

## **Social Media and Hate Speech: Analysis of Comments on Biafra Agitations, Arewa Youths' Ultimatum and their Implications on Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*Social media has been adjudged an innovation which can be utilized to propel socioeconomic and political transformations in the modern society. Given the liberty in access and use of social media, Nigerians have in recent times, put to use the platform to express their views on national issues. Recent occurrences have revealed that the use of vile and hateful comments dominate the discourse among Nigerians on the social media space, particularly Facebook. This development indicates the potentials of social media to pose serious threats to peaceful coexistence through the proliferation of hate comments. This paper examines users' comments on Biafra agitations and the Arewa youths' ultimatum to Igbo residents in the North, with a focus on the Facebook accounts of selected media organisations. The critical discourse analysis approach was employed to explore the tone of comments (that attack or express support for a particular ethnic or religious group, and those that attack the personality of the president based on his regional and ethnic affiliations) and their implications on peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. Findings reveal that users were polarised along regional and religious lines in their comments, posting negative and injurious comments capable of turning the nation against itself. This is attributed to the ubiquitous nature of social media, making it possible for users to anonymously read contents and react with derogatory comments that insult or ridicule the ethnic, political, regional and religious affiliations of the diverse population of the country. Thus, there is the need for an articulate policy framework to moderate what goes on in the social media, to counter the negative effects of the platform on peaceful coexistence.*

**Keywords:** Arewa youths, Biafra, Hate speech, Peaceful coexistence, Social media.

### **Introduction**

The emergence of social media has further widened the reach of media organisations and eased audience access to media contents. In this age of digital revolution, a single gadget is enabled to become a newspaper, a radio or television or a movie watching device. Nigerians, wherever they maybe, can pick up and contribute to

media contents with as simple a device as a mobile phone. Through news blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Skype platforms, mainstream media organisations are now able to reach broader audience with news and other contents at little or no costs. Besides, interaction between news sources and recipients has changed, thus facilitating speedy or instantaneous feedbacks from the audience. In effect, the social media phenomenon has decentralised the processes of information dissemination, thereby allowing audience the opportunity to partake in the creation and distribution of media contents.

This technological breakthrough has, in recent times, aided Nigerians to freely express their opinions on issues that affect or impact their lives directly or indirectly. By echoing their voices through the social media, Nigerians have contributed in shaping the direction of policy formulation and the outcomes of many events in the society. One outstanding example is evident in the role played towards mobilising Nigerians at home and abroad against the removal of fuel subsidy in 2012 (the occupy Nigeria saga) which in turn, affected the outcome of the issue. The use of social media by political parties and candidates in educating and mobilizing public support, as well as its use particularly in the collation and announcement of results during the 2015 general elections, contributed in promoting democratic ethos and enhancing the credibility of Nigeria's electoral process. Again, social media played an active role in the "Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG)" campaign which attracted global recognition and support. The platform has also been utilised to champion against causes and cases of human rights abuse. The recent agitations for scrapping of the police Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) over allegations of extra judicious killings of civilians, the calls to action against the slave trade in Libya and the xenophobic attacks in South Africa, are among other concerns raised by Nigerians through the social media, which have made some impacts.

While the social media has been used or is still being used to chart direction for socioeconomic and political transformations in Nigeria, recent occurrences have revealed that many Nigerians employ the use of hate comments, threats, abusive language and assassination of character on the social media to vent anger, frustration and register their dissatisfaction about political, economic, religious, security and social issues in the society (Ende & Dzukogi, 2012). Ring (2013) observed that because of the de-centralised nature of the social media platform, it has become a perfect place for amateurs and professionals alike to create and share ideas, information, images, videos, art, music. Hence, it has become populated with sites that are dedicated to inciting hatred against particular ethnic, religious, racial or sexually-oriented groups. A quick glance through the comments section of a racially charged YouTube video for example, demonstrates how pervasive the problem is.

Nigeria is obviously not immune from this development. With its large individual and corporate users of social media and still growing, there are issues that have obvious implications on the peaceful coexistence of the nation. Users generated content through comments on social media accounts of individuals, groups and media

organisations on national issues have exhibited various positions and division, in some instances hate-related on issues of national importance. These comments, as opined by previous studies (Vision Reporter, 2012; Wanapia & Targema, 2015 as cited in Jibril & Simon, 2017), attack personalities in government, individuals, groups, policies, etc. and are sometimes detrimental to national unity, peace and development.

The Biafra agitations and Arewa youths' ultimatum are issues that caught media attention and generated a lot of audience comments in Nigeria. The tone of the comments and their implications on peaceful coexistence become imperative for imperial documentation. Hence, this paper examines users' comments on the Facebook accounts of selected media organisations (*Premium Times*, *Nigerianbulletin.com* and *Today.NG*) on the Biafra agitations and the Arewa youths' ultimatum with the following objectives:

- i) to examine the tone of comments (attack or expressing support for a particular ethnic, regional or religious group);
- ii) to identify comments that are attacks on human dignity based on ethnic, regional and religious affiliations; and
- iii) to examine the implications of these comments on peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

## Literature Review

### Background on Biafra Agitations and Arewa Youths' Ultimatum

Biafra was a secessionist unrecognised state in Nigeria which existed between May 1967 and January 1970. It was made up of the states in the south-eastern part of the country. Biafra's attempt to secede from Nigeria resulted in the Nigerian civil war. After two-and-a-half years of war, during which almost two million Biafran civilians died from starvation caused by the total blockade of the region by the then military government, Biafran forces under the motto of "No-victor, No-vanquished surrendered to the federal military government, and Biafra was reintegrated into Nigeria (Barnaby, 2000; Omoigui, 2018).

Recently, a group in the south-eastern region (the Indigenous People of Biafra, IPOB), under the leadership of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, kickstarted fresh agitations for secession from Nigeria. The agitations birthed from resource allocation and control, and environmental degradation resulting from oil exploration. The objectives of IPOB range from the motive of drawing attention to the perceived marginalisation of ethnic groups in the region, or serving as a pressure group to influence the structure of power, and to redress perceptions of marginalisation of the region (Auwal, 2017). Even though Kanu has been on detention for some time, his release in 2017 triggered fresh agitations for the independence of Biafra. Consequently, several calls have been made for the nation's economic and political systems to be restructured. Since the inception of the agitations, IPOB and its leading members engaged in the use of hateful and inciting statements or what others describe as "language of the beasts, blatant lies and cheap propaganda on

social media” (Lai, 2017; Ubani, 2017), calling for the disintegration of the country into sovereign entities. This also sparked-off serious war of words among Nigerians, who flooded the social media space with comments expressing ridicule, insults, hatred, and even incitement to violence against the ethnic, political, regional and religious backgrounds of the diverse population of the country. This led to the October 1, 2017 ultimatum by the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum to Igbos in the 19 northern states to vacate the region (Haruna, 2017).

### **Social Media**

The phrase ‘social media,’ is used to define the relatively recent phenomenon of mass personal publishing, including any form of online interaction that allows for the highly scalable publication of user-generated content of any kind (text, audio, video, images) that is meant for the consumption of general public, and uses interactive dialogue with others (BITS, 2011). Put differently, social media refers to the new generation mass tools which not only enable people to obtain information but to also share, comment, or, more generally, interact with it, and can be accessed by computer, smartphones and mobile phone text messaging. They are applications that inherently connect people and information in spontaneous, interactive ways. Hence, social media include Internet tools such as blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms, wikis, YouTube channels, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Flickr, etc. which allow the average person to create contents that can be shared with a worldwide audience. In fact, the interactive nature of these tools has transformed media messages from one-way communication to facilitating a dialogue. However, this phenomenon is the new “buzz word” in the communications, media and marketing industries. It is the current label for digital technologies that allow people to connect, interact, produce and share contents. These technologies have donned many labels including social networking, peer media, new media, digital media, NextGen PR and Web 2.0 (CIO, 2009; Daleh, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Lewis, 2010; Lindsay, 2011).

### **Hate Speech**

The term ‘hate,’ on the other hand, refers to a feeling that evokes dislike, anger or intense hostility towards somebody or something (*Encarta Dictionaries*, 2009). It denotes the extreme negative feelings and beliefs held about a group of individuals or a specific representative of that group because of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Accordingly, “hate speech” will be understood as covering all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin (British Institute of Human Rights, 2012). Moreover, the meaning and dimensions of hate speech differ, as the term has acquired diverse viewpoints.

Hate speech denotes any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. Essentially, such speeches rob others of their dignity, including: (a) all dissemination of ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred, by whatever means; (b) incitement to hatred, contempt or discrimination against members of a group on grounds of their race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin; (c) threats or incitement to violence against persons or groups on the grounds in (b) above; (d) expression of insults, ridicule or slander of persons or groups or justification of hatred, contempt or discrimination on the grounds in (b) above, when it clearly amounts to incitement to hatred or discrimination; (e) participation in organisations and activities which promote and incite racial discrimination. Additionally, hate speech refers to all communications (whether verbal, written, symbolic) that insults a racial, ethnic and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcome for any other reasons. Hate speech has also been conceived as “verbal terror” or a war waged on others by means of word. Aside causing danger of physical assault, hate speech risks violent reaction (Kayambazinthu & Moyo, 2002; Neisser, 1994; United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2013).

### **Social Media, Biafra Agitations and Arewa Youths' Ultimatum**

To date, a number of online news organisations in Nigeria continue to provide a two-way communication process by facilitating dialogue between news sources and the receivers. Recently, media organisations (both the conventional and web-based), disseminated the news about age-old agitations by some groups in the southeastern part of Nigeria which led to the Arewa youths' ultimatum, via their social media handles, mostly on Facebook. This generated a lot of comments from Nigerians who took to Facebook to express their opinions on the issues. However, since the release of Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB by the Abuja High Court in 2017, there has been mixed reactions about the Biafra agitations even among the Igbo elders. Several news media reported this event and the resultant reactions.

In a story posted on its Facebook page (June 7, 2017), *Premium Times* reported the three months ultimatum given to all Igbos in the 19 northern states to vacate the region by the Arewa Youths Consultative Forum (AYCF), resulting from the agitations by IPOB. Excerpts from the report read:

*If the Igbos fail to leave by the October 1, 2017, the group said, it would use force to evict the Igbos. The group also threatened to take over all the landed properties of the Igbos after they had left the region. Though the group did not specifically say how it intends to carry out its threat, it said not even the Arewa Consultative Forum or the Northern Elders Forum would prevent it from carrying out its threat. At a press conference in Kaduna, the AYCF officials led by the group's National President, claimed that a successful sit-at-home protest*

*organised by Igbo groups, was a threat to the country's national security. The AYCF said they would not tolerate such action, hence the issuance of the three months ultimatum for the Igbos to leave. We are also telling our brothers (northerners) out there in the South-East to get prepared to come back home.*

In a related report on the Facebook page of *Today.NG* (June 9, 2017), a former minister of aviation, Femi Fani-Kayode was quoted commending the IPOB, saying that "the group is fighting a noble cause." On September 14, 2017, the *Nigerianbulletin.com* in a report on its Facebook page, quoted the Imo state Governor, Rochas Okorocha, condemning the Biafra agitations led by Nnamdi Kanu. According to the Governor, "no sensible person will support the agitations because it is child's play." The report explained:

*Let me assure you that no Ibo person or man is in support of secession and people must see this as a childish act. We must stand up to address it before it becomes a national problem. As for us leaders in that area, it will be insane for anyone to think that the IPOB leader will ask us to follow him to seek secession.*

Within the period, *Nigerianbulletin.com* again, reported President Muhammadu Buhari describing the agitations for secession in the southeast as senseless. The report quoted the President saying:

*The people of the southeast are known for their ingenuity, industrial and commercial talent. There is no part of Nigeria where you will not find Igbo entrepreneurs, both men and women, contributing to the development of their adopted communities. I am asking you all not to buy into the senseless propaganda on secession. Igbo is Nigeria and Nigeria is Igbo.*

The above reports as posted on the Facebook pages of the selected news media, generated lots of comments from Nigerians. What is the tone of these comments (are the comments objective or sectional)? Are these comments offensive or abusive on the regional, ethnic or religious affiliation of a particular group of people? What is the gravity and implications of these comments on peaceful coexistence? These are some of the questions guiding the direction of this paper.

### **Implications of Social Media and Hate Speech Proliferation on Peaceful Coexistence**

The social media phenomenon is one of the most remarkable innovations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has changed the way individuals share, understand and react to social events in general and conflicts in particular (Dauda et al., 2017). Understanding the implications of hate speech on harmonious coexistence among the various ethnic groups

and other divisive margins in the country, requires theoretical explanation and the review relevant literature.

Nigeria is pluralistic in terms of ethnic, regional and religious identities. Political elites, ethnic and religious organisations have over the years exploited these identities, which later stirred up agitations for power and control of resources by the social groups that were once silenced (Danaan, 2017). While findings reveal that social media can be used to achieve developmental purposes in a diverse society like Nigeria, social media is increasingly being deployed as a tool for confounding and fueling conflicts and championing retrogressive causes, especially among its youth population. And this would not foster the unity, peace and development that Nigeria desperately needs. Violent conflicts, whether electoral, communal or ethno-religious, have always been the end product of hate speech being spread through the social media (Dauda et al., 2017; Santas, 2017). According to a report by the Center for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), there is increase in hate speeches among Nigerians on various social media platforms. The report indicated that 60.3% of hate speeches recorded came from Facebook, 5.9% from newsletters and 4% from blogs surveyed within the period. It revealed further that 63% of perpetrators of hate speeches are prominent people while 39% of them are ordinary citizens (non-prominent). Additionally, 35.2% of the hate speeches surveyed, insult people for their religion, abuse people for their ethnic or linguistic affiliation, or express contempt against people because of their place of origin (Alkassim, 2017). Again, findings of a study by Ende and Dzukogi (2012) indicate that verbal terror attacks directed at individuals, ethnic groups, religious institutions and regions, as stereotypes were used to describe those involved. Comments deemed as offensive employed hate speech, threats, abusive language and assassination of character.

Indeed, the phenomenon of hate speech has taken an extensive dimension in Africa due to poor regulations. Hate speech has permeated every nook and cranny of Africa. Observably, hate speech has eaten deep into the bone marrows of Nigerians and it has continued unabated. Hatred between the ethnic groups that make up Nigeria has intensified as the use of hate speech continues unregulated (Ezeibe, 2015). However, Nigerians have failed in their comments on national issues, to draw a line between hate speech and constructive criticism. Considering the porous nature of the country's fault-lines of ethnicity and religion, the need to regulate the proliferation of hateful and inciting speeches through the social media therefore becomes inevitable. In view of that, the Nigerian government has taken steps to curb hate speech. Nigeria's Vice President, in August 2017, bewailed that "hate speech will no longer be tolerated, as the silence of the country's leaders on hate speech would be a grave disservice to the nation, its peace and future. We have drawn a line against hate speech, it will not be tolerated, it will be taken as an act of terrorism and all of the consequences will follow" (Ayitogo, 2017; Bello, 2017). Recently, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), launched a strategic campaign tagged '*say no to hate speech*' on social media platforms. As the Director-

General of NOA observed, “in the last few months, our country and its people have witnessed a disturbing trend in social and political conversations that sometimes call to question our traditional friendship, love for neighbour and sense of unity. If you look at the social media, a channel mostly used by our youths, the voices of hate is what you hear. There is an urgent need for all men and women of goodwill in Nigeria to take measures to curb hate speeches and promote national cohesion, love and unity” (*Vanguard*, 2017).

Yet, the moves against hate speech by the federal government triggered fresh controversies among civil society and political organisations about what constitutes hate speech. While some political and public affairs commentators lament that such move is unconstitutional as it runs the risk of trampling on citizens' rights (particularly that of freedom of speech and expression), others succumb to the need for a law to regulate hate speech. A Lagos-based human rights lawyer, Ebun-Olu Adegboruwa, expressed in a statement to *Premium Times*, that “any law capable of hindering the freedom of expression granted under Section 39 of the 1999 constitution and the African Charter would be illegal and unconstitutional...This is just an attempt by the ruling APC government to gag citizens and if such law is ever passed, we shall challenge it to court” (Ezeamalu, 2017). Similarly, Ekiti State Governor, Ayodele Fayose, considered the move to classify hate speech an act of terrorism, as a plot by the APC-led government to silence the opposition party – PDP. In his words, Fayose stated that, “this appears as another plot to silence the opposition and I make bold to say that, saying the truth concerning the country and its rulers cannot be termed as hate speech...” (Williams-Smith, 2017). In a related statement, Rivers State Governor, Nyesom Wike, described the move as a threat merely aimed at instilling fear into members of the opposition, PDP. The statement reads: “...I don't know what they refer to as hate speech. I don't know whether we should all keep quiet when things are going wrong” (Gogo, 2017).

A former aide to ex-president Goodluck Jonathan, Doyin Okupe, emphasises the need to protect those in government against what is said about them on social media, and to also prevent reckless statements that can incite or dehumanize people for no other reason except that they are in government offices. Okupe stated that: “...I agree that there is a justification for the law and that we need to look into the situation properly and a proper law should be enacted that can control what we say and how we say them especially on the social media. There is absolute need for sanity because what goes on in the social media is pathetic, it is unthinkable” (Bello, 2017). Further, Governor Nasiru El-Rufai of Kaduna State observed that hate speech and fake news are the biggest threats to national security, and called for collective action to tackle them. According to him, “the social media had been used to incite people to violence... There is need to curtail the emerging trend of using social media to create crisis in the country. I think collectively we have to fight it and discourage those behind it by arresting and prosecuting them” (NAN, 2017). Amidst situations of this sort, it calls to question, the possibility of achieving harmonious living in a society and polity enmeshed with



provocative tendencies as evident in Nigeria. While the negative use of social media poses serious threats to peaceful coexistence (through the proliferation of hate speech), its potentials to contribute positively to peaceful coexistence will remain untapped, until these excesses are duly checkmated.

### Method

This paper adopts the critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology approaches. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides theories and methods for the empirical study of the relations between discourse and sociocultural developments in different social domains. The prerogative of CDA is that, discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations (in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination) between social groups or classes (e.g. women and men, ethnic, religious minorities and the majority). These effects are understood as ideological effects which culminate into conflicts between groups (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002).

The Facebook accounts of three popular news media with online presence were purposively selected for this study. They were purposively selected for their consistency in the coverage of the Biafra agitations and the Arewa youths' ultimatum issues and their consistency in sharing the reports and updates on their Facebook pages which generated numerous comments. The selected news media were *Premium Times*, *Nigerianbulletin.com* and *Today.NG*. Readers' comments on the news items shared through the Facebook pages of the selected news media were read and carefully placed to categories. The categories include:

- i) Offensive: Comments that attack personalities.
- ii) Hateful: Comments that are insulting ethnic, religious, regional groups.
- iii) Inciting statement: Comments that call for violent attacks against individuals, members of a particular ethnic group or region.

Thus, the paper conducted an analysis of macro propositions to discover the manifest contents, as identified in the stated categories. On this, van Dijk (1980) explains that, macro propositions analysis is based on an identification of the most relevant collection of information in a text, derived from the local meanings of words and sentences by macro rules, such as deletion, generalisation and construction. This paper therefore examines comments that are offensive, hateful and inciting in tone. The sampling frame consists of 786 comments from the Facebook posts of the selected news media between June and September 2017 on the Biafra and Arewa youths' issues. This comprise of 231 from *Premium Times*, 311 from *Nigerianbulletin.com*, and 244 from *Today.NG*. However, the systematic sampling technique was used in selecting the comments at a fixed interval of seven, resulting to a sample of 112 comments.

## Findings

The comments sampled for analysis are presented below, according to frequency in the selected news media and identified categories.

**Table 1: Distribution of comments in selected news media (June-Sept., 2017)**

News media	Frequency of comments	Percentage
Premium Times	34	30.4
Nigerianbulletin.com	41	36.6
Today.NG	37	33.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field survey, 2018.

The table above shows that *Nigerianbulletin.com* has the most comments with 36.6% of the sample size. This is followed by *Today.NG* with 33.0%, and *Premium Times*, 30.4%, respectively.

**Table 2: Distribution of comments according to categories (June-Sept., 2017)**

Categories	Premium Times	Nigerianbulletin.com	Today.NG	Total (%)
Offensive	14	8	7	29 (25.9)
Hateful	9	20	14	43 (38.4)
Inciting	11	13	16	40 (35.7)
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>112 (100)</b>

**Source:** Field survey, 2018.

Table 2 above indicates that 25.9% of the sampled comments were offensive in tone, while 38.4% hateful, and 35.7% inciting in tone. Out of the 34 comments from *Premium Times*, 14 are in the offensive, 11 in inciting, and 9 in hateful categories. For *Nigerianbulletin.com*, 20 out of the 41 comments are in hateful, 13 in inciting, and 8 in the offensive categories. However, 16 out of the 37 comments from *Today.NG* are inciting, 14 in hateful, and 7 in the offensive categories.

## Discussion

Emerging trends and issues from some of the comments in social media discourse show that participants are quick to ethnicise, politicise and engage in deceptive arguments, even where the content that is generating comments is neither ethno-religious nor political (Dauda, Abubakar & Lawan, 2017). Thus, many Nigerians employ hate speech, threats, abusive languages and assassinations of character to vent anger, frustration and register their dissatisfaction about political, economic, religious, security and social issues in the society (Ende & Dzukogi, 2012). However, findings from this and related studies indicate that Nigerians are often polarised along regional,

ethnic and religious lines in their expressions, using negative and injurious statements capable of reducing the social media platform into a chaotic and indiscreet battlefield where participants engage in war of words (Jibril & Simon, 2017).

Analysis of comments under the offensive category indicates that commentators made different kinds of statements which are direct attacks on human dignity based on ethnic and regional affiliations. These comments mostly emanated from the reports on Arewa youths' ultimatum to Igbos. Few examples are as follows:

*"If you want to know the typical meaning of psycho, just listen to Igbos when they talk. They lack focus and direction."*

*"They are senseless and idiots. But I will not blame them because most of them (Igbos) don't have parents. They are being produced by baby factory."*

*"Northerners say you should leave their zoo...if Biafrans are not animals, why are they finding it difficult to leave the zoo."*

*"If Arewa youths and all the Hausa-Fulani cows don't keep to their October 1<sup>st</sup> threat, they will forever remain fools and cowards."*

*"Bunch of illiterate almajiris wanting to lead the literates."*

*"Who begged them now? Ndi ara...uncircumcised almajiri fools."*

However, comments which fall under the hate category emerged from the reports in which President Muhammadu Buhari described the Biafra agitations as senseless. Here, most of the comments were abusive of the personality of the President, his ethnic and regional affiliations. Examples include:

*"Buhari and all Fulani is senseless, not Biafra;"*

*"Arewa and Buhari are senseless."*

*"Who born you? Go to hell Buhari. You have no name. Biafra must come."*

*"Buhari is the most senseless human on earth."*

*"Bokohari...Biafra agitation is not senseless. Rather our heritage. Blood and water don't flow together."*

*“Nigerians are senseless for allowing the cattle rearrer Buhari to rule. Commot for road make we see Nnamdi Kanu abeg.”*

*“Idiot president, Fulani herdsmen that go about fully armed killing and destroying villages are not senseless to you, but armless freedom fighters are senseless...Foolish man.”*

*“Buhari, when are you going to acquire human brain.”*

*“Useless old fool. Your senselessness is incomparable.”*

*“And how sensible are you as a president...A big time ignoramus.”*

*“IPOB is senseless, just as you and your irresponsible government. The reelection bid is equally senseless.”*

*“Whenever animals from the Hausa-Fulani zoo talk, you will know.”*

*“PMB you are more senseless. You have the guts to insult your host.”*

*“What do you expect from a Fulani president who attended secondary school and came out certificateless.”*

*“The stupid president ever, big fool. Demonic FulaBuhari.”*

Under the inciting category, analysis shows that most of the comments call for secession and incitement to violence against individuals, ethnic and regional groups in the country. Examples of such comments include:

*“I plead with Arewa youths to kill any useless Igbo man that refuses to obey their quit notice. Kill them all unless they return to their land.”*

*“Are we in feudal system. Is the north the owner of Nigeria? Let them give Biafra, and then send Igbo away.”*

*“Igbos should leave the North. Any sane Igbo man should relocate because when it starts no government will defend u. Only d living can make wealth, Igbos leave the North or loose ur life.”*

*“What’s this noise is all about? We asked them to leave b4 1st Oct. Failure to do that....hmm.”*

*"It happened before the civil war, they are not reliable, our people should vacate now before it is too late. Come home send them out of your land too."*

*"Hausa Fulani's are not our brothers. To be forewarned is to be forearmed."*

*"Enough is enough Igbos leave our region."*

*"Before, no victory no vanquished, Hahahaha. Now no retreat no surrenders. Let them go before it's too late for them."*

*"Igbos must leave north. Let all Igbos go. Leave that land. Before now, so many Igbos have left the land. The remaining Igbo should leave."*

*"Okay na. October 1 we will know whether it's you fools that own Nigeria or us the people. To hell with Nigeria and it's wicked system."*

*"Stop all dis talk talk ndigbo and swing into action and let us see if there would be any positive results."*

*"You refused to support the force that could have set all of us free from this Hausa-Fulani clutches and you're crying when it's already too late."*

*"It's better Nigeria breakup, we cannot be Islamic country. We reject their rubbish Islamisation."*

The overriding tone in most of the comments reveals the use of offensive and abusive languages. These are mostly attacks tilted towards the regional, ethnic and religious affiliation of a particular group of people. In view of the diverse nature of the country's population, it is evident that the analysed comments are provocative. The use of phrases such as 'psycho,' 'most of them don't have parents,' 'senseless and idiots,' 'animals,' 'fools and cowards,' 'illiterate almajiris,' 'uncircumcised almajiri fools,' as in comments under the offensive category, are denigrating on human dignity, especially as they are directed at a particular group of people. Others, such as 'Buhari and all Fulani is senseless,' 'most senseless human on earth,' 'big fool,' 'a big ignoramus,' 'useless old fool,' 'idiot president,' 'cattle rearer,' 'foolish man,' 'Bokohari,' 'irresponsible government,' 'animals from Hausa-Fulani zoo,' 'certificateless president,' 'demonic fulabuhari,' 'Arewa and Buhari are senseless,' are also derogatory, as they express outright hatred for Buhari as an individual, his region and ethnic group in general. Similarly, provocative speeches such as 'kill them all,' 'send Igbo away,' 'leave or loose your life,' 'vacate now before it is too late,' 'send them out of your land too,' 'we asked

them to leave,' 'leave our region,' 'Igbos must leave,' 'to hell with Nigeria,' 'it's better Nigeria breakup,' 'swing into action let use see,' 'set all of us free from this Hausa-Fulani clutches,' as manifest in comments under the inciting category, have the tendency of inciting the country against itself.

As a nation-state, Nigeria is inhabited by people who are characterised with an assortment of sociocultural, political and religious beliefs. Notwithstanding, the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in its preamble, aptly captures the indissolubility of the State as follows: "We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria having firmly and solemnly resolved, to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God..." Nevertheless, a number of occurrences in the country's sociopolitical endeavours continue to question the effectiveness of the above proclamation. In effect, the country's diversity virtually reflects in all endeavours. This often culminates in "identity politics" which forms the basis for political appointments and allocation of resources, and "identity contestation" – a state of social relationship based, for example, on class (as rich or poor, civilised or barbaric, etc.), regional and ethnoreligious affiliations (as northerner or southerner, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo or Yoruba, Muslim or Christian, etc.). Resulting from this diversity, the country has witnessed series of violent conflicts which posed obstacles to unity, peaceful coexistence and stable development (Auwal, 2017; Edewor, Aluko & Folarin, 2014).

From inception, the media have on different occasions, served as viable platforms used by aggrieved individuals, social groups or members of so-called marginalised and minority groups, to express their grievances about issues in the society (Danaan, 2017). In the conventional media, where contents are usually made to undergo internal and external scrutiny and control in terms of editing to ensure that ethics and professionalism are religiously adhered to (Nafada & Gudaku, 2013), these grievances are often expressed with some degree of tolerance and responsibility. However, advancement in communication technologies has changed the status quo with the upsurge of Internet and social media. Owing to its interconnected, accessible, interactive, open-ended character, ubiquitous and delocated nature (McQuail, 2007), among other features that guarantee unregulated access to and use of social media platforms in contemporary Nigeria, aggrieved users exploit the platform to express and promote rivalries which pose alarming implications on the continuous existence of the country as a political entity.

Considering the excessive freedom associated with the access and use of the Internet, the tendencies of the cited comments to promote ethnic and religious rivalries, instigate people against a political party, candidate, religious or ethnic group, are taking on more frightening dimensions via the Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other social media, because the platforms operate on user-generated contents. Because participants in online discourse are often virtually anonymous and thus, unaccountable for their rudeness, individual and group users, take advantage of the country's fault-lines of religion and ethnicity to promote intolerance through these platforms (Segun, 2015;

Wolchouwer, 2012). However, this narrow-mindedness displays ignorance, insensitivity and a lack of grasp of the dynamics of national issues. Thus, these discourses vituperatively turn violent due to the inability of individuals to accommodate and tolerate others' ideological leanings, and the violent exchanges reveal the discussants' belief systems, ethnic and regional bigotries and political affiliations (Dauda et al., 2017). In a diverse society like Nigeria, the implication is that these trends are detrimental to social and harmonious coexistence, since no one subjects whatever comes from the social media to any form of scrutiny.

### **Implications of the comments on Biafra agitations and the Arewa youths' ultimatum on Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria**

Nigeria is characterised with a diverse population who have over the years been involved in contestations for identity and favourable allocation of power and resources. This has contributed in sowing seeds of discord, mutual distrust and intolerance among Nigerians, as individuals seek means to promote and protect personal, sectional, and religious interests rather than national interest. Consequently, Nigerians have always been polarised along ethnic, regional and religious lines in their discussions about issues of national importance. However, findings reveal that the comments on Biafra agitations and Arewa youths' ultimatum pose grave implications to peaceful coexistence, because the overriding tone in most of the comments involve the use of offensive and abusive languages which are provocative and are not devoid of showcasing the level of intolerance among the diverse population. As evident from the analysis, these comments are also war inducing. The Rwandan genocide which emanated from disagreements and animosity between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsi birthed from such tendencies as evident in Nigeria today. The implication is that such comments could trigger anger and violent reactions among Nigerians.

### **Conclusion**

While the development of social media further enhanced citizens' access to information and the rights to reply, this liberty has in recent times, not been exercised with its corresponding responsibility. Even though social media guarantee users access to various points of views, discussions among Nigerians on the social media space are overwhelmed with tendencies that could promote extreme negative feelings and bring about hatred or incitement to violence against a group of individuals because of their ethnic, religious or regional orientations. The major finding from the critical discourse analysis reveals that comments were abusive of the ethnic, regional and religious affiliations of the diverse population of Nigeria.

Whenever national economic, political and social issues are discussed, as they relate to, and affect the different groups in Nigeria (Ojo & Adebayo, 2013), the way and manner opinions are expressed via the social media usually wear the toga of incitement. It is however, imperative to state that hate speech can step-up the tempo of irredentist

claims in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. If the situation continues without proper attention by government and relevant stakeholders to find lasting remedy to curb these ills among Nigerians, efforts to achieve peace and other developmental objectives may not see the light of the day. In view of the overwhelming influence of social media and its contents on the society, this paper recommends as follows:

1. On its part, government should focus on addressing issues of injustice, transparency and inclusiveness in all affairs. This would go a long way in resolving the increasing agitations by various groups, in addition to strengthening unity among the country's diverse population.
2. There is the need for high sense of responsibility and tolerance among participants in online discourse, in order to make all appreciate the obvious values of this innovation. Through regular sensitisation by governmental agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Ministry of Information and Culture, and other non-governmental organisations, this can be achieved.
3. Owing to the imminent implications of hate speech and reckless comments on peaceful coexistence, moderation in the pattern of users' interaction on the cyberspace becomes inevitable. Even though the constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and expression, there is the need to draw a line between hate speech and constructive criticism, as this would provide the path towards containing the negative effects of hate speech on the Nigerian society.



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