# A Discourse Analysis of Online Readers' Comments on Political Discourse in Nigeria

Abubakar Jibril
*Taraba State University, Jalingo*, abakarsadique@gmail.com

Sabiu Idris
*Taraba State University, Jalingo*

Adamu Mohammed
*Taraba State University, Jalingo*

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# A Discourse Analysis Of Online Readers' Comments On Political Discourse In Nigeria

## Abubakar Jibril[1]*, Sabiu Idris[2], Adamu Mohammed[3]

[1,2,3]Taraba State University, Jalingo

## ABSTRACT

The internet has liberalized political discussion in Nigeria, and enhanced public debates on trending social, economic, religious, and political issues on the various platforms it harbors, such as the social media, online news sites and blogs among others. Online comments sections of news sites enable readers to discuss issues raised in the news from their individual points of view. This development facilitates interaction among news producers and consumers, and serves as effective feedback mechanism. However, previous researches have established disturbing trends on the platforms, bordering on a seaming inclination of discourse to ethnic, religious and regional schmaltziness. This portends damning implications on the age-long unity in diversity question in Nigeria. This study, therefore, undertakes a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative discourse analysis of comments on the various online news platforms vis-à-vis this 'all important' unity in diversity question. Specific attention was paid to the ideological leanings of the comments in terms of regional, ethnic and religious affiliations of commentators, with the aim to interrogate how these divides are forced into discourse on the platforms, and the implications on the unity and continuous corporate existence of the multicultural Nigeria. Findings from this study established that comments on Nigerian political stories by online readers are driven by ethnic, religious and geopolitical identities of the readers ("us" versus "them") instead of political ideology and rationality. As a result, online readers are polarized along ethnic, religious and/or regional lines with negative implications on the much sought-after unity in diversity.

*Keywords*: Ideological Leanings; Online News Sites; Online Readers; Political Discourse; Readers' Comments

## 1. Introduction

In Nigeria, online debates and discussions over trending political issues has become a daily practice. With every new development in the political arena, Nigerians take it to social media to register their dismay or excitement, and this has continued to result in debates and discussions among Nigerians. Unfortunately, these discussions are often driven by ethno-religious sentiments instead of ideological stands.

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* Corresponding Author:
Abubakar Jibril : abakarsadique@gmail.com

The northern-southern Nigeria disparity and ethno-religious divides characterize the nature of debates in these online political discussion platforms. The idea of national identity is being relegated to the background. Participants in these platforms first of all, identify themselves as Christians or Muslims, Yorubas, Igbos or Hausa-Fulanis, northerners or southerners, etc. before as Nigerians. No matter how sensitive or of national importance an issue is, participants support what their brother-in-faith or ethnic group asserts regardless of whether they have made a point worthy of consideration or not.

The debates that trail the 2015 and 2019 general elections on social media and other online discussion forums indicate how divided the Nigerian society is, with manifestations of outright denial of truth for regional, religious and tribal interests.

The new media no doubt provide a voice to the voiceless. Those who are denied a voice by the mainstream media can utilize the power of social media and other online platforms to raise issues of national concern or register their grievances. But the way and manner discussions and debates on national issues transpire on the new media is capable of deepening the divides and the already dichotomous relationship that exist among Nigerians.

Mixing politics with ethnic, religious, and other differences poses a serious threat to national unity and cohesion in Nigeria. This is because whenever political discussions take ethnic or religious coloration, the implication is that, what is right or ought to be right will be relegated to the background, paving way for biases, sentiments and divisions. It is against this background that this study seeks to examine how politico-ideological leanings influence online readers' comments on political issues in Nigeria.

## 1.1. *Online political debates and divides in multicultural Nigeria*

Debates and discussions on political issues are common practices on Nigerian social media platforms. With increasing presence of Nigerians on the Internet, hot debates and arguments on government's actions or inactions have continued to flood the social media. Social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook are now a hub for discussing and debating on controversial social and political issues in Nigeria.

Dialogue is no doubt an essential ingredient in maintaining a healthy democracy. These online discussion forums enable citizens to express their political thoughts. They increase opportunities for political participation. People who feel ignored or sidelined in the traditional

political arena can participate in the alternative online arena of public issues deliberations (Vergeer and Hermans 2007). Debating on political issues on social media is a practice that is common not only in Nigeria, but in countries across the world. This is because it has become an integral part of life (Kaposi 2006).

However, arguments and debates can only be beneficial to democracy when patriotism and love for common good is the main motive of such actions. Discussion and debates on political matters on Nigerian social media platforms mostly take ethnic, regional, or religious tone. Ethnocentrism and religious jingoism are always at the center of political discussions and debates in Nigeria. Whereas in advanced democracies, debates are done based on economic and political ideologies of participants and that of their favorite candidates, not religious, regional or ethnic background, however, in Nigeria the reverse is always the case. Amuta in Adeniyi (2017:1) aptly states that:

> Ordinarily, one would expect such a national gaze on political developments to reflect fundamental disagreements on issues along clear ideological lines. After all, we have collectively experienced Nigeria long enough to have by now made healthy choices as to what route leads quickest to the harvest place. Sadly, that is not the case.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. It is a home to more than 250 ethnic groups and three major religions. Unfortunately, Nigerian politicians have succeeded in mixing politics with religion, ethnicity, and regionalism to their advantage. Whenever discussions on issues of national concern is taking place, these divides: ethnicity, religion, and regionalism, will quickly come into play and blindfold people from seeing what is right.

Politics is no doubt the biggest obstacle that stands between Nigeria and achieving national unity. Political debates on social media is also not helping matters, because trading of insults and use of offensive languages on social networking sites among Nigerians over politics and politicians is only deepening the divide and worsening the situation. In the words of Jibril and Targema (2017): "with the way commentators are polarized along regional lines in their comments, the realization of the much desired unity in diversity and national integration via this platform is obviously far from reality". Edewor, Aluko, and Folarin (2014) in this regard, note that forging "unity in diversity", washing away socio-cultural differences, and creating uniformity in spite of our "complex cultural diversity" is the way forward.

To this end, championing and supporting the cause of development and uniting against ethnic and religious politics will be a good move towards achieving national unity and development. This is because blindly following politicians and advancing their interests in the country's daily political discussions at the expense of its collective national welfare, will only further the underdevelopment of the country.

## 2.    Literature Studies

Studies about the pattern and nature of online political discourse abound the literature. To some scholars, online political discussion forums are promoting political participations and strengthening democracies across the world, while others see these forums as free-for-all and hubs for incivility.

Grevet, Terveen, and Gilbert (2014) investigate the political disagreements among Facebook users with the view of understanding the conditions under which diverse opinions can coexist online. The authors employed survey method and interview to study 116 politically engaged American social media users, distributing 103 online questionnaires and conducting 13 interviews. Findings of the study reveal that Facebook is a difficult place to maintain a friendship with someone who has different opinion during times of heated political debates. During those times, Facebook can feel like a hostile environment, and the opportunities to show support with like-minded others overshadow the opportunities to engage with peoples of different opinions. They submit that: "Currently, muffling political discussions, or at least discouraging them, might create a more welcoming environment".

Papacharissi (2004) explores the potentials for civil discourse in cyberspace by examining the level of incivility in political discussion forums in USA. The author adopts content analysis and studied 287 discussion threads in some selected political news groups in USA. The study reveals that online anonymity and the absence of face-to-face interaction may make some less mindful of their manners, but incivility and impoliteness do not dominate online political discussions. Therefore, online discussion forums are not a threat to democracy.

Ortiz, Hamrin, Aggio, and Dalmonte (2017) examine the characteristics of the conversation and political discussion on Twitter during the televised Brazilian Presidential debate prior to 2014 elections. The authors employed content analysis to study a sample of 56,721 tweets. The study reveals that Brazilians tweeting during the live televised 2014 Brazilian presidential debate were not commenting on political issues but exchanging jokes about some

extraordinary happenings between candidates during the debate. Findings of the study indicate that Brazilian users did not use the interactive features to interact directly with other users in order to discuss political issues, but mostly to replicate and endorse someone else's comment, rather than to engage in direct interactions with other users.

Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) examine the extent to which online discussion groups expose participants to political talks and diverse political views. The authors adopt survey method to study a sample of 1,386 Internet users. Findings of the study reveal that just as politics often comes up in face-to-face contexts when discussing other issues, it is the same thing that used to happen in most of the online discussion forums. In their words: "However, just as political discourse can occur in the course of everyday activities, online political exchanges may also occur in nonpolitical contexts."

Vergeer and Hermans (2007) study the nature of online political discussions in Germany. The authors employed content analysis and network analysis to study 214 sampled discussion threads from a highly active Dutch political discussion group "nl.politiek" in the weeks prior to and after the German national elections of November 2006. Findings of the study reveal that "Interactive functions of electronic discussions indeed leads to more political participation and empowerment of peripheral groups." They submit that: "It is clear that online discussions will gain more possibilities and opportunities for participation in politics, governance, and society."

Abdu, Mohamad, and Muda (2017) investigate the role of Facebook in engendering online political participation among Nigerian youths. The authors employed survey method to study 372 youths in Bauchi Metropolis. Findings of their study reveal a significant relationship between Facebook use and online political participation. They submit that online political participation among youths is largely dependent on the use of Facebook because more youths are often showcasing stronger reliance on it as their online platform for securing political information they need to make an informed political decision.

Masiha, Habiba, Abbas, Saud, and Ariadi (2018) explore the link between the use of Facebook and political participation among youths in Pakistan. The authors adopt online survey method to study a sample of 345 Facebook users in Pakistan. Their findings reveal that use of Facebook increase political participation among youths. In their words: "use of Facebook is significant in promoting political participation by sharing views and posting

comments on political issues on Facebook. Exchanging opinions and information indicates the understanding of political issues and tendency of youth's political participation."

## 3.    Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on public sphere theory, propounded by Jugen Habermas in 1989. The theory advocates for the existence of a public space where all citizens will have equal access to, in order to freely express their views on issues of public interest. Public sphere theory centers on the idea of participatory democracy and how public opinion becomes or influences political action. Public sphere according to Habermas is an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through these discussion influence political actions.

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* a book that has widely influenced public opinion theory. This book argues that democratic politics will only be conducted as intended by Enlightenment thinkers when there is an egalitarian public sphere in which everyone has an opportunity to participate and to express their ideas (Littlejohn and Foss 2009).

According to Littlejohn and Foss (2009), Habermas argued that such a public sphere existed during the 1700s, but it was gradually transformed with the rise of mass societies and commercial mass media. In later books, Habermas discussed ways of restructuring public communication so that a public sphere can be created that will permit broad public involvement in politics. Such a public sphere is seen as essential for public opinion formation in a democracy (Littlejohn and Foss 2009).

Recently, new media theorists have drawn on Habermas' ideas to argue that Internet-based communication might be used to create a global public sphere. Brenne (2016) argues that Habermas' model of the public sphere is useful in understanding the structure of political discussion on the Internet. Increasing participation in debates over social and political matters in online discussion forums by all class of people is in tandem with the tenets of public sphere theory. This is because social networking sites and other online discussion forums provide a space for all calibers of people to express their views on matters of public concern, often with opposing views being expressed by other participants in the discussion.

However, the prevalence of negative comments, arguments and debates with ethnic or religious sentiments, and other serious negative practices that are common to online interactions among online readers indicate that the potentials of the new media to serve as a public sphere is not being properly utilized. Brenne (2016) in this regard, posits that the new media just "mimics the structure of a public sphere" but "fails as a formal public sphere". It is in line with this that the theory suits the discussion in this study.

## 4. Methods

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative content analysis and discourse analysis. The universe of this study is the total number of readers' comments published on political issues on Facebook pages of *Daily Trust*, *Premium Times* and the *Punch* newspapers between February 1st and March 31st 2019. Composite week was used to randomly select one story each for Monday through to Sunday within the study period, while all comments from the selected stories were studied. This gives a total of 201 comments from Daily Trust, 462 comments from Premium Times, and 296 comments from Punch making a total of 956 readers' comments sampled. Coding sheet was used to collect the data.

Comments in the content analysis section of this study were categorized according to rational argument, non-rational argument, solidarity comment, criticism, and neutral comment.

- Rational arguments: these are comments that categorically state the position of the comment writer and provide reasons and justifications for the stand taken. These comments raise issues and provide facts about the political actors/matters at stake, and also constructively oppose other commentators' view points by providing fact-based evidences to support their positions.
- Non-rational arguments: these are comments that use myths and hearsays in arguments. They argue the position of other comment writers, as well as praise or vilify the political actors/issues at stake using fallacies.
- Solidarity comments: these are comments that show the support and solidarity of the comment writer to other posts, based on certain ideological, political, ethnic, regional or religious affiliations.
- Criticism comments: these are comments that are aimed at criticizing the political actors/issues at stake. They also refer to comments that attack others position in the discussion.

- Neutral comments: these are comments that neither support nor oppose the political actors/issues at stake. They are comments that objectively state the position of the comment writer without taking side.

Patterns of commenting were categorized as:

- General reply
- Personal reply
- Name calling

Symbolic trends in commenting in the discussions were categorized as:

- Use of stickers
- Use of emojis
- Use of GIFs

## 5. Results

A total of 959 comments posted on the official Facebook pages of *Daily Trust*, *Premium Times* and the *Punch* on political related stories between February 1st and March 31st 2019 were studied.

Table 1: Types of comments

| Facebook pages | Types of comment | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rational arguments | Non-rational arguments | Solidarity comments | Criticism comments | Neutral comment | |
| Daily Trust | 11 (5%) | 50 (25%) | 48 (24%) | 58 (29%) | 34 (17%) | 201 (100%) |
| Premium Times | 47 (10%) | 74 (16%) | 157(34%) | 152(33%) | 32 (7%) | 462 (100%) |
| Punch | 24 (8%) | 47 (16%) | 92 (31%) | 112(38%) | 21 (7%) | 296 (100%) |
| Total | 82 | 171 | 297 | 322 | 87 | 959 |

**Source:** Fieldwork

The distribution of the coded comments above shows that across all the three newspapers, criticism comments have the highest frequency of appearance with one-third (322) of the total comments. Example of some of the comments under this category are:

Peter Eloka:

> *BUHARI the cow. Founder and commander of BH. Get lost.*

Another one by Felix Harrison:

> *Go and kill yourself.... In case you don't know, Igbos are all over Nigeria. Animal*

This is followed by solidarity comments with less than one in every three comments (297). Some examples of comments under this category are:

Anu Matt Aanuoluwapo:

> *They are really sweating profusely. Please INEC don't give them KKKK yet. We are going to use that as KO. I need just 50 likes if you believe that our NNPC is safe.*

One Anisal Jalis Mohd Abdullah replied:

> *You got more than a hundred sir.*

Another one Abdussalam Modu Bulama also replied:

> ***Anu Matt Aanuoluwapo*** *your generations to come will see good cos you believe in a better Nigeria.*

The comments that are non-rational constitute less than one-fifth (171) of the total comments. Examples of comments under this category are:

Emomotimi Botu:

> *The first and only Christian Governor of Kaduna state: murdered! The first and only Christian National Security Advisor: murdered! The first southern Christian Chief Justice of the Federation in 32 years: disgraced and removed! ALL former Governors jailed by Buhari are Christians*

Rational arguments constitute the least of all comments with less than one in ten (82) comments under this category. An example of comment under this category was by Stain Kenkwo who commented thus:

*Buhari is the one causing the whole fear in our election, you remember how his supporters killed so many people in 2011 election after the result was announced, then coming to 2015 election he threatened Nigerians with dogs and baboons that will be soaked in blood, this made a lot of people to run away from Nigeria before the election day, but today Nigerians have seen him and what he stands for, his four years in government has teach us how to live and dine with the devil so we are not running to anywhere again, unleash the hell we are not afraid anymore, you will be voted out tomorrow.*

Less than one-tenth (87) of the comments are found to be neutral. For example, a participant Jimoh Abdullahi Ayansina commented:

*VOTE DON'T FIGHT*

Table 2: Patterns of Comments

| Facebook pages | Patterns /styles of commenting | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Replying generally to all participants | Replying personally to a specific participant | Name calling | |
| Daily Trust | 40 (20%) | 50 (25%) | 111(55%) | 201 (100%) |
| Premium Times | 134(29%) | 185(40%) | 143(31%) | 462 (100%) |
| Punch | 71 (24%) | 133(45%) | 92 (31%) | 296 (100%) |
| Total | 245 | 368 | 346 | 959 |

**Source:** Fieldwork

The distribution of the coded comments also indicates that personal replies (368) occurred more in the discussions, followed by name calling (346), most especially on personal replies and the general reply or conversational response (245) is least common.

Table 3: Symbolic Comments

| Facebook pages | Trends in commenting | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Use of stickers | Use of emojis | Use of GIFs | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Daily trust | 11 (55%) | 8 (40%) | 1 (5%) | 20 (100%) |
| Premium times | 19 (56%) | 12 (35%) | 3 (9%) | 34 (100%) |
| Punch | 13(50%) | 9 (35%) | 4 (15%) | 26 (100%) |
| Total | 43 | 29 | 8 | 80 |

**Source:** Fieldwork

The distribution of the comments above also indicates that the use of stickers is more common followed by emojis and then GIFs in the discussions.

The findings indicate that in all the comments studied, participants comment along regional, ethnic and religious line. Rationality in argument is very low. Personal replies where participants comment on others comment to show solidarity and approve what they post by adding information or to criticize and attack the commentator, characterises the commenting pattern. The use of stickers, emojis and GIFs is also common among the discussants.

## 5.1. Beyond figures and statistical descriptions: A critical discourse analysis to uncover the ideological leanings behind the comments

This section presents the analysis, interpretation and discussion of the qualitative data collected in the study. A critical discourse analysis was conducted on the same comments to uncover the hidden ideological messages they carry. According to Van Dijk's (2001:73) socio-cognitive approach to discourse analysis, to identify social groups as well as their interests in any discourse, seven ideological discourse structures should be considered. Analysis in this study is based on three of these ideological discourse structures namely: Polarization, Pronoun and Identity.

## 5.2. Pronoun

Members of certain ideological groups often use pronouns such as 'we' (us, ours etc.) to refer to themselves and their fellow group members, and then pronouns such as 'they' (theirs, them etc.) to refer to members of other competing groups.

Participants in the discussion platforms under study are found to be seriously divided, commenting along regional, ethnic and religious line. The 'we' and 'they' syndrome is found to dominate the discussions as example in the lines below, on a report about President Buhari's national broadcast on 2019 election eve:

A participant Abdulazeez Saidu Musa commented: *We are voting u tomorrow again, in order to continue ur good work and to move Nigeria to the NEXT LEVEL insha Allah.*

Another participant Abdulraheem A. Omeiza commented: *May almighty Allah make **our** dear PMB victorious and reelect him for **us**. Ameen.*

Another participant Adam Abdul also commented: *I no get Strength to shout all I know be say Buhari/PYO all the way **We** no dey make noise. #Next-Level 4+4*

While a comment that seems to be from a member of 'opposing group' Benneth Ozor commented: ***We** look forward to his handover ceremony on May 29 this year for Nigeria to join progressive nations instead of possible "Next Level" Slavery!*

The discussion continued on this pattern throughout the voting and result collation period of the presidential election.

In a story about Senator Ali Ndume explaining why Buhari got highest number of votes in north-east, a participant Justin Zirra commented: *Because **they** rigged.*

Another participant Albert Faaziga Kuru replied: *To prove this, a population Census should be conducted. & it will be discovered that **their** adult Head counts (18 yrs & above) are not up to 800,000.*

Another participant Dickson Felix replied: ***They** prefere boko haram. thats why **they** voted buhari .*

Another participant that seems to be from the 'opposing group' Honourable Aggi Olalekan also replied: ***We'**ve told you, the real voters are not on Facebook.*

 Another one Shuaibu Aliyu also replied: ***They** promised to send Buhari back [BACK] to DAURA while online, but **they** ended up been offline and   finally nowhere to be found.*

### 5.3.  Identity

Members of ideological groups often identify with their groups and express such identification in many ways.

A participant Jamiu Yusuf commented: *In 1993, **northerners** rejected **their own,** #Bashir_Tofa, to elect a southerner, #MKO_Abiola. #Tofa even lost his home state Kano to #Abiola. In 1999, **northerners** again elected another southerner, #Olusegun_Obasanjo, when his fellow southerners rejected him. Then **we** were not illiterates, but today **we** choose a **Northerner** over another **Northerner** all of a sudden **we** are illiterates.*

Another participant Omo Holar commented: *This is How we rigged Election in the **North**:*
*1      Man      4      Wives      =10      Children      each.      Voters=      45*
*South: 1 Man 1 Wife 2 Children Voters =4*

Another one Ihe Louis Oguguo commented: *I DONT CARE WHO WINS BUT I WILL ALWAYS BE BETTER THAN U. THATS THE **IGBO** SPIRIT. IF YOU HATE **IGBO** JOIN THE FULANI HERDSMEN OR B.H AND HELP REDUCE UR BROTHERS POPULATION . Me? E no concern me.*

Another one Modupe Asake Orelope commented: *...and **Igbos** are always united in whatever they want to do and there is no state in Nigeria where we don't have **Igbos** so don't underrate them...*

Another one Felix Harrison commented: *Go and kill yourself.... In case you don't know, **Igbos** are all over Nigeria.*

## 5.4.  Polarization

This refers to the positive portrayal of in-group and negative portrayal of out-group by members of ideologies in discussions.

A participant Ogbu Ambrose commented: *If anyone lost election it's the **north east.** People who are living in the bush and IDPs but comes to vote and go back to their hell. After four years in the bush has come to renew another four years. I don't know why Igbos are crying more than the bereaved. The violence is even spreading to **north west** and **they** wants it that way and you're shouting rigging. If someone rigs or votes himself into poverty and insecurity why are you that's safe crying for him.*

Another participant Darius Fidelis Fidelis commented: *Thank God BUHARI is the president of this country since 2015 but almost all bad things happening is from the **north.** Because **northers** are just are desperate for powers not for well-being of their people but still there*

*people will vote for them just to have president from the **<u>north</u>** and **<u>Muslim</u>**. That is all they want.*

Another one Lawrence Ajugwe commented referring to the northerners: *Yesoooh highest vote, highest poverty, highest insecurity, highest bomb, highest death, highest hunger and highest sickness.*

Another one Celine James commented referring to the northerners: *The became **<u>almagirise</u>** and **<u>Boko Haram</u>** period. Polluting the whole country with there useless **<u>jahadis.</u>***

Another one Shogbesan Ifa Kayode commented referring to the Igbos: *You keep voting PDP to **<u>mess up your states</u>**; later you migrate to Lagos to claim is no man's Land. Continue* 😎😎*.*

Another one Nura I. Bala commented referring to the Igbos :*When the **<u>Northerners</u>** eager to cast their votes your people are busy playing ball and commenting **<u>rubbish</u>** on their phones at last crying election was **<u>rigged.</u>***

## 6. Discussion

Part of what the research tries to achieve is to ascertain whether perceptual differences affect online discussions on political matters. Findings from the data reveal that Nigerian online readers are divided along regional, ethnic and religious lines during political discourse. Each group considered themselves as Nigeria's better citizens while other groups are the problem of the country. These perceived differences seriously affect the quality of the discussions and gave birth to this unhealthy manner of discussion.

Contrary to the finding above, Vergeer and Hermans (2007) who studied online political discussion in Germany reveal that online political discussions lead to "more political participation and empowerment of peripheral groups." The researchers also submit that these online discussions give more opportunities and possibilities for "participation in politics, governance, and society."

Also, the study wanted to examine the way online readers manage discussions with other online participants perceived to have different political opinions. The finding shows that in these discussion platforms, participants with different political opinions are considered as out-group or minorities and therefore portrayed negatively by the in-group or the majorities.

Moreover, participants who refused to follow this tradition are seriously criticized by their fellow ideological group members. For instance, a participant Edidiong Udi commented: *For the avoidance of doubt, Atiku is not better than Buhari and he can't be a replacement to the incumbent president Buhari...hence i am going to next level with Buhari period.* One Dante Wine Williams replied: <u>*Edidiong Udi*</u> **<u>*fulani boy*</u>** *claiming SS* (meaning South-South) *name.* Another one Celestine Emenike also replied: *What do you know?* Yet another one Eke Livinus also replied: *Poverty.*

However, after the presidential election ended and the governorship election started, the tone of the discussion slightly changed. Many northern names with their south-west usual collaborators go against themselves and that which they initially support during presidential election. For instance, on a story about Kano rerun results, a participant, Abu Lawal commented *That is next level of inconclusive.* Another one Nura YaQub Sa'eed replied: *We are disappointed by government.* One Nura Mustapha Umar commented: *The next level of inconclusive. Apc sata[theft].* Yet another one Mohammad Sadis Sulaiman replied: *Buhari is a bad president.* This shows that members of ideological groups can at times go against themselves for personal interests. In the same vein, findings from Grevet, Terveen, and Gilbert (2014) who studied political disagreement among Facebook users indicate that it is difficult to maintain cordiality with someone who has different opinion during times of heated political debates.

This study was designed to identify the patterns and trends in Nigerian online political discussion platforms as well as the ideological constructs of the discussants. To achieve that, 959 comments drawn from sampled stories posted on the official Facebook pages of three selected newspapers, namely *Daily Trust, Premium Times and* the *Punch* within the period of 2019 General Elections were studied.

Findings of the study reveal a manifestation of division, irrationality, immaturity and incivility in the Nigerian online discussion platforms, especially the social media. Instead of discussing politics along certain social or political ideologies, the participants prefer to engage one another in irrational and illogical debates characterized by blame-games and baseless accusations. The study, thus, deduce that this practice is harmful to Nigerian democracy and, therefore, needs to be adjusted. On the contrary, findings from Papacharissi's (2004) study on political discussion forums in the USA show that despite the tendencies of anonymity and absence of face-to-face interaction making people less mindful of their

manners, there was less incivility and impoliteness in their online political discussions patterns, therefore the forums do not constitute any threat to their democracy.

## 7. Conclusion, Implication and Study Limitation

There is no doubt that the nature and pattern of online political discussion among Nigerian online readers resembles the voting pattern in the country. The northern-southern dichotomy and ethno-religious divisions were what shaped the way and manner in which politics was discussed on these platforms, not based on any political ideology. This is unhealthy to Nigerian democracy, and is capable of affecting national unity and cohesion. The existential challenges relating to disunity, recent extensive acts of divisiveness, widespread hatred for one another and high rate of unprintable attacks along religion and regional lines impinged on healthy, liberal and positive political discussions on the various online platforms. This study concludes that discussions on political posts among Nigerian online communities are devoid of any serious ideological leaning. Rather, commenters are guided by, and divided along ethno-religious-cum-geopolitical factors.

To put the work under the right pedestal, such relevant studies from both local and global perspectives that were considered germane to this study and reviewed guided comparatively in analysing the nature and patterns of online political discourse among Nigerians. And, consequent upon that, it can be deduced that the patterns of online discussions on politics in Nigeria is negatively different, antithetical and unhealthy for a nascent democracy like Nigeria's. Also, in an effort to uncover the hidden ideological messages, the critical discourse analysis conducted revealed the same pattern, where the participants were alarmingly divided along those lines above. The 'we' versus 'them' syndrome was found to dominate the discussions. This results in constant attacks, hatred and hate messages, including intimidations, stiff opposition and denigrating comments on each other, thereby furthering the deteriorating and fragile relationship and narrowing the much needed unity in diversity among the divides.

By implication, Nigeria, as represented by its regional, ethnic and religious defenders online, has a long way to go in its development aspirations. As it is today, online political platforms have more divisive tendencies than possibilities of uniting the populace. The ethno-religious and sociocultural bonds, and political undertones exhibited in online interactions still form, influence and distort significantly the democratisation process of the country, there by

threatening the little peace, unity, and stability the country is enjoying. And, by extension, truth, logical reasoning, civility, understanding and all the good elements of healthy discussion are relegated to the tail end, paving way for partiality, bigotry, hypocrisy and incivility. In turn, national patriotism will be kept aside for group interests.

The major limitation of this study is on the universe of the study. Wider coverage would have given the research more grounds for generalization. More so, the subjects of this study cannot accurately express the views of others outside the selected political posts and comments, who may have a completely different understanding, predisposition and opinion on political discourse. Hence, the needs to do a wider study. It is also within the scope of this study, if a comparative study will be conducted on the same subject but with a focus on comparing online and offline political discourses.

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