumors, misinformation, and deceptive information. Instances of misinformation campaigns, deliberately disseminating false or inaccurate narratives about particular groups to foster hatred and prejudice, are occasionally intertwined with the manifestation of hate speech.

During election periods, social media platforms such as Facebook significantly influence public sentiment. While users utilize these platforms to share information, express political opinions, and engage in debates, their wide reach and viral nature can also facilitate the rapid dissemination of hate speech (Birla, 2023). Meta, Facebook's parent company, contends that effectively monitoring and curbing hate speech during election seasons poses substantial challenges. Content moderation teams grapple with the sheer volume of user-generated content, its rapid dissemination, and the delicate balance between freedom of speech and content regulation. Moreover, hate speech often adopts subtle disguises, such as political satire or criticism, making detection and mitigation more challenging (Meta, 2023).

According to Daughter's study (2023), hate speech during electioneering can detrimentally impact social cohesion, public trust in democratic institutions, and the overall well-being of individuals and communities. It has the potential to deepen divisions, incite violence, and impede constructive political discourse. Isola and Mohan (2018) argue that a collaborative effort involving social media platforms, political actors, civil society organizations, and the government is imperative in addressing the issue of hate speech during the Nigerian presidential election campaign or any electoral period. Potential outcomes of this collaboration include heightened user awareness and education on appropriate online behavior, the promotion of counter-speech and constructive engagement, and fostering a climate of respectful political dialogue. Establishing explicit legal frameworks and regulations to combat hate speech while safeguarding freedom of expression may also prove beneficial.

Notably, the Nigerian government has undertaken initiatives to regulate social media usage in the country, particularly during election periods, raising concerns about potential constraints on free speech (Nwozor, Ajakaiye, Okidu, Olanrewaju & Afolabi, 2022). Striking a delicate balance between the imperative to curtail hate speech and the necessity to uphold fundamental rights necessitates thoughtful and inclusive deliberations among diverse stakeholders.

Review of Empirical Studies

In a study conducted by Uzochukwu in (2019), the focus was on "Social Media, Hate Speech, and Conflict: Interplay of Influences." The research utilized the Critical Discourse Analysis strategy and the spiral of silence theory. The investigation revealed that quantifying hate speech requires prior familiarity with the language employed to propagate hostility towards others. Moreover, the definition of hate speech is often ambiguous, occasionally encompassing expressions that denigrate powerful individuals, members of marginalized communities, or notable figures. The study's findings also indicated that, despite the ease with which hate speech can be manipulated during critical moments such as electioneering, accusations of promoting hate speech can be

exchanged amid silenced criticism and opposition. This underscores the importance of intermediaries in advancing the fight against hate speech, as individuals exposed to hate messages are more prone to forming negative opinions than positive ones.

Alakali, Faga and Mbursa (2017) conducted a study titled "Audience Perception of Hate Speech and Foul Language in Social Media in Nigeria: Implications for Morality and Law," with a focus on exploring the audience's views. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative research designs to gather data, incorporating media morphosis and public sphere theories to enhance the study's depth.

The findings revealed that respondents were aware of the penalties associated with hate speech and foul language. Despite this awareness, respondents demonstrated a greater understanding of the corresponding obligations and laws established to address such behaviors in Nigeria. The study concluded that instances of hate speech and foul language are prevalent on social media platforms in Nigeria.

As a recommendation, the study proposed that a comprehensive understanding of hate speech necessitates collaborative efforts from the Nigerian government and relevant stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations. To achieve this, the study suggested supporting monitoring initiatives such as the UMATI project in Kenya. Furthermore, the study recommended that regulatory bodies established under the legal framework should implement procedures to identify and remove hate speech content from social media platforms in Nigeria. In 2019, Wiana conducted a study titled: "Analysis of the Use of Hate Speech on Social Media in the Case of the Presidential Election in 2019." The primary focus of this research was to assess the words, phrases, and speech expressions related to hate speech that were prevalent on social media platforms during the 2019 presidential election. The study adopted a qualitative research approach to achieve its objectives.

The findings of the research highlighted the predominant form of hate speech observed on social media during the election was incitement. The study concluded that both Facebook and Instagram were utilized as platforms to propagate incitement and insults during the 2019 elections. Consequently, the research recommended that users of social media exercise caution in their postings, particularly during political events, emphasizing that the dissemination of hate speech can escalate societal conflicts.

To address this issue, the study further advocated for the continuous promotion of media literacy among social media users. Additionally, it stressed the importance of enhancing public understanding of regulatory efforts, including the ITE law, Indonesia Police Circular Letters, and the Criminal Code Law pertaining to hate speech. Government agencies and institutions were urged to play a proactive role in deepening this knowledge among the public to prevent unpleasant situations from arising.

Theoretical Underpinning

The study was anchored on the public sphere theory. This idea was put out by Jurgen Habermas in reaction to what the theorist saw as the media's massification and atomization of the populace. According to Habermas (1989), the public sphere is an area where people can freely discuss issues of public interest and are based on their rights to free speech, association, assembly, and publication of ideas without excessive political or economic influence. Flichy (2010) makes the case that Web 2.0 gives amateurs the chance to contribute to their areas of interest, engage with opposing viewpoints, and find an audience in support of Habermas's theory. In this way, amateurs gain influence that was previously only available to experts and professionals. This social acceptance of amateurs, in the view of Flichy (2010), is especially important in the fields of politics and other sectors in the life of a society. Due to lack of regulation or gatekeeping, bloggers and other Internet users are at liberty to discuss politics in a way that changes the basic parameters of the public sphere. Without sufficient regulation, social media has become the new public space in Nigeria, with ill-defined limits on the rights to assemble, associate and express oneself. Hence, this theory was considered relevant to this study.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a survey research approach, targeting the residents of Kwali Area Council, Abuja, as the study population. The estimated population of Kwali Area Council in 2023, as retrieved from (www.manpower.com.ng/places/iga/317/kwali), was reported as 170,446. The study determined a sample size of 384 using the sample size determination table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Convenient sampling techniques were applied, and data were collected using a questionnaire as the primary instrument.

The presentation and analysis of data involved descriptive statistics, incorporating tables, charts, figures, frequencies, percentages, and mean deviation. The five-point Likert scale, comprising Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD), was utilized. A criterion mean of 3 was considered an accepted result, while a mean of 2 was indicative of a rejected result. This approach was employed to convey the research findings effectively.

Questionnaire Retrieval: A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed, and 367 were successfully retrieved, deemed valid, and subsequently used for analysis.

DATA PRESENTATION

Figure 1: Frequency of the prevalence of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria
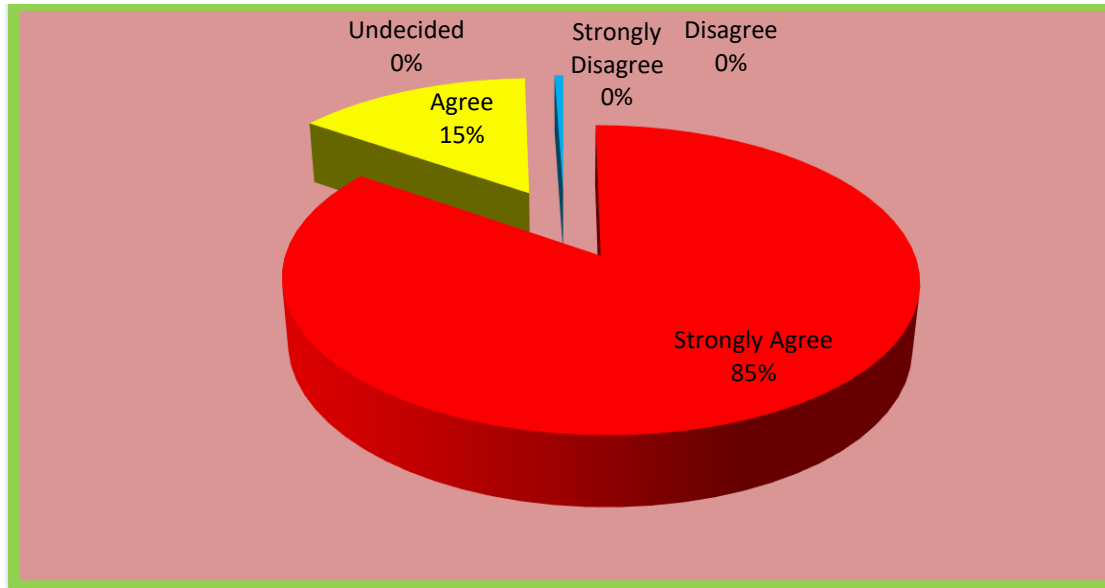
Analysis of the chart above reveals that a majority of the study participants hold the belief that hate speech was widespread on Facebook during the 2023 general elections.

Figure 2: Factors that encouraged the posting of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections
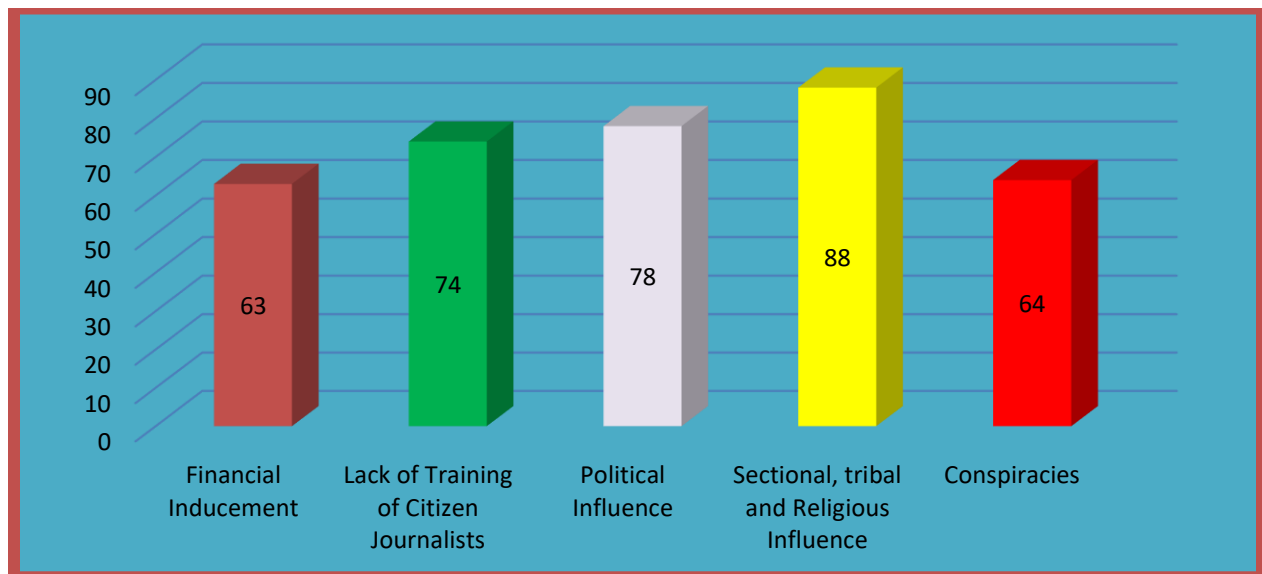
While sectional, tribal, and religious influences emerge as predominant factors, it can be inferred from the findings presented in Chart 2 that numerous factors typically serve as catalysts for the propagation of hate speech on Facebook during electioneering in Nigeria.

Table 1: Impact of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria

Option	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean Rating	Decision
Facebook was used to publicize speeches directed at politicians, individuals, their tribes, religion, section, which made people hate political candidates and individuals even without knowing about such candidates or individuals.	323	33	11	0	0	4.8	Accepted
Facebook was deployed to insult, harass individuals, political candidates and their parties, their supporters, resulting in tribal conflicts, religious conflicts, tensions, attacks, disparities, fights and division among citizens, thereby undermining Nigeria's growing democracy	319	27	21	0	0	4.8	Accepted

The implications of the results in the table above indicate that if social media posts during electioneering in Nigeria are not checked, they could have significant consequences on the country's political trajectory.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate a prevalence of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. This observation aligns with the perspectives of Burnap and Williams (2015) and Chiluwa, Taiwo and Ajiboye (2020), who contend that the evolution of social media platforms has created a fertile ground for the dissemination of hate speech, facilitating its rapid dissemination and amplification, particularly during political events. Additionally, the study revealed that factors such as financial enticement, conspiracies, lack of training for citizen journalists, religious interests, sectionalism, tribalism, and political influences contributed to the proliferation of hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. This finding resonates with the work of Alakali et al. (2017), who identified regionalism, religious and political sentiments, as well as bribery, as factors influencing the content shared on social media.

Furthermore, the research established that Facebook was utilized to publicize speeches targeting politicians, individuals, tribes, religions, and sections, fostering animosity towards political candidates and individuals, even without substantial knowledge about them. The study also revealed that Facebook was employed for insulting and harassing individuals, political candidates, their parties, and their supporters, leading to tribal and religious conflicts, tensions, attacks, disparities, fights, and division among citizens, thereby undermining Nigeria's evolving democracy. These findings align with Aduko's (2021) work, which highlighted the adverse implications of ideas and thoughts shared on social media, including the potential for violence, fights, and harassment based on segregation, ethnicity, nationality, religious, and political affiliations.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, social media, particularly Facebook, continues to exert significant influence on Nigeria's political landscape. It has transformed the manner in which Nigerians engage with political issues, fostering extensive mobilization for desired change. However, this digital revolution within the communication industry also brings with it inherent challenges. Consequently, this study concludes that Facebook played a role in the dissemination of hate speech targeting political candidates, their supporters, and parties during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Various factors, including financial enticement, conspiracies, insufficient training for citizen journalists, religious interests, sectionalism, tribalism, and political influence, were identified as contributing to this phenomenon. Recognising the dual nature of social media's impact on political discourse is crucial for comprehending its complexities and ensuring a nuanced approach to mitigating the negative consequences associated with hate speech during elections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the study's conclusions, the following recommendations are put forth:

1. Social media users should channel their engagement toward positive causes.

2. The Nigerian government ought to institute stringent measures to combat hate speech on social media.

3. The youth are encouraged to utilize their time judiciously, refraining from posting materials that lack value for both themselves and the nation.

4. Civil society organizations, media establishments, and influential figures in Nigerian society should intensify efforts by exerting pressure on perilous social media influencers, urging them to refrain from disseminating posts and making comments that have the potential to incite unrest in the country.

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