DIGITAL SPACE ENABLER OF ELECTORAL HATE SPEECH AND HATE CRIME PERPETRATION DURING NIGERIAN CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

Research Problem: *With the very rapid growth of digital platforms in Nigeria, there is an increase in the production and dissemination of hate speech during the election period by political actors and supporters, while regulatory frameworks are nearly inadequate, and digital spaces continue to provide opportunities for dehumanising political rhetoric and foster environments that could lead to hate crimes during election periods.*
Method Used: *The study adopts a Critical Integrative Literature Review (CILR). Data was retrieved from databases, such as Scopus, African Journals Online (AJOL), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and Google Scholar. A total of 73 articles were used for thematic analyses.*
Results: *The study indicates that thepromotion of hate speech and hate crimes through digital media is growing rapidly in Nigeria, especially using digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, TikTok, among others. Several factors that are responsible for the occurrence of electoral hate speech and hate crimes in the digital space, including digital media, algorithms, anonymity of users, and poor content moderation policies and weak institutional monitoring are contributing to the persistence of the situation in Nigeria.*
Conclusion: *Hate speech and crimes in Nigeria are deeply rooted in the digital infrastructure growth of the country. This continuation is driven by factors that enable electoral hate and political instability.*

Key Contributions to Knowledge: *This paper considers digital space as an active enabler rather than a medium of communication. This study synthesises fragmented literature into a unified framework connecting digital frameworks to hate speech and crime escalation and identifies four operational mechanisms through which hate speech translates into hate crime potential in electoral contexts. The study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate on various forms of hate crimes in the Global South nations.*
Recommendation: *Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should establish a Joint Digital Electoral Integrity Unit to monitor online hate speech during elections. Social media platforms operating in Nigeria should be mandated to strengthen indigenous language moderation as a licensing condition. Additionally, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), in collaboration with INEC, should implement a digital civic literacy programme to raise awareness and prevent hate speech.*

1. Introduction

Hate speech and hate crimes have continued to remain a problem in most democratic nations across the world. According to Negi (2024), the emergence of digital technologies in recent times presents new opportunities to spread hate speech and carry out hate crimes, threatening the basic foundations of social harmony and democratic stability in developing countries. Digital platforms have also been linked to hate speech and hate crimes worldwide, with some research highlighting the role social media plays in the spread of hate speech and violence (Duffy 2003, cited in Olteanu et al., 2018). Furthermore, digital communication technologies have radically changed democratic engagement, electoral campaigns, and political participation globally. In the era of social media, the ability to share information and provide mobilisation to electorates in real-time has made platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube essential for political communication and campaigning, as everyone from politicians and political parties to voters and interest groups can use them. The use of these technologies has improved political inclusion and increased citizen engagement, but they have also created unprecedented opportunities for the spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and other forms of harmful online communication (Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). Digital space is fast emerging as a battleground for political confrontation and polarisation in electoral narratives (Shaminja et al, 2026), particularly in newly democratic countries such as Nigeria, where political contestations often include ethnic, religious, and regional divides. As digital technologies become more entrenched in Africa, the promotion of hate speech and hate crimes is becoming increasingly easier, which poses a real threat to the sustenance of democracy (Adams,2025; Asogwa & Ezeibe, 2022).

Nigeria is a country with over 240 million people with an increasing digital penetration. The internet penetration rate was 53% with a total of 115.04million active subscriptions (Nigeria Communications Commission [NCC], 2026) in January 2026. In this regard, the digital sphere is an important arena of electoral contestation, as social media platforms are utilised by politicians and their supporters to mobilise support and to broadcast hate speech (Adams et al., 2025). In addition, Idowu et al. (2025) state that tension and violence have arisen in Nigeria's political atmosphere due to the hate speech and negative language used by politicians and their supporters on social media duringthe general elections. Since the return of civilian government in 1999, Nigeria's democratic history has been marked by intense competition varying levels of violence, political intolerance, and identity mobilisation. Hate speech has been used as a strategic tool in political campaigns for partisan political persuasion, political party mobilisation, and elite competition for political power (Ezeibe & Ikeanyibe, 2017). However, hate speech and crime in Nigeria tend to take advantage of the socio-political issues inherent in the country, which include ethnic divides, religious issues, regional and political divides. Research has found that political actors and their supporters use inflammatory rhetoric, derogatory language, stereotypes, and hostile narratives as preferred tools to discredit opponents and unite voters around them (Ikeanyibe et al., 2018).

The new digital media landscape penetration has transformed the landscape of hate speech in electoral campaigns. Electoral hate speech is no longer limited to campaign rallies, newspapers, radio, and television; it is now spread via social networking sites and other digital

communication channels. Nigeria's elections have shown how social media has emerged as a vital space for the dissemination of election hate messages, often by party supporters and electorates seeking to advance their party's agenda (Nwozor et al., 2022). Likewise, indications from the 2023 general elections show that social media helped fuel a large-scale proliferation of hate campaigns, misinformation, insults, and character assassination, thereby exacerbating tensions in an already polarised political landscape (Jimada, 2023).

Digital hate speech is a security issue, as hate speech is appearing more and more in the physical world, after it originated in the virtual world. The repetition of hateful stories has been proposed to normalise prejudice, reinforce group antagonisms, promote dehumanisation of the target group, and help justify violence against perceived enemies (Soral et al, 2018). In an electoral setting, such processes can also provide opportunities for online hate speech to turn into hate-motivated intimidation, harassment, discrimination, property destruction, physical assault, and other forms of hate crime. This concern is even more pertinent to Nigeria, where historical ethnic and religious cleavages are politically activated during elections (Ezeibe, 2021).

While existing literature have focused on the hate speech and election violence (Ezeibe, 2021), ethnic politics and hate speech (Ezeibe & Ikeanyibe, 2017), political campaign rhetoric (Ikeanyibe et al., 2018), newspaper representations of hate speech (Msughter, 2025; Aondover, 2024), and social media-driven electoral hostility (Nwozor et al., 2022; Jimada, 2023), less attention has been paid to understanding the digital space as an enabling environment that facilitates the progression from electoral hate speech to hate crime perpetration. Although most studies highlight the occurrence, frequency, manifestations, and implications of hate speech, there is insufficient research that focuses on the technological, communicative, and socio-political mechanisms that enable digital platforms to amplify, recruit, coordinate, and facilitate hateful narratives and hate-related victimisation.

This study seeks to fill this gap by studying the digital space as an enabler for the penetration of electoral hate speech and hate crime during the political campaigns in Nigeria. In particular, the research examines how digital communication platforms can help to generate, spread, reinforce, and sanction electoral hate speech as well as their role in the rise of hate-motivated actions within the overall electoral ecosystem. The study brings together the issue of online hate communication with the offline expression of hate crime, making it a contribution to the growing research literature on digital criminology, electoral security, electoral political communication, and democratic governance in Africa.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Digital platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, X (Twitter),TikTok, to name but a few, have continued to play an active role in electioneering mobilisation, and there has been an increase in the use of hate speech on these platforms to insult and to incite comments against opponents by political actors, sometimes resulting in online battles and even progress offline, resulting in physical violence. Much research exists on the impact of digital technologies and electoral processes, but there remains a dearth of research on the specific mechanisms by which digital space enables hate speech and hate crimes in Nigeria. In their study, Zamri et al. (2023) explored digital hate speech and its construction from Malaysian perspectives. Nwozor et al. (2022) examined

theuse of social media in politics by focusing on hate speech by the electorateduring the 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria, while Jimada (2023) explored the impact of a social media hate and misinformation campaign in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Ikeanyibe et al. (2018) discussed hate speech in the context of political campaigns and democratisation in Nigeria during the 2011 and 2015general elections, while Akinsola (2025) investigated the influence of social media platforms on democratisation in Nigeria. Existing literature has been centred on the role social media has played in the electoral processes; however, no study has been found that examined the role social media plays in the perpetration of hate crimes in Nigeria using a criminological perspective. Considering these issues, it is imperative to conduct an analysis of how digital platforms facilitate electoral hate speech and how this leads to the commission of hate crimes in the context of Nigerian electioneering campaigns.

Even though scholarly research on this topic is expanding, existing scholarship remains fragmented across various disciplines, with communication studies, political science, legal scholarship, and sociology each addressing distinct dimensions of the problem without adequate integration. Additionally, it is rare for the literature on digital electoral hate speech in Nigeria to be synthesised in a way that either systematically maps the contributing characteristics unique to the Nigerian context or explicitly investigates the causal processes relating digital space to hate crime perpetration. Both identified gaps are addressed in this review.

The increasing incidence of hate speech and hate crimes during Nigerian electioneering campaigns, facilitated by digital technologies, therefore, poses a significant threat to electoral integrity, peaceful coexistence and democratic stability, and becomes imperative for investigation.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The study prioritises the following objectives:

i. Examine the relationship between digital space and electoral hate speech in Nigeria.

ii. Investigate the role of digital space in enabling hate crime perpetration during Nigerian electioneering campaigns, and

iii. Identify the factors that contribute to the spread of hate speech and hate crimes in the digital space during Nigerian electioneering campaigns.

1.3 Conceptualisation

Digital hate speech

Brown (2017, cited in Stahel & Baier, 2023) sees digital hate speech as utterances mediated by digital technologies and aimed at entire groups and group members who are denigrated by harassing, insulting, and demeaning them, thus defamed by spreading false, distorted, and highly generalised claims about them, and intimidated with threats and incitement to violence. Digital hate speech, as used in this study, refers to online communication that is derogatory in nature and incites hatred, intolerance, or violence against individuals or groups, based on social and physical characteristics such as tribe or ethnicity, region, national origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability, among others. Hate speech can take many forms, including text posts, images, videos, comments, and memes (Zamri et al., 2023). With the penetration of digital platforms in developing democracies like Nigeria, there is an increase in their use by political actors for messaging and followership, including the use of hate speech for insults and intimidation.

Hate speech and hate crimes

Iganski (2022) states that hate speech entails content that vilifies, dehumanises, or incites violence against persons or groups of persons, based on protected identity characteristics. The author adds that it is a conscious and wilful public statement intended to denigrate a group of people.Hate crimes involve criminal acts committed by perpetrators toward the target based on the target's perceived membership in a social group, usually based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender, or political affiliation (Iganski, 2008). Hate crimes have a two-fold effect compared to other types of crime; they cause harm to the person directly targeted as well as to the larger community the victim belongs to (Perry, 2001). In Nigeria, hate crimes are linked to the mobilisation of ethno-religious identities during electioneering campaigns. Furthermore, Omotoso and Oladeji (2022) observe that Nigeria is a deeply pluralistic society, fragmented along various ethnic groups like Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, and hundreds of minority ethnic lines like Tiv, Ijaw, Idoma, Jukun, Kanuri, just to mention a few, which creates fertile ground for politically motivated hate, especially when electoral competition intensifies. According to Gagliardone et al. (2015), political actors frequently weaponise identity-based rhetoric to incite animosity against rival groups, and such rhetoric, when amplified through digital platforms, has been shown to escalate into physical hate crime perpetration.

2. Legal instruments criminalising hate crimes in Nigeria

In Nigeria, legal instruments criminalising hate crimes do not yet have a dedicated, standalone hate crime statute. However, a web of domestic legislative instruments operating alongside international legal obligations collectively criminalises conduct that falls within the ambit of hate-motivated offences. The host of these instruments includes the Nigerian Constitution. The constitutional foundation for combating hatecrimes lies in the 1999 Constitution, which guarantees fundamental rights, including the right to human dignity (Section 34), freedom from discrimination (Section 42), and freedom of expression (Section 39). Crucially, Section 45 prohibits the derogation of certain rights, including the right to freedom of expression.

The Criminal Code Act, Cap C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 2004, applicable in the southern states of Nigeria, contains provisions that directly and indirectly criminalise hate-motivated conduct. Sections 59, 60, and 373 to 381 of the Criminal Code address offences relating to unlawful assemblies, riots, seditious publications, and conduct likely to disturb public peace. The Penal Code (Northern States) Federal Provisions Act, Cap P3, LFN 2004 (in the 19 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory), has provisions like the public order provisions of the Criminal Code, but with sensitivity to ethno-religious issues. Part of the Penal Code (sections 391–401, 417-418) deals with actions that are likely to cause harm or encourage ethnic and religious animosity. Section 417 of the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria particularlypenalises hate speech or conduct that seeks to create contempt against any individual or group in a manner that endangers public peace (Adibe, 2018). The Electoral Act 2022 is the most direct (election-specific) legal instrument addressing hate speech in Nigeria. Section 97 of the Electoral Act prohibits all forms of sectional campaigns or broadcasts, including those based on religion and tribe, for the purpose of promoting or opposing a particular candidate (Usman & Ibrahim, 2023). The Cybercrimes (Prohibition

and Prevention) Act 2015 (as amended in 2024) is the most significant instrument for combating digitally facilitated hate crimes in contemporary Nigeria. It is in this regardthat Onadeko and Afolayan (2021) state that the Act criminalises the use of computers and the internet to commit various offences, including cyberstalking, and racist and xenophobic offences. The Terrorism Prevention and Prohibition Act 2022, which was repealed and replaced with the Terrorism (Prevention) Act 2011, has been invoked as a framework for prosecuting extreme hate speech that rises to the level of terrorism (Adibe, 2018).

Nigeria is a state party to several international instruments that require criminalisation of hate-related conduct. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966, the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) of 1965 and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1981, which provide a normative foundation for regulating hate speech. Despite this legislative framework, scholarly and policy consensus identify significant gaps. Nigeria has laws against hate speech, but they are not comprehensive, nor is there any legislation that clearly and exhaustively specifies what hate speech entails according to internationally accepted definitions (Uzoka, 2019). The dream of the proposed National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill (2019) still has a long way to go.

3. Theoretical framework: Routine Activity Theory (RAT)

According to the Routine Activity Theory (RAT) developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), three elements must come together for a criminal event to occur: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and a lack of a capable guardian. According to Yar (2005), the theory was utilised to explain the concept of cybercrime, along with evidence that the digital environment reduces criminal convergence due to lowercosts associated with offending, accessibility to targets at all locations, and a lack of situational guardianship in deterring crime. In the Nigerian electoral setting, RAT's three components are realized as follows: motivated offenders: Users empowered by the political process whose motivations are consequently shaped by the ethno-religious polarization in the nation and the electoral manipulation by the elite; suitable targets: These are digital registers, profiles, language use and group affiliations that make users visible to motivated offenders; capable guardianship: This is the absence of proper regulation, the capacity of the regulatory agencies and the absence of any moderation by platform developers. RAT's greatest analytical contribution to this review is its identification of the absence of capable guardianship rather than the presence of motivated offenders as the most tractable point of intervention in the hate speech-to-hate crime pathway, pointing towards platform governance and regulatory reform as the most effective preventive strategies.

4. Methodology

Study design

This study adopts a Critical Integrative Literature Review (CILR). This is a well-established qualitative research methodology developed within the social and health sciences by Torraco (2005) and Whittemore and Knafl (2005) and subsequently adopted across communication studies, political science, and African studies scholarship (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016). The CILR is defined as a review that critiques and synthesises the literature on a topic in an integrated way, thereby generating new conceptual frameworks and perspectives (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016). The choice of

CILR is because it spans multiple disciplines, the evidence base is methodologically heterogeneous, and the primary goal is theoretical synthesis and gap identification rather than effect-size estimation. In effect, conditions that precisely characterise the study of digital electoral hate speech in Nigeria.

Data Sources

This study sought its information from a broad range of academic and institutional databases, such as African Journals Online (AJOL), Scopus, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and Google scholars for open-access Nigerian and African academic output not captured by subscription databases. The choice of these databases is due to their coverage of African and Nigerian studies, as well as other studies related to the topic at hand.

Search Strategy and Study Selection

The information was researched on studies conducted between 2003 and 2026, using a combination of phrases and Boolean operators. Search terms such as "hate speech" AND "Nigeria" AND ("election" OR "electoral" OR "campaign"), "social media" AND "electoral violence" AND "Nigeria", "digital space" AND "hate crime" AND "Nigeria", "online hate" AND "electioneering" AND "Africa", "WhatsApp" OR "Facebook" OR "Twitter" AND "hate speech" AND "Nigeria". Asecond search was conducted with further search terms to expand the scope and impact of the results to include international scholarship that is directly relevant to the Nigerian or similar African context, such as: 'platform affordances and hate speech', 'algorithmic amplification and political violence', 'ethnic hate speech social media Africa', and 'disinformation electoral violence sub-Saharan Africa'.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were used to identify relevant studies for this review, including those conducted in Nigeria which focusing:(a) digital platform affordances and hate speech (b) algorithmic amplification and election violence (c) ethnic hate speech social media Africa, and (d) disinformation electoral violence in Nigeria as well as articles written in Englisharticles relating to the topic at hand.

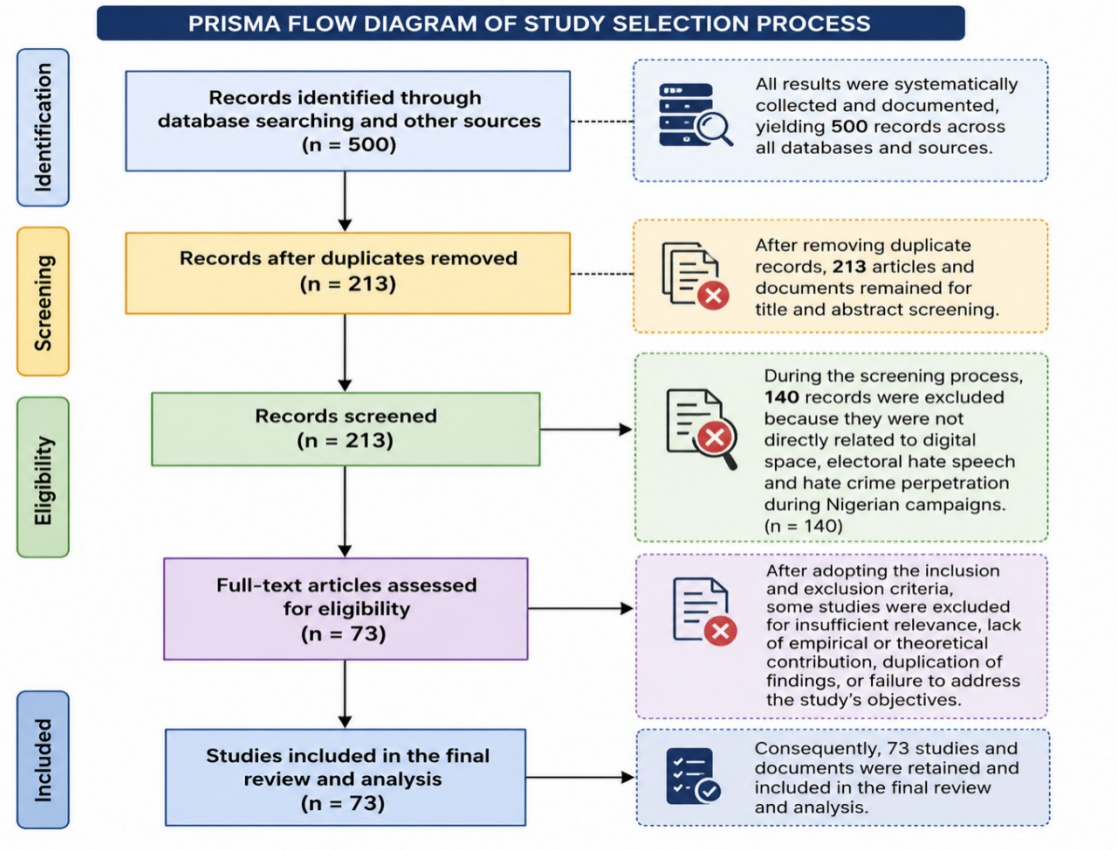
Exclusion Criteria

Under exclusion criteria, the researchers exclude papers that did not focus solely on hate speech and crimes without digital relevance, lack theoretical grounding, or were published in non-peer-reviewed outlets and other published information/materials not relevant to the study. Also, the articles that were not written in English.

Screening and Selection

All results were systematically collected and documented, yielding 500 records across all databases and sources. After removing duplicate records, 213 articles and documents remained for title and abstract screening. During the screening process, 140 records were excluded because they were not directly related to digital space, electoral hate speech and hate crime perpetration during Nigerian campaigns. After adopting the inclusion and exclusion criteria, some studies were excluded for insufficient relevance, lack of empirical or theoretical contribution, duplication of findings, or failure to address the study's objectives. Consequently, 73 studies and documents were retained and included in the final review and analysis. Based on the criteria set up, studies for inclusion were

reviewed and analysed as shown in Figure 1: PRISMA



Data Collection Procedure

The selected studies were downloaded, catalogued, and organised by theme, relevant to the research questions. Information relating toplatform affordances and hate speech, algorithmic amplification and political violence, ethnic hate speech social media Africa,and disinformation electoral violence in Nigeria, and other topics published in English between 2003 and 2026. These articles were empirical and theoretical. The collected literature was subsequently classified according to thematic categories to facilitate analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic content analysis to analyse the selected literature. This approach enabled the identification, coding, categorisation, and interpretation of recurring themes and patterns across the reviewed studies. The analysis focused on five major themes: (i) platform affordances and hate speech (ii) algorithmic amplification and political violence (iii) ethnic hate speech social media Africa, and (iv) disinformation electoral violence in Nigeria.

5. Thematic Results

Theme 1: The relationship between digital space and electoral hate speech in Nigeria

Digital space as an active co-producer of electoral hate speech

The reviewed studies are consistent with the theoretically significant finding that digital space is not a passive mirror of pre-existing social hatreds; however, an active structural condition that enables, intensifies, and organises electoral hate speech in ways that have no equivalent in traditional media (Ekoh & George, 2021; Ndlela, 2020). This claim is supported across disciplinary perspectives. Ekoh & George (2021) used a communication studies approach to systematically analyse the ethnoreligious slurs, dehumanising language, and exclusionary identity appeals in a significant number of politically motivated posts on Twitter during the 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. The fact that digital platforms are not simply reflecting social prejudices but rather creating and reinforcing them is the most empirically grounded claim in the literature reviewed.

Politically, Nwangwu (2015) and Omotoso and Oladeji (2022) found that the relationship between digital space and electoral hate speech in Nigeria is the structural nature of the electoral competition in Nigeria, specifically the winner-takes-all nature of executive elections, which amplifies the stakes of each electoral cycle and encourages the extreme manifestations of identity-based mobilisation. Hate does not emerge from digital space; it's amplified, sped up and organisationalised by digital space, orders of magnitude more effective than the same before digital communication of ethnic and religious campaigns.

This is important historical context provided by Pate & Ibrahim (2020) who argue that inflammatory rhetoric based on identity concepts in the Nigerian electoral context is not new to the digital world, as it was already in place prior to the advent of social media. Their longitudinal approach refutes the techno-determinism found in the literature by providing evidence of how the digital space is not the source of the ethno-religious antagonism but amplifies it, an antagonism which Nigerian electoral politics always mobilises.

Platform-specific dynamics in the Nigerian literature

The reviewed literature identifies distinct platform-specific dynamics in the production and dissemination of electoral hate speech in Nigeria. Facebook and WhatsApp are the preferred media for spreading electoral hate speech, according to Ekoh and George (2021), and the greatest hindrance to monitoring and governance. WhatsApp broadcast chat groups allow for a platform in which hateful speech is amplified quickly through a peer network to reach thousands of people within a few hours of being posted. This happens outside the purview of any content management system. Nwozor (2022) and Olaniran (2025)provide an analysis of hate speech in Nigerian political social media discourse that identifies platform-specific linguistic strategies, such as Facebook posts tend toward longer, more argumentatively structured hate content incorporating historical grievance narratives; Twitter posts tend toward shorter, more emotionally charged, and explicitly dehumanising language; WhatsApp messages tend toward fabricated disinformation presented as breaking news or insider information. This platform-specific differentiation of hate speech form and content is an important contribution to the literature, with significant implications for content moderation design, but has not yet been systematically integrated into regulatory frameworks.

The reviewed literature also identifies a consistent gap regarding YouTube as a platform for video-format electoral hate speech in Nigeria. While Murthy and Sharma (2019) note globally that hate speech on YouTube generates interactions that extend well beyond the content itself, the Nigeria-specific literature contains virtually no empirical studies of YouTube electoral hate speech content, which represents one of the most significant methodological gaps in the reviewed corpus. Similarly, TikTok's emergence as a significant political communication platform in the 2023 election cycle is almost entirely unaddressed in the reviewed academic literature, reflecting the inevitable lag between platform adoption and academic analysis.

Indigenous language hate speech

The commonality in the findings of the studies reviewed lies in the rolethat local languages used by Nigerians play in allowing hate speeches during elections to bypass platform moderation policies. Gagliardone et al. (2015), in the most widely cited work in this review, establish that social media platforms' content moderation systems are almost entirely English-centric, creating structural regulatory blind spots in which hate content in indigenous languages becomes difficult to control. In addition, Udeze and Voigt (2026) take their insights to the electoral arena, highlighting how hate speech against minority ethnic and religious groups in Nigerian elections is most vicious when written in the indigenous language, simply because those who produce such content know that this type of speech will not be noticed or deleted. Muhammad (2025) confirms that African indigenous language hate speech continues to be under-detected and under-moderated, according to recent evidence, on digital platforms. The AfriHate project found large amounts of abusive and hateful content in many of the African languages, which shows how inadequate the current content moderation systems are, focusing mostly on major global languages.

Theme 2: Digital space as an enabler of hate crime perpetration

The online-to-offline violence pathway in the literature

The reviewed studies examine the connection between online electoral hate speech and offline hate crime perpetration through two complementary analytical approaches: temporal-correlation studies examining the temporal proximity between online hate speech peaks and physical violence incidents, and mechanism-identification studies examining the specific processes through which online hate speech transitions to offline criminal conduct. Aondover (2024) confirms that the use of hate speech during Nigeria's general elections in 2015 and 2019 led to the escalation of ethnic and political tensions in the country. The use of traditional and electronic media outlets helped spread inflammatory narratives against ethnic and political minorities, which created an atmosphere of hostility and polarised society. The study indicates that the relentless dissemination of this kind of material can normalise antagonistic attitudes, stimulate group-based resentment, and provide opportunities for online harassment to develop into offline violence and electoral disruption.

Mechanism-identification studies in the reviewed literature converge on four pathways through which digital space enables the perpetration of hate crimes in the Nigerian electoral context. Perry's (2001) foundational structural theory of hate crime, which holds that hate crimes are enabled by social systems that normalise group subordination, provides the

overarching framework. The four mechanisms identified in the Nigerian digital literature represent the specific manifestations of this structural enabling in the platform environment.

These four mechanisms are: dehumanisation, coordinated incitement, disinformation as moral justification and disinhibition through anonymity, which are discussed as follows:

Dehumanisation

Dehumanisation, the discursive construction of outgroup members as subhuman, animalistic or inherently threatening, is identified across the reviewed literature as the most consistent and theoretically significant mechanism linking digital hate speech to hate crime perpetration. Chiluwa (2018) conducts the most detailed corpus analysis of dehumanising language in Nigerian political social media discourse, identifying systematic use of animalistic metaphors, disease metaphors and genocidal vocabulary in electoral content, targeting ethnic minorities. According to Tsesis (2002), hate speech frequently uses dehumanising messages that stigmatise targeted groups as less deserving, less worthy of rights and dignity, and dangerous. These stories slowly desensitise the reader to the suffering of the victim and reinforce a discriminatory attitude in society. Dehumanising rhetoric can normalise prejudice and exclusion, and foster an environment where hostility, marginalisation, and even violence against stigmatised groups becomes easier to accept. Thus, these messages serve as a basis for harmful social movements and collective acts of aggression.

Coordinated incitement

The second mechanism identified in the reviewed literature is the coordinated incitement and the deliberate organisationally enabled deployment of digital platforms to mobilise groups toward violence against identified targets. This process has been described by Nwozor (2022), who shows, using social network analysis of election-related social media activity in Nigeria, that a substantial amount of violent hate speech is generated and propagated through political supporters' networks rather than through spontaneous personal expression. This finding is theoretically significant because it distinguishes digital electoral hate crime enablement from the spontaneous model of hate crime perpetration and situates it within a framework of organised political violence, which requires different legal and policy responses from those designed for individual perpetrators. This supports the opinion of Lugbin (2025), who states that the Nigerian presidential elections held in 2023 were characterised by the presence of a coordinated cyber campaign which propagated hate speech and divisive language. According to Lugbin (2025), the activities of party-based "digital militias" are centred on crafting such content on social media sites. These actors used structured messaging and coordinated campaigns to amplify ethnic, religious, and political divisions, showing the potential to exploit digital platforms to mobilise followers and legitimise extreme messaging in electoral campaigns.

Disinformation

The third mechanism found in the literature is the creation and dissemination of electoral disinformation, which creates false narratives about out-group threats, fraud or aggression, giving those who commit hate crimes a sense of moral legitimacy to act. Gagliardone et al. (2015) identify the mechanism globally, by converting targeted groups from "normal citizens" into "threats to the existence". In the Nigerian electoral context, this mechanism is documented most concretely by Ekoh and George (2021), who analyse the role of

fabricated electoral result sheets, false claims of ballot stuffing by ethnic bloc voters and manufactured accounts of post-election ethnic aggression in precipitating the violence that followed the 2015 and 2019 elections. This review aligns with the view of Vasist et al. (2024), who argue that political disinformation and hate speech often employ networked communication technologies in a highly organised way, specifically aiming to enhance negative narratives and increase ideological divides. From their findings, it is apparent that organised groups intentionally spread inflammatory material to influencepublic opinion, mobilise support for and destabilise their political rivals. The fact that such incitement occurs in an organised mannercreatesa polarising environment characterised by hostility and marginalisation. It can lead to hate campaigns that undermine social harmony and increase the likelihood of conflict during politically turbulent times. Thus, proving disinformation as the most viral form of hate speech in Nigeria's digital election landscape.

Disinhibition through anonymity

The fourth mechanism, drawing its theoretical background most directly from the work of Suler (2004), is that of disinhibition resulting from digital anonymity, the psychological process that allows violent intentions that would otherwise be inhibited to manifest themselves due to the lack of accountability in face-to-face situations. The application of Suler's theoretical framework to the case of Nigeria is provided by Idowu et al. (2025), who, through the analysis of the motives of hate speech producers, demonstrate that the feeling of invisibility and non-accountability in digital environments is an established condition that enables the production of the most extreme types of hate speech. Ndlela (2020) further expands on this analysis by pointing out that the anonymity provided by digital platforms not only eliminates individual inhibitions but also eliminates social control within the community in the form of ethnic intercommunity courtesy standards that govern face-to-face interactions in many Nigerian communities. The reviewed literature consistently establishes that this mechanism interacts with the other three: dehumanisation, coordination and disinformation are more easily produced, circulated and normalised in a disinhibited digital environment than in accountable offline contexts.

Theme 3: Factors contributing to the spread of hate speech and hate crimes

Structural factors: Ethno-religious polarisation and electoral system design

All the studies discussed above agree that Nigeria's ethno-religious diversity is the key structural factor upon which the phenomenon of election-related hate speech through digital media is built. Omotoso and Oladeji (2022) situate understanding of the linkage between ethnic identity and electoral hate speech in Nigeria within the wider context of the country's lack of strong mechanisms of interethnic political accommodation. They argued that elections now provide the arena for zero-sum games over ethnic-group political representation. In this context, digital platforms provide the mobilisation infrastructure through which ethnic group political entrepreneurs can activate and intensify intergroup hostility at a scale and speed that no previous communication technology permitted. The author Nwangwu (2015) brings out the electoral hate angle, which shows that the presidential system in Nigeria is a winner-takes-all system, thus raising the political stakes of the whole contest in one shot, ensuring that the political mobilisation along the lines of ethnicity and religion becomes extremely

motivated, leading to hate speech becoming an electoral tool.

Technologically related factors

The reviewed literature identifies platform architectural features as a second cluster of enabling factors that operate independently of, and interact with, the structural socio-political conditions described above. Ndlela (2020) provides the most theoretically developed account of platform affordances as enablers of hate speech in the African electoral context, drawing on Gibson's (1979) affordance theory to argue that the specific features of social media platforms, their architecture of anonymous profiles, viral sharing mechanisms, group communication tools and engagement-maximising algorithms, are not neutral conduits for pre-existing communication but actively constitute the conditions of possibility for hate speech production and escalation. According to Gagliardone et al. (2015), maximising engagement algorithms inherently favour emotional content, which forms a structure that creates incentives for hate speech, irrespective of the intentions of individual users.

The inadequacy of platform content moderation for the Nigerian digital electoral context is identified as the most practically significant technological enabling factor in the reviewed literature. Beyond the indigenous-language moderation gap documented under Objective 1. In addition, the literature reviewed reveals three other moderation failures specific to the Nigerian context, namely, a lack of Nigeria-specific contextual knowledge on the part of platform trust and safety teams (Aondover, 2024); an inability for real-time moderation at the Nigeria-specific scale and speed of viral hate speech dissemination during election periods (Olagunju et al., 2023); and the deliberate strategic use of moderation gaps by organised political actors that produce hate content in formats and registers specifically designed to evade automated detection systems.

Socio-economic and demographic factors

A critical analysis of the reviewed literature showed that the literature on socioeconomic and demographic factors that can lead to the production and amplification of hate speech is less well developed than that on structural and technological factors, yet a coherent and consistent body of findings supports this. Ayoola & Adewuya (2025) empirically link economic marginalisation to hate speech by conducting qualitative analysis and finding that the Nigerian youth who constitute the producers ofhate speech on the digital space are drawn disproportionately from the economically marginalised youth for whom digital political activism, especially hate speech production, is a low-cost political engagement and assertion of social identity. Omotoso and Oladeji (2022) link this individual-level finding to the structural political economy of the phenomenon of electioneering in Nigeria and show that this is a technique used by political elites to recruit economically marginalised youth as agents of campaigns of digital hate, using their economic vulnerability to mobilise digital militias that can be deployed during the election season.

The literature reviewed points to age and gender as important demographic factors in the involvement in hate speech. According to Perry (2001), the demographic characteristics of electorally motivated hate crime producers across all platforms monitored corroborate the broader criminological literature on the demographic profile of hate crime perpetrators, with male users aged between 18 and 35 being overrepresented. Olagunju et al (2023) state that the gender aspect of digital electoral hate speech is an under-researched area. In Nigeria, the

gendered nature of electoral hate crimes against women and the gendered nature of its perpetrators is a gap in the reviewed literature, as many campaigns against hate speech targeted at women in the country are directed at women as victims rather than perpetrators.

Institutional and regulatory factors

The most practically relevant finding from the literature on the role of institutional and regulatory failures in enabling the escalation of digital electoral hate speech is that it occurs when the norms and practices governing elections are perceived as weak. As regards the role of institutional and regulatory failures, it has been found that the escalation of digital electoral hate speech happens when the norms and practices of elections are seen as weak. Uzoka, (2021) has done a systematic analysis of the Nigerian regulatory framework for the prevention of digital hate speech and found that the real challenge for effective prevention is not a lack of law but rather a mix of jurisdictional fragmentation, enforcers' misapplication of laws, and a lack of political will to enforce. Their analysis of prosecution patterns under the Cybercrimes Act reveals the law has been enforced more against political critics and journalists than against those who commit hate speech, resulting in a failure to deter hate speech and actively discouraging legitimate political expression. A fragmented regulatory landscape, as outlined by Ekoh and George (2021), has been observed as INEC, NBC, the NCC and the courts all exercise their own jurisdiction over digital electoral hate speech, meaning that none of these institutions is empowered with both the power and expertise to adequately regulate the phenomenon during the electoral campaign season when the risk of hate speech is highest.

The examined legal literature is evaluated as having sufficient provisions on hate speech in political campaigns, but the provisions provided for in Section 97 of the Electoral Act, 2022, which prohibit ethnically and religiously inflammatory campaign content, are evaluated as practically not being enforced, despite being formally adequate (Usman & Ibrahim, 2023).The lack of any successful prosecution of hate-related crimesunder Section 97 with respect to digital hate is considered by many sources to be the best example of regulatory impunity, which is one of the conditions leading to the growth of hate speech. According to Chiluwa (2018), the theory of impunity is more than the lack of punishment. It signals to potential platforms that hate speech is tolerated, thereby reducing the risk of its production.

6. Discussion of findings

The thematic synthesis of 73 peer-reviewed sources across five disciplinary fields confirms all three research hypotheses and produces an integrated picture of digital electoral hate speech in Nigeria as a multi-layered, structurally enabled, and progressively escalating phenomenon whose understanding requires precisely the interdisciplinary integration that the CILR methodology is designed to achieve. The linkage of the validation of the digital space to the prevalence of hate speech in the Nigerian elections is supported by a convergence of evidence from content analysis, discourse analysis, political science studies, and research on platforms, all of which show that the digital space is a co-producer of hate in the elections rather than merely a transmitter of pre-existing opinions.

The confirmation that digital space plays a significant role in enabling hate crime perpetration is supported by the identification of four consistently documented mechanisms (dehumanisation, coordinated incitement, disinformation and disinhibition) that together

constitute a coherent causal pathway from online hate speech to offline violence. Although the temporal correlation literature does not offer experimental proof of causality, it demonstrates sufficient consistency across four election cycles to warrant an equally strong causal inference. The most important weakness in the literature is its complete lack of longitudinal studies that can observe such effects across several election cycles within the same measurement framework.

The confirmation that socioeconomic and demographic factors contribute to hate speech and hate crime spread is supported across the reviewed literature, but the evidentiary base for this hypothesis is notably thinner. The literature has established the structural conditions (ethno-religious polarisation, winner-takes-all electoral system and the economic marginalisation of youth) with greater confidence than the individual-level mechanisms, linking specific demographic characteristics to specific hate speech behaviours. This gap reflects a broader methodological tendency in the Nigerian digital hate speech literature toward content analysis of online text and away from research on the producers and perpetrators of that content, a tendency that the CILR identifies as one of the most important correctable biases in the field.

Across all the objectives, the CILR identifies a consistent geographic and temporal gap in the reviewed literature. Most empirical studies focus on the 2019 and 2023 election cycles and on the South-West, South-East and North-West geopolitical zones, leaving the 2011 and 2015 cycles and the North-Central, North-East and Southern zones significantly under-researched. Given that the 2011 election produced the most lethal post-election violence in Nigeria's history and that North-Central states have consistently been the most violent in post-election periods, the underrepresentation of these contexts in the literature is a significant analytical limitation.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

This Critical Integrative Literature Review has synthesised 73 peer-reviewed academic sources across communication studies, political science, legal studies, sociology and information technology, to produce a comprehensive and disciplinarily integrated account of the academic evidence on digital space as an enabler of electoral hate speech and the perpetration of hate crime in Nigeria. The CILR methodology's commitment to critical appraisal and integrative synthesis, rather than mere aggregation, has produced a number of conceptual advances beyond what any individual study in the reviewed corpus achieves: the identification of four distinct mechanisms of hate crime enablement; the integration of structural, technological, socio-economic and institutional contributing factors into a unified analytical framework; and the mapping of significant disciplinary and methodological gaps that define the agenda for future research.

Recommendations

The literature review demonstrates a high level of scholarly agreement such as Tajfel and Turner (1979), Cohen and Felson (1979), and Suler (2004), which is unusual for social scientific research, regarding the role of digital space in the Nigerian electoral process where digital space serves not merely as a platform of neutral communication but as an environment for enabling hate speech to emerge and become violent in nature. It starts with fundamental theoretical frameworks and proceeds until the very latest empirical research on the 2023 elections (Olagunju et al., 2023; Aondover, 2024). The progressive escalation of digital electoral hate speech across the 2011 to 2023 cycles documented across the reviewed literature

suggests that, absent significant structural intervention in platform governance, regulatory capacity and socioeconomic conditions, it will impact the 2027 elections and will generate even greater volumes of more severe digital hate content with correspondingly greater offline risk of violence.Based on findings, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Nigerian regulatory authorities: The NCC, NBC and INEC should establish a joint Digital Electoral Integrity Unit with statutory authority to issue real-time take-down orders during election campaign periods.
2. Social media platforms operating in Nigeria should be required, as a condition of their NCC operating licences, to invest in hate content monitoring and moderation in indigenous languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Pidgin for hate-speech reports during election campaign periods.
3. Rather than focusing on prosecuting individuals who are making hate-speech comments, it is important for the Attorney General of the Federation to develop prosecutorial guidelines that target electoral hate speech campaigns which have an inclination towards violence.
4. The National Orientation Agency (NOA), in partnership with INEC's Voter Education Directorate, should develop and deploy a digital civic literacy curriculum in secondary schools and tertiary institutions, targeting the youth demographic identified by the reviewed literature as the primary demographic of digital hate speech production.

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