LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CYBERBULLYING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Nigeria's linguistic and religious diversity has made it a fertile ground for identity-driven discourse, often manifesting in online interactions. This study examines the intersection of language, identity, and religious bigotry in Nigeria's digital space, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explore how online discourse shapes and reinforces social divisions. The study critically analyses selected online posts, comments, and video clips to identify patterns of religious intolerance, cyberbullying, and hate speech. Findings reveal that language is not only a medium of communication, but also, a tool for constructing and maintaining social identities. Online platforms amplify religious bigotry by enabling individuals express prejudices, propagate stereotypes, and engage in cyberbullying. Various forms of cyberbullying such as trolling, hate speech, fraping, denigration, exclusion, discrimination, impersonation, to mention a few serves, to deepen religious and ethnic divides. The study highlights the role of social media in both exacerbating and mitigating religious tensions, suggesting that strategic interventions, including digital literacy programs and stricter cyber laws, are necessary for promoting tolerance and interfaith dialogue. By examining the linguistic strategies used in online religious discourse, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how digital interactions influence societal cohesion. The findings advocate for a more responsible use of language in online spaces to promote peace, tolerance, and mutual respect in Nigeria's pluralistic society.*

KEYWORDS: Language, Identity, Religious Bigotry, cyberbullying, Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with over 500 distinct languages spoken across its regions. English serves as the official language and a lingua franca, facilitating communication across different ethnic and linguistic groups. This linguistic diversity is both a source of cultural richness and a potential ground for social fragmentation. According to Ajala, et al. (2023), language is not just a tool for communication, it is also a key means of expressing and constructing identity. This, however, is often closely tied to religious beliefs and practices. In turn, religious beliefs and practices can shape language use and communication, influencing the ways individuals and groups interact with one another. This intricate interplay has far-reaching implications for social dynamics, intergroup relations, and even conflict resolution. This is often facilitated by both traditional and modern media of communication.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and reflecting society's values in this dynamic socio-religious landscape (Mokodenseho, Jasiah, Muharam, Rizaq, and Hasibuan, 2024). The interplay among media representations, language, identity and religious issues is a recurring phenomenon in Nigeria. This symbiotic relationship between media and public opinion has been extensively studied. According to Mokodenseho, et al. (2024), the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions through agenda-setting, framing, and influencing attitudes.

Overview of Nigeria's Linguistic and Religious Diversity

Language is a critical component of identity in Nigeria. It is not just a means of communication, but a marker of ethnic, cultural, and regional identity (Udoh and Emmanuel, 2020; Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025). For instance, speaking Hausa often signals an association with Northern Nigeria and its predominantly Muslim population, while speaking Yoruba or Igbo is indicative of ties to the South-Western and South-Eastern regions, respectively, which are largely Christian. This intricate link between language and identity means that, linguistic choices can reflect and reinforce social boundaries and affiliations.

Religion is another major axis of identity in Nigeria, with Christianity and Islam being the two predominant religions. The religious landscape is geographically divided, with Islam being more prevalent in the north and Christianity in the south. Religious identity is deeply interwoven with ethnic and regional identities, often reinforcing social divides. The interactions between these religious groups have historically been marked by both cooperation and conflict, influencing various aspects of social and political life.

Problem Statement

Recent studies have shown that, on several occasions, online platforms, have amplified religious bigotry as netizens use language to express prejudices and propagate stereotypes, resulting into cyberbullying. This study is a critical discourse analysis of selected online posts, comments, and video clips. It is a study that dove tailed into language use, social and other online religious related issues. According to Vidgen & Yasseri (2020), religious bigotry in online discourse has manifested through hate speech, derogatory language, and the spreading of misinformation about different religious groups. Such discourse has exacerbated existing tensions and even incited violence offline. Tahir and Ramadhan (2024) reported that, online hate speech has become a significant concern on social media. Its dissemination in

communicative spaces represents one of the major societal challenges of digitalization. According to a model of moderation variables, it is postulated that factors at various analytical levels influence comment moderators' perceptions of hate speech, which in turn influences the decisions they make regarding moderation to fight abusive content (Kunst, Porten-Cheé, Emmer and Eilders, 2021).

In the context of religious tensions in Nigeria, language plays a crucial role in fostering or mitigating religious crises (Abodunrin and Ogungbenro, 2024). The words and phrases people use to describe others, whether online or offline, can either promote tolerance, understanding, and interfaith dialogue or perpetuate stereotypes, prejudices, and hate speech. This paper will examine the complex relationship between language and religion in Nigeria, exploring how language use mitigates or contributes to religious bigotry in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Discourse and Social Interaction in Nigeria

The rise of the internet and social media platforms has transformed the landscape of communication in Nigeria. Online discourse, particularly on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp play a significant role in shaping public opinion and social interactions. These platforms provide spaces for individuals to express their identities, share opinions, and engage in debates on various issues related to language, identity, and religion. Obviously, the increased use of online platforms has contributed to the exponential rise of online anti-social behaviour, which has consequently reduced the perceived benefits and promise of social media in society (Soares, Jacobson and Hodson (2023).

In the context of online discourse, the interplay among language, identity, and religion becomes particularly complex and influential. Language use in online interactions often reflects underlying ethnic and religious identities. For example, posts written in Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo can signal the speaker's ethnic background and, by extension, their religious affiliation. This linguistic signalling suggests a sense of community among users with shared identities but can also highlight divisions and contribute to polarization. In Nigeria, where religious tensions and conflicts are a persistent feature of the country's political landscape, the impact of online discourse on religious tensions is a pressing concern. As online discourse shapes public opinion, influences social norms, and fuels extremist narratives, it is essential to examine the ways in which digital communication platforms contribute to or mitigate religious tensions, and to develop strategies for promoting peaceful and inclusive online discourse.

Social Media and Cybersecurity Challenges in Nigeria

The proliferation of the internet has empowered Nigerians to become highly engaged and active online. This has practically revolutionized their participation in the digital world. The past few decades have however, witnessed a substantial surge in the development and adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), with social media platforms becoming increasingly ubiquitous. According to Akinyetun, (2022), social media has infiltrated almost every aspect of human life. Studies have emphasized the relevance of social media to religious/ political efficacy and participation. Cyberbullying poses a significant challenge to the ideals of free-flowing information and discourse on social media. This involves the use of digital means

to intimidate, annoy, frighten, or create a hostile environment for the victim. This unwarranted contact disrupts the free exchange of ideas and undermines the online environment's intention (Olonode, 2021). To address this growing concern, Nigeria has introduced cyberlaws, dubbed the Cybercrimes Act, aimed at combating these unlawful activities (Uba, 2021; Akeusola, 2023). The enactment of the Nigerian Cybercrime Act of 2015 addresses various online criminal acts, including child pornography, cyberstalking, and cyberterrorism. Additionally, the introduction of protection from Internet falsehoods, manipulations, and other related matters bills aims to criminalize the promotion of false information on social media (Olonode, 2021).

Religious Bigotry on Online Platforms

This is the upholding and expressing of unreasonable opinions and beliefs about one's own religion and refusal to change them. It is the refusal to tolerate other forms of religion. (Njoku, et. al, 2018). Religious bigotry on online platforms refers to the prejudiced attitudes or discriminatory behaviour towards individuals based on their religious beliefs. Such hostility often manifests as hate speech, derogatory comments, or misinformation targeting specific religious groups. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become hotspots for this phenomenon due to their global reach and anonymity features (Citron & Franks, 2019). For instance, anti-Muslim sentiment has been prevalent in Western countries, fuelled by extremist narratives spread online (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

These platforms struggle to balance free expression with content moderation. Algorithms designed to recommend content can inadvertently amplify divisive rhetoric by prioritizing engagement over accuracy (Benkler et al., 2018). While companies implement policies against hate speech, enforcement remains inconsistent, leaving marginalized communities vulnerable.

Research highlights that religious bigotry online not only harms individuals but also exacerbates societal divisions. A study by the Anti-Defamation League (2020) found a significant increase in cyberhate during global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where minority religions were scapegoated. Addressing this issue requires collaborative efforts from tech companies, governments, and civil society to promote digital literacy, it is unfortunate that the anonymity and reach of social media has enabled constant wide spread of toxic posts and comments which aided environment of hate.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was developed in the 1980s by linguists such as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, among others. It draws on insights from linguistics, sociology, philosophy, and anthropology to analyse how language is used to construct social reality and shape social interactions. CDA is a type of discourse analysis that seeks to uncover the power relations, ideologies, and social structures that are embedded in language and communication. It is a critical approach that examines how language is used to create, maintain, or challenge social relationships of power and domination. Looking at Social Structures, CDA examines how discourse reflects and reinforces social structures such as class, gender, religion, race, and ethnicity. It explores how these social categories are constructed and contested through language use. Chilton (2011) asserts that, metaphors play a significant role

in CDA. They are of the view that metaphors in a discourse represent an ideology which leads to reality in that particular context according to an individual's perception.

The concept of discourse refers to the ways in which language is used to create meaning and shape understanding within social, cultural, political, and historical contexts (Igbashangev, 2024). According to him, Discourse extends beyond individual utterances or conversations, it encompasses larger patterns of communication. CDA, involves not only what is said or written but also how it is said, who is speaking or writing, and the broader ideologies and power dynamics at play. Vandijk (1998) is of the view that CDA is particularly concerned with the analysis of any discourse whether written or spoken from the perspective of discursive practices in a society like hegemony, domination, inequality of basic rights and racial discrimination. Categorically, CDA analyses the abuse of power and hegemonic attitude by focusing through the lens of language (Igbashangev, 2024).

Blommaert (2005) and Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) are of the opinion that CDA is wider and broader because it analyses the relation of language within a society and its impact on the discourses. According to them, linguistic and social variables in CDA research are closely knitted to each other because whenever we approach any text or discourse, we approach it from linguistic perspective and emphasize how choice of language in a particular discourse pertaining the socio-political context tries to analyse the discursive practices.

Fairclough (1992) believes that CDA is a kind of analysis of discourse which brings forth odd relationships among different social and ethnic groups. He focuses on texts and sequential events and then relates them with broader socio-cultural perspective of the discourse of people which reveals uneven and ideology shaped power relations. He also explores how power is exercised in a society through hegemonic attitude and ideological text of the elite. Fairclough (1992) explains three stages for the analysis of a discourse. In first stage CDA analyses the personal experience and knowledge of the speaker by keeping in view his beliefs. Secondly,

how social relations affect the discourse and thirdly, speaker realizes about the reality and identity.

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory is a framework for understanding how different social categories, such as religious group, race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and others, intersect and interact with each other to create unique experiences of oppression and marginalization. This theory was first introduced by an American academic; Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. According to Atewologun (2018), Intersectionality shares similarities with the fault line perspective, which highlights the importance of shared characteristics and experiences within social groups. The theory recognizes that social groups can be characterized by multiple overlapping identities and characteristics. This means that individuals within a group may share common experiences, perspectives, and struggles due to their shared membership in multiple categories, such as religion, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or ability. This shared sense of belonging and experiences create a powerful sense of solidarity and collective identity. However, this enables individuals mobilize and advocate for change on behalf of their group.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (here after SIT), proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970, posits that individuals derive a portion of their self-concept from their membership in social groups (Patel, 2023). The theory seeks to explain the cognitive processes and social conditions underlying intergroup behaviours, especially those related to prejudice, bias, and discrimination. People tend to categorize themselves and others into ingroups (groups to which an individual belongs) and outgroups (groups to which an individual does not belong). These categories can have a profound impact on an individual's behaviour, attitudes, and self-concept. Going by SIT, an individual's social identity is shaped by the groups they belong to and the social categories they use to define themselves. When an individual identifies with a particular group, they experience a sense of belonging and a feeling of being part of something larger than themselves. This can lead to a range of positive emotions, including pride, loyalty, and cooperation.

Nigerian discourse as a case study, online platforms often serve as spaces where individuals form and reinforce their religious identities. People often join groups or communities that share their religious beliefs, creating strong in-group identities. Subsequently, online interactions on religious topics have become a platform for social comparison, where individuals bolster their self-esteem by emphasizing the superiority of their own religious beliefs and practices. This however, has severally manifested into identity fusion; an act of making derogatory comments or trolling, aimed at individuals or groups with different beliefs. This often materialised into the expression of hateful speech, harassment, or even violent extremism, all which are product of Cyberbullying; an online anti-social behaviour.

According to Soares et al, (2023), online anti-social behaviour encompasses a range of harmful acts, including trolling (the intentional provocation of others through inflammatory online comments), bullying (aggressive behaviour towards an individual or group), and harassment (offensive or abusive conduct directed at others) that have a negative impact, causing harm or distress to individuals or communities. Bullying and trolling are related concepts defined as repeated aggressive behaviour. Harassment, on the other hand, is a broader concept that includes any unwanted, offensive, or abusive conduct towards others (Marwick and Boyd 2014). According to SIT, online platforms can amplify intergroup conflicts related to religion by providing a forum for individuals to express extremist views, provoke others, or reinforce existing prejudices. This polarization can lead to online hostility and even real-world consequences.

Forms of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying encompasses a range of behaviours such as spreading rumours, making threats, engaging in sexual remarks, revealing personal information, and using derogatory labels, including hate speech (Akeusola, 2023). However, distinguishing among offensive expressions, hate speech, and cyberbullying can be challenging as boundaries become blurred. The evolving nature of cyberbullying, driven by new tools and methods for online attacks, adds to this complexity (Adediran, 2021). Cyberbullying can take various forms such as direct cyberbullying (insulting messages) or indirect cyberbullying (rumours and fake news) (Iqbal & Jami, 2022). Several forms of cyberbullying have been identified in the literature (Adediran, 2021; Iqbal & Jami, 2022; Nwafor, 2024; Kintonova, et al., 2021; Matulewska et al., 2021; Xu & Trzaskawka, 2021), which are discussed below.

Outing: A form of cyberbullying that involves the unauthorized sharing of private or embarrassing information for malicious purposes. In Nigeria, outings are commonly performed using imagery and video.

Trickery: A form of cyberbullying in which the victim is deceived into revealing personal information that the cyberbully intends to share or use as a threat. In Nigeria, a common manifestation of trickery is revenge porn, which involves the leaking of sex tapes or nude pictures.

Trolling and Roasting: Common forms of cyberbullying that involve disruptive behaviour and deliberate provocation online. Trolling is characterized by purposefully causing discord and annoyance, whereas roasting entails multiple individuals attacking a single victim to humiliate them. These forms of cyberbullying often blur the line between harmless comments and harmful intentions. Interestingly, research suggests that trolling is often seen as a form of entertainment by those who engage in it.

Visual/Sexual Cyberbullying: This involves the misuse or editing of private photos to humiliate them. The act of sharing intimate or embarrassing visual content without consent falls under this category. It aims to degrade and shame victims by leveraging their personal photos.

Verbal Cyberbullying: This includes insulting messages, hate speeches, and derogatory labels. It encompasses behaviours such as spreading rumours, threatening, engaging in sexual remarks, and using offensive language online. Verbal attacks through comments posted on the Internet are a form of verbal cyberbullying often faced by victims.

Exclusion: A form of cyberbullying that involves intentionally leaving someone out of social gatherings, online conversations, or specific platforms. Cyberbullies aim to inflict emotional harm through exclusion by isolating individuals and denying their participation.

Flaming Harassment: Refers to the act of engaging in heated and aggressive arguments online, often involving offensive language and insults. It aims to provoke and incite negative emotions in the target individual.

Denigration: Involves spreading cruel gossip or rumours with the intention of damaging

someone's reputation. Cyberbullies may use false information or make derogatory comments about victims to humiliate and belittle them.

Impersonation: The act of creating fake profiles or pretending to be someone else online. By assuming another person's identity, cyberbullies can engage in harmful activities such as posting content in the victim's name to deceive and cause harm.

Cyberstalking: Involves the transmission of threatening or harassing communication through computers. It induces fear of death, violence, or bodily harm in the targeted individual, and can escalate from online threats to real-life situations.

Cyber mobbing: Refers to a phenomenon in which a group criticizes or targets individuals or ideologies on social media, which sometimes leads to real-life conflicts. It involves collective online attacks and can have severe consequences for the targeted individuals.

Hate Speech: This is a prevalent form of cyberbullying, where offenders use derogatory language to offend their victims, based on characteristics such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. It involves public expressions of animosity or disparagement of individuals or groups.

Internet trolling: Here, individuals provoke reactions, cause disruption, or seek personal amusement by engaging in online discussions with offensive language and insults. Trolls actively search for contentious topics to attack others verbally.

Harassment: Entails persistent and intentional messaging via the phone or Internet.

Fraping: Involves impersonating victims and posting content in their names.

Dissing: Entails spreading cruel gossip or rumours to damage someone's reputation. Cyberbullies may also use photos, screenshots, or videos to belittle and draw attention to the victims' negative qualities.

Catfishing: Occurs when someone steals another person's online identity, typically by using photos, to create deceptive social networking profiles.

Memes: Matching words with images for entertainment and making derogatory comments about a person.

Discrimination: Refusing to engage with someone because of their religion or religious beliefs.

Stereotyping: Stereotyping is a form of social categorization in which people are reduced to a set of characteristics, traits, or behaviours that are attributed to their group or category, often based on limited or inaccurate information. This can be done based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, or other socially defined categories.

Jabbing: Jabbing is a slang term that refers to a type of online harassment or bullying, particularly on social media platforms. It involves making snide, sarcastic, or mocking comments or jokes about someone, often with the intention of provoking a reaction or stirring up controversy.

All of the above-described types of cyberbullying will be divided into six different sections in order to provide a systematic and thorough analysis: denigration, discrimination, stereotyping, internet trolling, verbal cyberbullying, and memes. This categorization is a methodical examination of cyberbullying strategies, emphasizing the linguistic and social implications in Nigerian online communities. False charges, impersonation, and disparaging statements intended to damage someone's reputation are all considered forms of denigration. Bias and exclusion on the basis of religion, race, or other identification indicators constitute discrimination. By limiting people to inflexible traits connected to their group, stereotyping serves to strengthen preconceptions.

A variety of disruptive online behaviours, including flaming, jabbing, roasting, and harassing, are included in internet trolling. Direct verbal abuse, such as hate speech, cyberstalking, and cyber mobbing, is referred to as verbal cyberbullying. Collective online anger that frequently escalates to real-life repercussions is referred to as "cyber mobbing." Lastly, memes employ words and images to make fun of or denigrate someone. A precise framework for examining

how cyberbullying affects language, identity, and religious intolerance in Nigerian online discourse is provided by this organized categorization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design by employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the linguistic strategies used in online religious discourse in Nigeria. The study also integrates Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Intersectionality Theory to explore how online interactions reinforce social divisions, religious bigotry, and cyberbullying.

Data Collection

Data were collected from social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, where religious debates and conflicts frequently emerge. The selection of data was based on purposive sampling, focusing on posts, memes, and comments that exhibit hate speech, denigration, discrimination, verbal cyberbullying, and stereotyping.

Analytical Framework

The study applies CDA to uncover power relations, ideological biases, and face-threatening acts (FTAs) in religious cyber discourse. SIT helps analyse how users align with in-groups (their religious community) while antagonizing out-groups. Intersectionality Theory examines how religious identity intersects with ethnicity and social structures in digital conflicts.

Ethical Considerations

User anonymity was maintained, and content was analysed within the framework of Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act, ensuring compliance with ethical standards on digital discourse research

DATA COLLECTION, PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE SAMPLES

Table 1. Forms of Online Group Identity and Religious Bigotry

S/N	Online Variables of Group Identity and Religious Bigotry	Online Platform	Instances of Online/Digital Harassment
1	Denigration	Facebook (Yorubawood Community Blog)[1]	i. You are saying d truth akhii! Islam forbids praying for a non-Muslim deceased, what concerns Muslims about non-Muslims death..this is the real islaam take it or you leave it (A facebook comment) ii. Am not a blogger, I have no business with Egbin Orun, am only saying what God and the prophet says, anybody that didn't practice islam won't enter paradise – (Alfa Legba reaffirms his comment on Egbin Orun).
		Twitter (Lloyd De Jong's handle)[2]	The "Like Agege bread, He rose" meme mocking the resurrection of Jesus. Statements like "Awon elesin Boko Haram" (calling Muslims extremists). Posts claiming non-Muslims won't enter paradise, alienating other faiths.

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[1] Yorubawood Community (2024; May 6). Am not a blogger, I have no business with Egbin Orun…
Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=929831308939886
{Accessed 15 August, 2024}.

[2] Lloyd De J. (2025; February 08). Shocking and Blasphemous Claims from AaPopular
Muslim Polemical Book that insults Christianity. Retrieved from
https://x.com/LloydDeJongh/status/1888172793759453630/photo/1 [Accessed on 14
February, 2025].

2	Discrimination	Facebook (Yorubawood Community Blog)[3]	i. she came from a Muslim family is not a justification in islam. The truth is she not a Muslim, in islam, each and every soul bears his or her sins. (Comments such as "She came from a Muslim family, so she can't be considered a true Christian" show exclusion based on faith background). ii. Am not a blogger, I have no business with Egbin Orun, am only saying what God and the prophet says, anybody that didn't practice islam won't enter paradise - Alfa Legba reaffirms his comment on Egbin Orun
		Facebook (Stream MEDIA TV)[4]	i. If oriyomi like he can continue to deny it, but it's totally obvious that hamzat want to bring Gabriel down, he even curse people here which will eventually bounce back to his entirely family (facebook comment).
		Facebook (Victor King Initiatives)[5]	i. Awon elesin bokoharam loti MUEDEEN pa (facebook comment)

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[3] Yorubawood Community (2024; May 6). Am not a blogger, I have no business with Egbin Orun…
Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=929831308939886
{Accessed 15 August, 2024}.

[4] Facebook (Stream MEDIA TV) (2024). Listen to what this Man is saying about what happened between Agbala Gebrel and Miudeen. Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=798048065632805
{Accessed 11 September, 2024}.

[5] Victor King Initiatives (2024; October 8). Muyideen VS Agbala Gabriel. Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=439324588876197
{Accessed 11 September, 2024}.

3	Stereotyping	Facebook (Adeyemo Akanni Nurudeen)[6]	i-. Eni ofo ni ENIKENI TI o ba ku Si esin Miiran yatosi Islam - Q3:85 (Meaning that anyone who dies aside being a Muslim will perish- Facebook comment).
		Facebook (Yorubawood Community Blog)[7]	i. ….then if that is real Islam , then that Islam is full of hate and is filled with evil. Love rules the world. Our GOD is love. As CHRIST followers we do preach hate we preach love. To lose a soul is great pain (facebook comment).
4	Internet trolling: dissing, flaming, roasting, jabbing, bullying, and harassment	Facebook (Stream MEDIA	i. Alhaji oriyomi, started cursing this morning and I believe his curses will come back to him and his children as well. I use to love him, but since mohbad's Case and this muideen's. I have come to a conclusion about him. Cursing agbala Gabriel who has not replied to anything this recent time. Oriyomi should fear God and stop bullying and intimidating people up and down (Facebook comment). ii. The truth of the matter is that,oriyomi hamzat is so envious of agbala Gabriel!!! (facebook comment). iii. Don't mind him jare. Oriyomi is jealous agbala Gabriel ni (facebook comment).

[6] Adeyemo Akanni Nurudeen (2024; May 6).
Alfa legba & Yinka TNT on the issue of Sister Egbin Orun Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=416369987978081
{Accessed 13 January, 2025}.

[7] Yorubawood Community (2024; May 6). Am not a blogger, I have no business with Egbin Orun…
Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=929831308939886
{Accessed 15 August, 2024}.

		TV)[8]	
		Facebook, ((Yoruba wood Blog)[9]	i. my brother dis people re' nothing but bunch of nuisance honestly. I think psychologically he seriously needs attention ii. Your so called religion is full of hate,your god is powerless that is why you people fight for him,but we Christian serve a God who fight for us (facebook comment on Yorubawood community blog). iii. Gbemisola Bamidele thank you my sister you nailed it all whenever someone served a powerless God definitely he or she must fight on behave of such God □□ but when you served a true living God that living God will fight for himself □□ (facebook comment on Yorubawood community blog). iv. which truth is she saying, will you shut your traps, how many times has this alfa suna preached Islam to this woman before she

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[8] Facebook (Stream MEDIA TV) (2024). Listen to what this Man is saying about what happened between Agbala Gebrel and Miudeen. Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=798048065632805
{Accessed 11 September, 2024}.

[9] Yorubawood Community (2024; May 6). Am not a blogger, I have no business with Egbin Orun…
Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=929831308939886
{Accessed 15 August, 2024}.

| | | | died? Who even told you the so-called Islam that you put for head is the right way, you better go and sit down

v. Some people are ignorant even to there religion. Is telling you the truth. Well, is not your fault, you watch yoruba movie too much.

vi. He's a mad man! |
| | | | Cyber mobbing: Refers to a phenomenon in which a group criticizes or targets individuals or ideologies on social media, which sometimes leads to real-life conflicts. It involves collective online attacks and can have severe consequences for the targeted individuals: |
| 5. | Verbal Cyberbullying: Cyber mobbing, Cyberstalking Hate speech, | Facebook (Adeyemo Akanni Nurudeen)[1] | ii. Then prove it to us how Christians will enter paradise with that idolatrous statement ☐ (Facebook comment).

iii. Omo see ignorant ☐☐
The verse itself has already debunked your idolatrous statement of Trinity thank you for bringing this verse now ☐☐☐
(Facebook comment). |
| 6 | Memes | | These are matching words with images for entertainment and making derogatory comments about a person or religion. Posting of anti-Semitic memes or jokes on social media (See Fig. 1, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). |

[1] Adeyemo Akanni Nurudeen (2024; May 6).
Alfa legba & Yinka TNT on the issue of Sister Egbin Orun Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=Hn3EexMF1WhlYZLE&v=416369987978081
{Accessed 13 January, 2025}.

Religious Memes making Mockery of Religion

Fig 1: Facebook Memes
Source: De Real Adewale's (2024) Facebook Post (**https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1267296107854666&id=100037228653373**)

Fig. 2: Instagram Memes

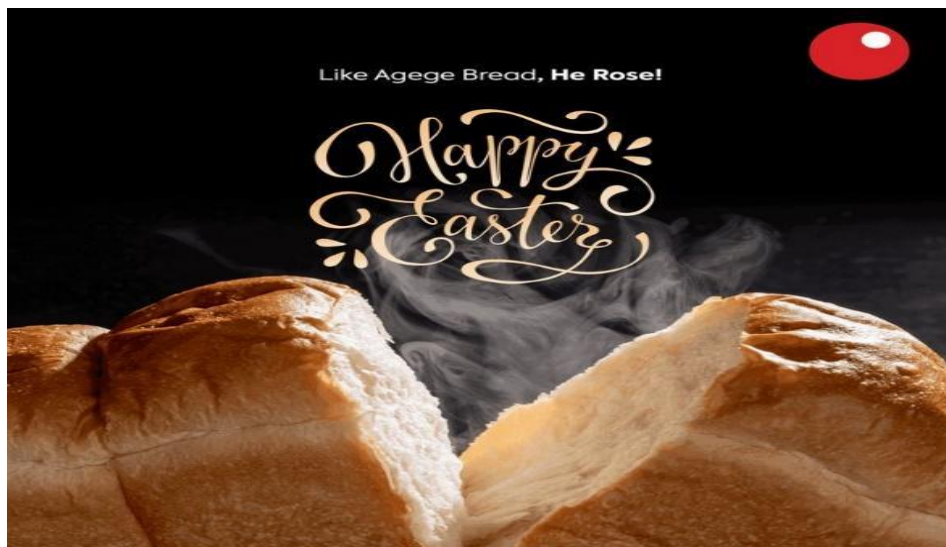**Source:** Sarki's (2024) Instagram Post (**https://www.instagram.com/nollywoodstarzs/p/DDy264ECURy/?img_index=1**)

Fig 3: Facebook Meme
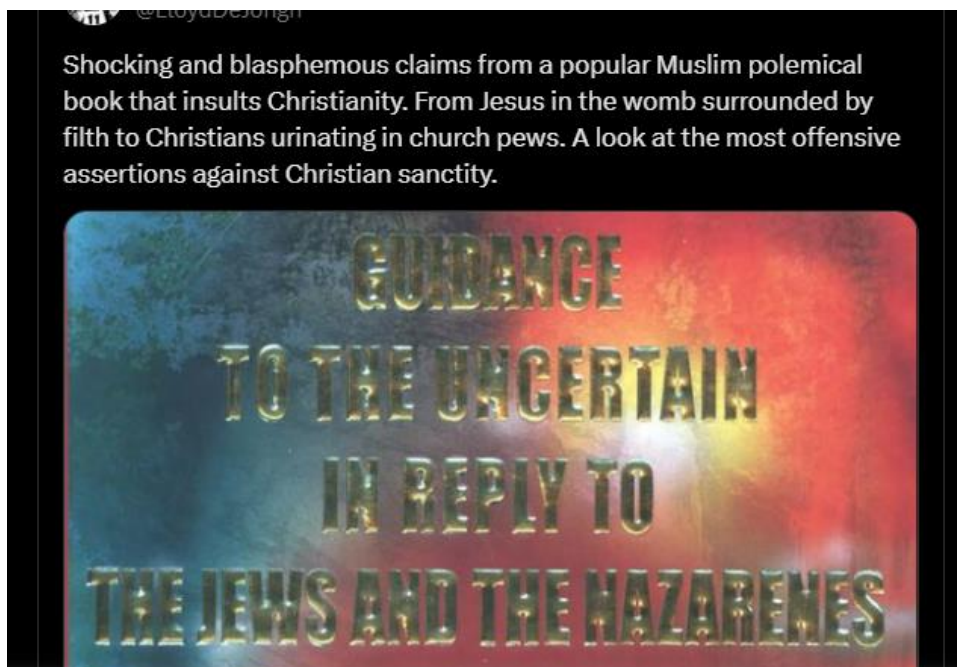
Source: Theo John-Phillips; (2022) Facebook Post (https://www.facebook.com/theojohnphillips/posts/529048318826473/)

Fig 4: Deliberate Provocative post on Twitter

Source: Lloyd De's. (2025) twitter handle (https://x.com/LloydDeJongh/status/1888172793759453630)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that language plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing religious identities and social divisions in Nigeria's digital space. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Intersectionality Theory, the study uncovers how linguistic choices, memes, and digital rhetoric contribute to religious bigotry, cyberbullying, and online discrimination. CDA exposes the power dynamics embedded in online discourse, illustrating how language is strategically used to construct, maintain, or challenge social hierarchies. The deliberate use of derogatory terms, such as *oponu* (meaning "fool" in Yoruba) and *awon elesin* Boko Haram (literally "those who follow the Boko Haram religion"), serves to ridicule and marginalize individuals based on religious identity. These expressions act as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), damaging the self-image of those targeted and intensifying interreligious tensions.

A key manifestation of religious bigotry in digital spaces is the use of memes and provocative imagery to undermine religious figures and beliefs. For instance, the meme of Pastor Adeboye wearing a Muslim turban, portraying him as if he were in Mecca, is a calculated attempt to undermine his Christian identity and fuel interreligious tensions. Similarly, the meme that states "Like Agege bread, He rose. Happy Easter" trivializes the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a fundamental Christian doctrine, reducing it to a subject of mockery. These digital artifacts exemplify how online spaces have evolved into battlegrounds for religious and ideological supremacy, where faith-based symbols are repurposed to ridicule and delegitimize religious identities.

Using Social Identity Theory (SIT), the study explains how online religious discourse nurtures in-group solidarity while simultaneously alienating out-group members. Muslim users often align with narratives that uphold Islamic supremacy, while Christians defend their faith against perceived attacks. This binary structure reinforces polarization, where individuals engage in verbal attacks, denigration, and exclusion as means of protecting their religious affiliation. Comments such as "Your so-called religion is full of hate" and "Your god is powerless, that is why you fight for him" illustrate how digital platforms provide avenues for ideological warfare, where religious groups engage in rhetorical battles that further entrench intergroup hostility.

From the perspective of Intersectionality Theory, religious bigotry in Nigeria's online discourse is not isolated but deeply connected to ethnicity, regionalism, and socio-political identities. The comment by Alfa Legba "I have no business with Egbin Orun, I am only saying what God and the Prophet says, anybody that didn't practice Islam won't enter paradise" reflects both a religious and ideological exclusionary act. While the statement is rooted in Islamic theological doctrine, its online circulation transforms it into a divisive tool that alienates non-Muslims and encourages discrimination. Likewise, Christian responses to such declarations, including statements like "Islam is full of hate" and "Only Jesus guarantees salvation," create a parallel cycle of exclusion. The study reveals that such absolute truth claims escalate cyberbullying, digital hate speech, and interfaith antagonism, making social cohesion more challenging.

Additionally, the study examines how provocative social media posts, such as those by Lloyd De Jongh, serve as digital catalysts for religious conflict. By making inflammatory remarks about Christianity on Twitter (see Fig. 4), he violates Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act, which criminalizes content that incites religious hatred (Okibe, 2024; Eboibi and Richards 2025). This

highlights how online religious conflicts are not just random personal opinions but are embedded within broader power struggles that shape national discourse. These digital confrontations reinforce pre-existing religious stereotypes and prejudices, deepening the divides between Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes that language in digital spaces is not neutral; it serves as a powerful tool for constructing and contesting religious identity, power, and belonging in Nigeria. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Intersectionality Theory, the research reveals how memes, derogatory language, and cyberbullying contribute to religious bigotry and polarization. Online platforms have become arenas for ideological battles and identity reinforcement, where religious groups engage in verbal attacks, exclusion, and discrimination, deepening social divisions.

The study also underscores the face-threatening nature of digital discourse, where offensive remarks and provocative imagery escalate hostility rather than fostering mutual understanding. Given the escalating religious tensions online, stricter cyber laws, interfaith dialogue initiatives, and digital literacy programs are necessary to mitigate hate speech and online hostility. Promoting responsible language use and tolerance in digital interactions is crucial for fostering social harmony and religious coexistence in Nigeria's pluralistic society.

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