

# **We Are Not Parasites: Intergroup Differentiation in the User-Generated Content of Nigerian News Media**

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Studies have shown that despite the freedom of content creation and democratic participation, the digital space has also provided platforms for negative discourse with far-reaching implications for national unity and democracy. However, scant scholarly attention has been given to the prevalence and nature of online negative discourse in a pluralistic and politically complex society like Nigeria. Therefore, anchored on the Social Identity Theory (SIT), this study examined forms of intergroup discrimination as a negative discourse in the user-generated content (UGC) of online platforms of select Nigerian news media. Textual analysis of the UGC shows that as users react to news stories about national issues, they also create contents that reflect group identities and intergroup prejudices characterising Nigeria as a country with fragile unity. This phenomenon is a new socio-cultural order that poses serious threats to the peaceful co-existence and future of Nigeria—a nation grappling with sundry political, ethno-religious and security challenges.

**Keywords:** Intergroup discrimination, negative discourse, Nigerian news media, online community, user-generated content

The Internet has created a digital space that enables not only the traditional journalists but also the citizens to create contents and interact with other members of the online community (Campbell & Kwak, 2012; Ojebuyi, 2016). There is now more freedom of expression and an expanded public space for citizens' participation in the political campaigns (Anorue, Onyike, Ekwenchi, & Chiaha, 2016; Jensen, 2017), protests (Liu 2014; Oladapo & Ojebuyi, 2017) and overall democratic projects of their country (Attia, Aziz, Friedman, & Elhusseiny 2011; Chatora 2012; Van Rensburg 2012; Al-Kandari & Hasan, 2012; Bosch 2013; Hoffman, Jones & Young 2013; Price, 2013; Okon & Okogbule, 2016). Studies have, however, shown that, despite the freedom of content creation, political participation and social dynamics (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Edegoh & Anunike, 2016; Chudnovskaya & Lipatova, 2018), the digital space has provided platforms for negative discourse relating to race, civil rights, harassment and discrimination; and that "the notion prevalent in the early days of new media, either that race does not exist on the Internet or that cyberspace represents some sort of halcyon realm of 'colour blindness,' is a myth" (Daniels, 2008, p. 129).

Of course, scholars have worked on harassment, crimes, defamation, hate speeches, and ethno-cultural stereotypes in the cyberspaces in different countries (e.g., Douglas et al., 2005; Daniels 2008; Banks 2011; Bernik et al., 2013; Marwick and Miller 2014; Carney,

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2016; Gagliardone et al., 2016; Brown, 2017; Chudnovskaya & Lipatova, 2018; Ruzaitė, 2018). Also, there have been a number of studies from Nigeria focusing on influence of social media on how Nigerian youth use traditional mass media (Edogor, Jonah, & Ojo, 2014); online stance, civic engagements, and response to terrorist attacks (Chiluwa & Odeunmi, 2016), citizenship, participation and computed-mediated discourse (Chiluwa, 2012); new media and negative rhetoric (Ojebuyi, 2016); uprising of Boko Haram (a Nigerian terrorist group with its base in the north-eastern part of the country [Institute for Economics & Peace, 2015] and online pragmatic acts among Nigerians (Chiluwa & Adegoke, 2013); ideology in the tweets of Boko Haram (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014); and social media and political campaigns in Nigeria (Ndinojuo, Ihejirika, Nikade, Godam, & Eludu, 2016). However, despite the fact that Nigeria is a country that is prone to crises as a result of diverse cultural, ethnic, social, religious and political values (Isika, 2016), negative comments that reflect intergroup discrimination among Nigerian online community members especially when they converge to react to political news stories at critical periods such as the time of general elections, have not received adequate scholarly attention. This is the gap this study aimed to fill. The core question that we answered is: *What forms of intergroup differentiation are expressed by Nigerians in their online reactions to political stories reported by Nigerian news media?* Therefore, this study presents analysis of hateful comments posted by online audience of Nigerian news media, and proposes a theoretical interpretation in relation to the idea of intergroup differentiation. Specific focus is on readers' comments on news stories about political issues.

In Africa, Nigeria has the highest Internet use profile, and it is ranked eighth (8th) among the top 20 global Internet users (Internet Live Stats, 2014; technext.ng, 2018). Almost every single year since 2001, Nigeria has continued to be one of the fastest growing markets in Africa with triple-digit growth rates. One of the biggest and fastest growing telecom markets in Africa, attracting huge amounts of foreign investments, Nigeria overtook Egypt and Morocco in 2004 to become the continent's second largest mobile market after South Africa (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2018). And, according to the Internet World Stats, as of 31 December, 2017, Nigeria recorded the highest number of Facebook users (17 million) in Africa and her total Internet users stood at 98,391,456, accounting for 50% of her 2018 population estimate (195,875,237) followed by Egypt with 49.2 million users, Kenya 43.3 million users and South Africa with 30.8 million users (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2018). Given this impressive Internet use profile, the nature of discourse expressed by Nigerians when they interact in online community has implications for the social networking and co-existence among the citizens.

## Literature Review

### Nigerian Political History and Group Identity

Like many other West African countries, Nigeria is a creation of the European colonial masters. Over 400 ethnic groups including the three dominant ethnic nationalities—Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo—were forced to co-exist as a nation (Blench, 2000; Ojie & Ewhrudjakpor, 2009). The amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern protectorates in 1914 through the Native Authority System (Ojie & Ewhrudjakpor, 2009) brought different nationalities and ethnic groups together in a marriage of strange bed fellows. This is in line with Hodgkin's (1960) position that Nigeria is a product of complex histories of various people and civilizations.

Cited by Rafiu, Owolabi and Folasayo (2009), Ajetumobi, also posits that “the emergence of the Nigerian Colonial State is a by-product of a ‘fraudulent social contract’ and not of a ‘negotiated will’ of the wielded parts” (156). The import of the foregoing descriptions is that Nigeria is a heterogeneous entity comprising many ethnic groups and nationalities, who were yoked together to form one artificial nation. This complex historical trajectory created a complex web of people, who are religiously, culturally and politically diverse. Consequently, Nigeria, since her independence in 1960, has been on a turbulent journey chequered with rounds of serious crises caused by divergent interests among different nationalities, religious groups, and political alliances. Examples of such crises are the coup d’état of 1960, the counter coup of 1966, the civil war of 1967-1970 between the Igbo’s and the rest of the country, the 1993 June 12 political impasse that set the Yorubas of the South-west against other ethnic groups, especially the predominant Hausa/Fulani of the north, the Kaduna religious crises in the early 2000s where Christians mostly from the Southern Nigeria were the targets; the Nupe-Yoruba conflict in Kwara State in 2000, the agitation for resource control in the Niger-Delta region, the emergence of Boko Haram Islamists in the North, and recurrent cases of electoral violence (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Ojie & Ewhrudjakpor, 2009; Ahmadu & Yusuf, 2010; Odaeyemi, 2014). It could be inferred, therefore, that Nigeria is not a nation, but a geographical entity comprising different groups with peculiar identities that find their roots in religious and ethnic differentiations among other dividing factors such as political and social alignments. In the following words, the late literary giant from Nigeria, Chinua Achebe, reflecting his sentiments as an Igbo man, captures how he believes his ethnic group has struggled to survive in spite of being on the receiving end of the ethnic discriminations among the various nationalities in Nigeria:

The origin of national resentment of the Igbo is as old as Nigeria and quite as complicated....The Igbo culture being receptive to change, individualistic and highly competitive, gave the Igbo man an unquestioned advantage over his compatriots in securing credentials for advancement in Nigerian colonial society. Unlike the Hausa/Fulani he was unhindered by a wary religion and unlike the Yoruba unhampered by traditional hierarchies....Although the Yoruba had a huge historical and geographical head-start the Igbo wiped out their handicap in one fantastic burst of energy in the twenty years between 1930 and 1950....Had the Igbo been a minor ethnic group of a few hundred thousand, their menace might have been easily and quietly contained. But they ran in their millions! (Achebe, 1983, p. 66).

The picture of ethnic resentment and discrimination painted by Achebe several years ago still persists, and is gathering intensity in the contemporary Nigerian society, however, not just against the Igbo as an ethnic group, but also across all other nationalities. Members of each ethnic group, religious sect, social class or political affiliation see themselves as unique beings different from those of other groups; or a group of disadvantaged minority who have been marginalised, despised or dominated by other larger and stronger groups. Right from her independence, the Nigerian project has reflected a social structure that promotes conflicts, intergroup discrimination among different ethnic groups, political parties, religious affiliations and social classes. This phenomenon is captured in the view expressed by Chiluba (2011: 90) that “in Nigeria, social crises have been as a result of religious intolerance, boundary disputes, resistance to a perceived injustice/exploitation and other political reasons.” Formation of political parties in Nigeria has not been driven by real ideology, but by patronage (Omotola, 2009) and ethnic

sentiments, while articulation of public issues, and voting patterns at most elections often reflect religious and ethnic biases.

## Defining “the Other”

The origin of the concept of “the other” may be traced to Frantz Fanon’s works on postcolonial studies (Al-Saidi, 2014) especially his Theory of Racialization, which “provides a starting point for bringing conversations of race and racism into globalization theories” (Kane, 2007: 353). Quoting Frantz Fanon, Al-Saidi (2014, p. 95) says that “the *Other* is the “not me” he is the *Other*”. Al-Saidi further defines the *Other* as the one:

who lacks identity, propriety, purity, literality. In this sense he can be described as the *foreign*: the one who does not belong to a group, does not speak a given language, does not have the same customs; he is the unfamiliar, uncanny, unauthorized, inappropriate, and the improper (p. 95).

Further explaining the concept of *Otherness*, Al-Saidi, citing different authors, submitted that “the concept of *Otherness* sees the world ‘as divided into mutually excluding opposites: if the *Self* is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the *Other* is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil.” From the foregoing explanation, we can, therefore, describe the *Other* as the part outside the group that sees itself as the standard, ordered, ideal and good. Therefore, those who do not meet these identities and the norm of the group (i.e. the *Self*) are considered as the *Other*, the outsider, who is always seen, and treated, as a lesser, a substandard, an unfortunate, or a disadvantaged entity. In most cases, the *Other* may be an individual or a group, who is considered different in terms of religion, culture, nationality, race, social class, gender, or political orientation (Meddaugh & Kay, 2009; Al-Saidi, 2014; Ibelema, 2014; Kopytowska & Baidier, 2017). Beyond the group or individual level, the concept of *Otherness* also extends to the international level in terms of how one nation perceives the other or how one continent is portrayed by another.

As Ibelema (2014) explains, *Otherness* is “evident in the portrayal of Africa (by most western press) as a place that is removed from modernity” (200). In the same way, other nations may perceive Nigeria as a nation of *Boko Haram*, militancy and corruption, and South Africa as a nation of xenophobia, until such vices are eliminated from the respective countries. In Nigeria, the concept of otherness manifests in the way members of different ethnic groups, political parties, social class or religious sects treat and relate with others who are not from their ethnic, religious, social or political groups. As already explained above, Nigeria is a pluralistic, politically and culturally complex country. The different ethnic groups (e.g., Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba among other ethnic groups); members of different religious sects (e.g., Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religions); different social and political groups express otherness and discrimination along these constructs (Blench 2000; Ojie & Ewhrudjakpor, 2009; Chiluwa, 2011). Linguistic and semiotic resources play significant roles in discursive construction of the concept of otherness (Kopytowska & Baidier, 2017). Consequently in this study, we focused on how online audience of Nigerian news media employed language to discriminate against those they considered as the “others” on the bases of religion, ethnicity, social class and political affiliation”.

## Theoretical Framework

This study employed the Social Identity Theory (SIT) as its theoretical framework. The theory, first developed in the early 1970s in Britain by Henri Tajfel (Tajfel & Turner, 1979;

Tajfel, 2010), is a psychological analysis of how self-conception shapes group membership, group process, and intergroup relations. The theory describes self-conception as the core cognitive factor to be considered in defining a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Terry, 2003; Douglas et al., 2005; Hogg, 2006; Trepte, 2013). That is “a group exists psychologically if three or more people constitute and evaluate themselves in terms of shared attributes that distinguish them collectively from other people” (Hogg 2006, p. 111). The import of this is that the basis of social identity is group membership. Being a member of a group that has a comparative positive identity in relation to other groups (out groups) improves the self-esteem of an individual; and a person may decide to quit a group that seems less favourable to join or identify with a more favourable group (Brown 2000). Concepts such as prejudice, discrimination, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, intergroup conflict, conformity, group polarization, group cohesiveness, and deviance are the primary concerns of SIT (Hogg, 2006; Tajfel, 2010).

Applying the SIT to the evaluation of *Others* as relating to *us* or *them* (i.e. “in-group” and “out-group”), Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed three mental processes that must take place in the order of (i) Social Categorisation, (ii) Social Identification, and (iii) Social Comparison. Social categorisation has to do with using some social categories such as black, white, Christian, Muslim, student, bus driver, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, *okada* (motorcycle) rider, academic staff, and non-academic to categorise people into different groups. It is, however, possible for an individual to belong to more than one group. Next, the characteristics of the group(s) to which individuals have been assigned are used to identify or label them. Emotion and self-esteem of an individual are affected by their group identity (Brown, 2000). Finally, the identity (characteristics) of one group is used to compare the group with another group in terms of being favourable or not. These competing identities usually breed inter-group hostility, conflict, antagonism, and prejudice (Douglas et al., 2005). As summarised by Brown (2000), some of the SIT’s claims are that group members are likely to show intergroup differentiation by believing that their own group is superior to or better than other groups and, therefore, be ready behaviourally to express prejudice towards other groups, and feel good about their own group and themselves. These claims make the SIT relevant to this current study as the objective is to investigate the forms of intergroup prejudice in the comments made by online audience of Nigerian news media.

## Methodology

### Methods and Materials

Qualitative design through textual analysis was adopted for this study. Data for the study were taken from the user-generated content (UGC) on the online platforms of select Nigerian news media: *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *Channels Television*. The news media were selected through purposive sampling technique guided by the criteria of online presence, active readers’ comment section, and wide readership base. In this study, we specifically considered only the UGCs that used words or iconography (image) by online users of the select news media. Based on assertions that Nigerian politics is always driven by ethnic, religious and social sentiments rather than by clear ideologies (Omotola, 2009), we focused on only significant political news stories about Nigeria’s 2015 presidential elections of March 28. We assumed that stories relating to politics, and readers’ comments about these stories around these periods (March to April 2015) would reflect these sentiments. By UGC, also known as Consumer-Generated Media (CGM) or Conversational

Media, we mean online content created by users of online media through the digital platforms of the media (Techopedia, 2015). Examples of UGC are chats, posts, tweets, comments, digital images, videos, audio files, and blogs.

We considered UGC from stories about prominent political issues such as postponement of the elections, alleged plot to scuttle the election by sponsoring a new political party, General Muhammadu Buhari's certificate controversies, alleged distribution of foreign currencies to groups and Yoruba traditional rulers by former President Goodluck Jonathan, alleged plot to assassinate Rev. Fr Mbaka (a prominent Nigerian Pastor and social critic), and reactions to the election results. We focused on only the feedback comments on online platforms of Nigerian news media because focusing on all social media platforms would be too wide. Our assumption was that media representation of issues of public interest would attract high intensity of interaction and discussions among Nigerians. All users' comments (UGC) available on stories about the selected issues as at the time we visited the sites were retrieved for sorting and textual analysis.

## Data Analysis

We adopted qualitative content analysis to explore the corpus of user-generated content of the selected online news media. As explained by Catanzaro (1981) and Marshall and Rossman (1995) cited by Elo and Kyngas (2007), qualitative content analysis is an appropriate approach when the primary aim of the study is to retest existing data in a new context, or when the researcher aims at testing concepts, constructs, categories, themes, models, or hypotheses. Therefore, adoption of qualitative content analysis is relevant in this study because we used the constructs of SIT's intergroup prejudice as the guiding themes for the textual analysis. After rounds of reading the corpus of the UGC retrieved from the online platforms of the select Nigerian news media, we removed those comments that were considered irrelevant to the focus of this study to reduce the corpus to 583 comments. We, therefore, randomly selected 52 samples accounting for about 10% of the total corpus. The 52 comments were subsequently textually analysed based on the sub-constructs of *ethnicity*, *political orientation*, *religion*, and *social class* as the core concepts to establish the discourse of intergroup differentiation in the audience comments. 'COMT' in the samples represents 'comments'. In order to satisfy the principles of credulity and transferability (Bryman and Teevan cited by Clarke, 2010), we used extracts from the corpus of UGC to illustrate and discuss the manifest categories of intergroup discrimination in the UGC of the selected Nigerian news media.

## Findings and Discussion

Findings from the study show that UGC sections of the select Nigerian news media contain intergroup differentiations (ethnicity, political affiliation, religion, and social class) as identified in the Social Identity Theory [SIT] (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Terry, 2003; Douglas et al., 2005; Hogg, 2006; Tajfel, 2010; Trepte, 2013). Online users of the select news media displayed group identities along the taxonomies of ethnicity, politics, social abuse, and religion as they reacted to the political news stories about Nigeria's general elections. In most cases, instead of discussing the issues raised in the stories they are reacting to, the users, in the content they created, made inference about, or directly expressed sentiments that reflect discrimination along ethnic, political, religious or social divides. From the structures of the UGC, we identified the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Hausa and

the South-South minorities as the construct of ethnicity (COMTs 1-17); the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC), the two prominent and rival political parties, as the construct of politics (COMTs 18-32); Islam, Christianity, and atheists (though not obviously expressed) as the construct of religion (COMTs 33-45); and level of civilisation, education or literacy as the construct of social differentiation (COMTs 46-52).

While aligning with their different groups, the users, as contained in their comments, showed intra-group bias (Brown, 2000) by extolling the favourable characteristics of their groups and seeing their groups as the best or as being better than another group. Also, they expressed prejudices, discrimination, ethnocentrism, and stereotyping (Douglas et al., 2005; Brown, 2000) towards the out-groups. The UGC analysed in this study reflected that each user had self-conception (Hogg, 2006; Trepte, 2013) of belonging to a group that is *ordered, superior, standard, good and ideal* while seeing others who belong to the out-groups as *inferior, uncivilised, backward, disadvantaged, substandard, and unfortunate*. These intergroup discriminations expressed in the comment sections of Nigerian online news media are further explicated with textual evidences from the following corpus of the analysed UGC in COMTs 1-52:

### **Ethnic Differentiation**

One of the most prevalent intergroup prejudices used by online users to express discrimination is ethnic differentiation, a phenomenon where some users exhibited visible bias for their ethnic group or tribe and described other tribes with negative labels. The findings suggest that Nigeria is divided along diverse ethnic groups with the Yoruba, the Hausa, the Igbo, and the South-South minorities featuring most prominently in the corpus of the UGC analysed in this study. The extracts in COMTs 1 to 17 from UGC of the website of *The Punch*, *Channels Television* and *Sahara Reporters* contain obvious discrimination by different ethnic groups directed at one another. The comments were retrieved from UGC on stories about alleged inducement of Yoruba traditional rulers with foreign currencies by President Goodluck Jonathan, alleged plot to scuttle or postpone the elections, and results of the presidential election.

*COMT 1:* The Igbos again! What is wrong with these hyenas? Must they scrape and suck Nigeria to the bone? Four out of 6 zones are implacably opposed to their candidate, Jona (President Goodluck Jonathan), whose mother is Igbo.

*COMT 2:* Why does the Igbos' congenital greed blind him so? 419, cocaine, human parts, fake drugs, career armed robbery, murder-for-hire, *Okija* necrophilia, human baby farms supplying ritualists and cannibals regular fresh meat etc.

*COMT 3:* Why do the Igbos refuse to see that anything else will lack legitimacy and lead inexorably to war? Have the newly arrogant Igbos forgotten the lesson of 1966-1970? Why must Igbo candidates, Jonathan or Minimah rule us by force? Do the Igbos want a more brutal, blood-soaked civil war? The Igbo have started again.

Users employed different labels to express ethnic discrimination. In most of the comments, users, while reacting to stories about alleged plans to scuttle the elections and perpetuate President Goodluck Jonathan in office, insinuated that the Igbos are a 'violent' 'fetish' 'money-loving' and an 'aggressive' tribe by labelling them as 'hyenas' (COMT 1); 419, cocaine, human parts, fake drugs, career armed robbery, murder-for-hire, *Okija* necrophilia (COMT 2). They also accused the Igbos of being forgetful, a clear reference to the bloody

Civil war of 1966-1970, where Igbos were pitched against the rest of the country, and were perceived to be the target of ethnic cleansing (Achebe, 1983; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Insinuating that the Igbos are 'unrepentant', the user in *COMT 3* used the phrase, 'The Igbo have started again'. The user, labelling President Goodluck Jonathan as an Igbo man because he was overwhelmingly supported by the Igbos during the elections, derided the Igbos as being politically 'insignificant' and 'victims of the Nigerian civil war.

*COMT 4*: You must be a bastard.... If anything, Ndigbo have been more responsible for the existence and success of yeye Nigeria thus far. It took Prof. Humphrey Nwosu to get rid of IBB, Sen. Ken Nnamani to get rid of Baba Iyabo; it took late Prof. Dora Akunyili to rid you of Turai.

*COMT 5*: Cabal...and all the while, the likes of Dr. Ngz. Iweala, Oby Ezekwesili, Ndy Onyiuke-Okerek, Prof. Onyekachi Chukwu, Prof. Bert Nnaji, Dr. Oti et al, to sustain your flustering Nigeria... while you lazy ewedu-lovers (the Yorubas) and Aboki (the Hausas) cohorts stole the country dry in fuel-subsidy scams, Pension funds scams, and so on.

*COMT 6*: Stupid punk, how many Igbo Ministers have been charged for embezzlement in that useless country called Nigeria... compared to other ethnicities? Let's split it and see who runs a better ship.

Obviously reacting to users that attacked the Igbos, as shown in *COMTs 1, 2 and 3* above, users in *COMTs 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 16* expressed lack of confidence in the Nigerian project describing it as a yeye (worthless) entity (*COMT 4*), but attributed the existence of the country to some notable Igbo individuals, who had helped to stabilise the 'flustering Nigeria' (*COMT 5*) and contributed to dislodgement of some 'sit-tight politicians' from the Northern and South-western parts of Nigeria (*COMT 4*). In the comments, IBB refers to Gen. Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, the former Military Head of State (1985-1993), Baba Iyabo refers to former President Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979 and 1999-2007), while Turai is the wife of the late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua (2007-2010).

*COMT 7*: One Igbo is worth a million near-naked Aborigines like you stinking drunkards. Besides, we power One Nigeria economically, politically and socially... while you lazy Ijaw drunks X thousands of bottles of Sapele Water. Homeless drifters stealing from every town they visit. Amnesty Days are numbered, better gather your fishing nets and get ready to return to your swampy and polluted reptile-infested enclaves.

*COMT 8*: We the hardworking Igbos deserve to have money more than the lazy tribes but the lazy ones love pleasure and comfort more than any other working tribe. Why won't they sell themselves for anything?

*COMT 9*: By This sagacious postulation, this brilliant egghead of Igbo extraction has proven that perhaps the Igbo man represents the true fabric of "One Nigeria".

Other users presumed to be of Igbo origin, as exemplified in *COMTs 5, 7, 8 and 9*, further extolled the virtues of the Igbos as 'hardworking' (*COMT 8*) and labelled the Yorubas, as 'racial', 'lazy', 'arrogant', 'fetish', 'coward', 'greedy' and 'untrustworthy' (*COMTs 5 and 10*). In *COMT 10*, user described the Yoruba Obas (Monarchs) as 'materialistic' and 'selfish' accusing them of collecting dollars from President Goodluck Jonathan as inducements for political support. The users further insinuated that the Hausas, in particular, are 'illiterates', 'savage race', 'parasites', 'beggars', and a tribe where men marry many wives, have many children and abandon them on the street (*CMTs 5, 14 and 15*) while the Niger Delta people, especially the Ijaws, are described as 'alcoholic' with natural appetite for *sapele water* (a popular name for a brand of locally brewed alcohol in the Niger Delta parts of Nigeria)



'parasitic' 'predatory', 'homeless', 'half-naked', and 'dirty' (COMT 7). 'Parasites' as a label used to describe the Hausas (COMT 15) is an inference to the belief among the Southerners, especially those from the oil-producing states, that the North (dominated by the Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups) does not contribute significantly to the national treasury as Nigeria survives largely on revenue from the crude oil from the South. For instance, according to the Central Bank of Nigeria Economic Report, in the fourth quarter of 2017, Nigeria recorded gross oil receipt at ₦1.2 trillion (\$3.3 billion) or 60.1 per cent of the total revenue, compared to ₦814.55 billion (\$2.2 billion) or 39.9 per cent of the total non-oil revenue for the same period (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2017; *Blueprint* Newspaper [Nigeria], 2018). This trend persists till today, although the present government of Gen Muhammadu Buhari has claimed to focus on non-oil sectors as a way of diversifying the nation's economy.

COMT 10: The Yoruba obas love money too much, they openly collected money from Jonathan without the feeling of their people.

COMT 11: How many Yorubas can you be trusted? None, because they will be busy stabbing you for back.

COMT 12: Igbos are just too cynical; they only care about today and don't give a damn about tomorrow.

COMT 13: Mention your ethnicity if you're real human and not some cross-bred chimp from the creeks... like I suspect. At least, I've told you I'm core Igbo and proud of every drop of Igbo blood in me.

COMT 14: We Igbos cannot start having hundreds of wives and bringing bastards to the world... Many of my Yoruba friends keep telling me how they envy Igbos and wish they were Igbos. I will never wish to be Yoruba or Hausa. That's the difference.

COMT 15: These Hausa and Fulanis are animals of the highest order; they are cows.... What are these parasitic tribe talking about? All you (Hausa-Fulanis) do is to create violence everywhere you found yourself without adding any value to the community.

COMT 16: Why are the Igbos too mischievous? Another Nzeribe's ABN, Kanu's YEAA or what?

COMT 17: Jega and INEC do not need to re-print any ballot papers, they can hand-write the YDP on existing ones and say, 'shikena'. In the end, let it be known to you that Ndigbo couldn't care less either way dysfunctional One Nigeria goes... kapisch? Stupid baastard!

As presented in COMTs 1 to 17 above, Nigerians reflect the stances of ethnic hatred as they engage in the virtual space provided by the news media. The findings are examples of intra-group bias and out-group prejudice as contained in the tenets of Social Identity Theory (Brown, 2000). The picture of ethnic distrust, rivalry and intolerance that characterise Nigeria is manifesting in the online community. As Blench (2000), and Ojie and Ewhrudjakpor (2009), among other scholars, have argued, Nigeria is a western creation where naturally unique ethnic nationalities were forced to live together in a fake marriage. Apart from expressing discrimination against other ethnic groups, some tribes, especially users who are presumed to be Igbos (as shown in COMTs 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 17), inferred political marginalisation, and insinuated scepticism in a united Nigeria. One could argue that the assertion made several years ago by Achebe (1983, p. 66), that the Igbos were the 'victims' of political discrimination and marginalisation in Nigeria is being reinforced in the users' comments. On the other hand, other ethnic groups (e.g., the Yorubas and the Igbos) also suggested in their comments that the Igbos are 'mischievous' (COMT 16), 'cynical', 'profligate' (COMT 12), 'greedy' (COMT 2) and 'arrogant' (COMT 3).

## Political Differentiation

We conceptualise political differentiation as a phenomenon where members of one political group believe that their political party or group has better ideological values while they see other political groups as being politically inferior or ideologically inept. Subsequently, members of one political group discriminate against the other political groups, and their ideologies. In this study, two major political parties (the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC) being the two leading political parties that during the elections) featured prominently in the analysed UGC as shown in *COMTs* 18 to 32 below.

*COMT 18*: Kerosene is to be N50 not N180 but the PDP led administration are stealing from the masses to overflow their pocket, their time is over.

*COMT 19*: PDP can remain in South East (**SE**) and compete with the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), Both are now tribal parties... PDP criminals—they are busy doing their thuggery in Rivers and Akwa Ibom.

*COMT 20*: Can any PDP in the house tell me who are the goats and what is the yam in naija.

*COMT 21*: PDP - People Deceiving People. Their entire plan is to discredit the Man (Buhari). Buhari has the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) certificate for sure and the military was used by PDP to discredit the Man. Doyin Okupe and co - God see you ohhhhhhh.

*COMT 22*: PDPIG! Are full of heartless people who doesn't have mercy on the masses. Gej it's surrounded by rouge people. Even women in his cabinet are stealing at will.

On the one hand, as contained in *COMTs* 18 to 25, users who demonstrated allegiance to the APC labelled the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) as a party that oppresses the masses and 'steals' public funds (*COMTs* 18 and 20), a sectional and tribal party (*COMT* 19), and a corrupt party of the 'thieving elite'. This is inferred in the coinage 'PDPIG' to refer to the PDP (*COMT* 22). This adulterated coinage of PDP is an apparent allusion to the Pigs in George Orwell's allegory—*Animal Farm*—who represent the far more intelligent, but mischievous ruling class in the Animal Kingdom, is a satiric metaphor for totalitarianism in a democratic system of government. The Pigs ended up deceiving and oppressing other animals (The News [Nigeria], 2016). Users presumed to be APC loyalists also described the PDP as the 'monster' of Nigeria's politics (*COMT* 23), a corrupt and failed party (*COMTs* 24 and 25). The phrase, 'chop and chop' in *COMT* 23 is an inference to the public perception that the PDP is a corrupt party that should be displaced by the opposition party—the APC, whose presidential flagbearer was Gen Muhammadu Buhari, a man who was popular among the electorate because of his track records of anti-corruption, discipline and integrity as a former Military dictator (Alemoh & Gambo, 2016; Isika, 2016). Also in *COMT* 24, 'Breadth (breath) of Fresh Air in federal governance is needed' is an inference to the popular 'Change Mantra' as the central campaign slogan of the opposition APC, who capitalised on the ineptitude, recklessness and sheer corruption of the then ruling PDP (Isika, 2016).

*COMT 23*: 'Chop and quench' that is very rich coming from the PDP, the very ugly monster of Nigeria present day politics.

*COMT 24*: PDP is a failure. Breadth of Fresh Air in federal governance is needed.

*COMT 25*: Even if the Obas are billionaire; that does not stop them from collecting more. It's over for PDP

*COMT 26*: A vote for APC is a vote for Tinubu and One Man's rulership.

*COMT 27*: APC is bunch of sycophants, they see logs in other peoples' eyes but do not see it in their own eyes, only fools believe lies, rumors. APC cannot go far in this kind of politics. They rigged elections, used thugs bribed people.

On the other hand, the PDP online supporters labelled the APC as one-man party (*COMT 27*) insinuating that the APC was in full control of Bola Hammed Tinubu, formal Governor of Lagos State, and a strong financier of the party. Users, as shown in *COMT 31*, also used a coinage (*Thiefnubu*) from Tinubu's name to infer that he is a 'thief', who enslaved his ethnic group (the Yourbas) by conspiring with the North to form the APC. In reaction to the victory of the APC during the presidential election, most users described the party as a group of sycophants, who deceived and intimidate people, bribed the electorate and rigged the elections (*COMTs 27 and 28*).

*COMT 28*: Liars will never bring Change. APC have nothing and have nothing to offer Nigerians than deceit.

*COMT 29*: The south west Obas should just rain causes on Tinubu, Fashola and the APC.

*COMT 30*: The Devil and the APC are one...until recently, the Devil has lost the title of King of Lies to APC and has taken APC case to God for Judgement.

*COMT 31*: Let Failed Emperor Jagaban Thiefnubu continue to align to the Fulas for continued Slavery...

*COMT 32*: APC's hypocrisy is transparent. It is an evil assemblage of the most hardened criminals and regions in Nigeria. That's why it is comfortable for the political wing of Boko Haram to field senile, illiterate certificate forger, perjurer and coup plotter, Buhari, as its presidential flag bearer.

Users also labelled the APC as 'a devilish party' (*COMT 30*); 'a political wing of Boko Haram' (a terrorist group with its base in the north-eastern Nigeria [Institute for Economics & Peace, 2015]) [*COMT 32*]; and a party dominated by 'criminals' and 'hypocrites'. They accused the APC of fielding an incompetent presidential candidate (General Muhammadu Buhari, now President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria), who they described as a dictator, and an illiterate, old man without the required educational qualifications (*COMT 32*). Interestingly, the negative labels employed by users were the core issues that dominated the pejorative campaign messages targeted at both the APC presidential flagbearers, General Muhammadu Buhari, and the PDP presidential candidate, Goodluck Jonathan, during the 2015 electioneering (see Alemoh & Gambo, 2016; Isika, 2016).

## **Religious Differentiation**

We define religious differentiation as inter-group discrimination from the religious perspective. It happens when members of one religious sect see their religion as having the standard, ordered and acceptable values whereas they see other religions as unacceptable. Findings in this study show that religious differentiation, as exhibited by Nigerians in their comments, straddle political and ethnic contexts (see *COMTs 33-45*): while the APC is labelled as a Muslim and northern party, the PDP is tagged as a Christian and south-south, south-east political party. The insinuation could be explained in the contexts of religions and ethnic groups of the presidential candidates of the two political parties. The flag bearer for the PDP was Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the predominantly Christian south-east Nigeria, whereas Gen. Mohammadu Buhari, the presidential candidate of the APC, is a Muslim from the predominantly Islamic Northern Nigeria.

*COMT 33:* Are you corroborating the fact there is no forgiveness in Islam? If any Southern Nigerian did all Buhari did, he would not have been forgiven.

*COMT 34:* Buhari is a radical Islamic zealot. All radical Islamic zealots are clerics.

*COMT 35:* Useless people with their useless religion; these animals are the problem of this country. Mother fuckers, go and educate your brainwashed maggots in the north. Useless nomads.

*COMT 36:* All Xtians are believed to be mentally unstable...how can the president drop money and you return it to him? The money should have been paid back to the treasury. I am quite convinced that you're a Devil worshipper.

*COMT 37:* You are a very sick man to call all Christians mentally unstable. May God visit you with mental instability for calling His people mentally unstable. This goes to show that whoever you are, you are a fundamentalist in whatever you believe in.

As shown in *COMTs* 33 to 35, users, who are presumed to be Christians from the Southern Nigeria, attributed Islam to Buhari and the North describing Buhari as an 'unforgiving, radical Islamic zealot', and Northerners as 'nomads', and 'brainwashed flowers of a useless religion' (obviously referring to Islam). Tagging Buhari as an 'unforgiving Muslim' is a reference to his stance by doing what is similar to his approach during his first term as a Military dictator, when he arrested and persecuted politicians suspected of stealing public funds. He had been accused of vendetta for this act (Isika, 2016). Reacting to users with anti-Islam comments, other users presumed to be Muslims also labelled the Christians as 'mischievous', 'mentally unstable' and 'devil worshiper' (*COMT 36*).

*COMT 38:* I dare you to openly profess your religion, I am a Christian and a true believer in Christ Jesus, the saviour of the humanity.

*COMT 39:* I was born into a Catholic home. In fact, my late dad was a knight of the Catholic Church but I chose to worship like my ancestors did when I became a man. I do not believe in the white man's God.

*COMT 40:* Jesus wept! God and religion my foot! Christians and Muslims my foot! My respect to Nigerians who are not Christians and not Muslims, for theirs is the kingdom of Nigeria.

*COMT 41:* You Christians and Muslim will inherit Israel and Saudi Arabia while those of us who are no Christians and Muslims will inherit Nigeria and everything therein.

*COMT 42:* You Christians and Muslims are strangers in Nigeria. A time comes when your time is up in Nigeria, so you could pack to Israel and Arabia leaving non-Christians and no Muslims to enjoy our forefathers' Nigeria.

*COMT 43:* For a devout Muslim to collect dollar from GEJ, vote or no vote is haram, so who is fooling who here. *COMT 44:* For a devoted Christian, running from one church to another, kneeling before every pastor for deliverance, to loot the public treasury and share it with impunity; who is fooling who here?

*COMT 45:* Religion should not be a determining factor in Nigeria democracy.

However, some users, who appeared to be neither Christians nor Muslims, were critical of both Islam and Christianity describing the two religions as "foreign faiths" (*COMTs* 39 to 45), whose adherents are equally 'money worshippers' and 'looters of public treasury' (*COMTs* 43 and 44). The users were making reference to media reports that some traditional rulers and some Christian and Muslim leaders allegedly collected US Dollars from President Goodluck in exchange for political endorsement by their followers. The pattern of religious discriminations that feature Islam, Christianity and the African Traditional Religions (ATR) is a reflection of the Nigerian Society with heterogeneous

religious structure. While the Northerners are predominantly Muslims with majority of them from the Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups, the South is predominantly Christians, with some ATR adherents except in the Southwest with a mix of Christians and Muslims in almost equal proportions and a handful of traditionalists (Ojie & Ewhrudjakpor, 2009; Chiluwu, 2011; Ahmadu & Yusuf, 2010; Odaeyemi, 2014).

## Social Abuse

Examples of social abuse are evident in *COMTs* 46 to 52 where users employed some derogatory terms and name-calling to describe some political figures that belong to the outer-groups. They also used iconography (image/symbol) as components of discrimination (Marwick & Miller, 2014) to express message of social abuse.

*COMT 46*: Rev. Fr. Mbaka, with fear of God and with respect for truth, please summon courage to ask the following question too.

*COMT 47*: Bokohari can bribe Igbo man no whahala. But for the Niger Delta guy? Oil must be discovered in Sambisa forest. Bokohari get money?

*COMT 48*: The Statement of Result bears Mohammed Buhari while the APC Presidential candidate is Muhammadu Buhari GMB and APC are Serial Liars like Liaing Mohammed... Mindless Apostles of Change.

*COMTs 47* and *48* contain some elements of coinage and name calling to express social abuse. In *COMT 47*, for instance, the name *Bokohari* (a blending derived from *Boko Haram* and Buhari) is coined to suggest that General Muhammadu Buhari had sympathy for the terrorist group *Boko Haram*. Also in *COMT 48*, APC supporters are described as 'serial liars' while Lai Mohammed the Publicity Secretary of the APC, is described as 'Liaing Mohammed' insinuating that Mr Lai Muhammed is a 'liar' and suggesting lack of confidence in the 'Change Mantra' of the opposition party—the APC.

*COMT 49*: Mama Peace has School Certificate, NCE and B.Sc., yet speaks the worst of English language and behaves worse than an illiterate.

*COMT 50*: The quality of education matters and military training both home and abroad provides great knowledge and leadership skills. Meanwhile, u need to proof that Buhari has no School Certificate.

User in *COMT 46* also added an iconography (a satiric image) to ridicule General Muhammadu Buhari regarding the allegation that he did not possess the minimum educational qualification of School Certificate to become the Nigeria President (Isika, 2016). The image (which we removed from the comment because of its potential defamatory property) shows a cartoon of Buhari that looks guilty, confused and depressed. It also contains an indicting message: "#Buhari Show Your Certificate". *COMT 50* is on the same issue, but the user here is a supporter of Buhari who argued that the General possessed enough military training and exposure that even put him in a better social and educational position than Mrs. Patience Jonathan (former First Lady of Nigeria) that 'speaks the worst of the English language and behaves worse than an illiterate' despite that she 'has School Certificate, NCE (National Certificate in Education), and B.Sc. (*COMT 49*). Users' reference to Mrs. Patience Jonathan was not accidental. Her husband was the main political opponent of Gen Muhamadu Buhari during the 2015 presidential election. Therefore, any abuse directed at her was an inference to her husband.

*COMT 51*: Why do you reason like a fool? The only thing going for Goodluck Ebele Jonathan is access to government money. He knows that he cannot win a free and fair election...and

you are duller than the donkey in Aso Rock who has been there since 2009 unless you can prove that another donkey was in Aso Rock when Ya'ardua was sick.

*COMT 52*: And where are the Tompolos and Asaris threatening us we must return the Jonathan rogue to Aso Rock? Why has Ayo Kanye West Oritshejafor disappeared? Where is senile Edwin Clark? I hope Okupe has included bastard in his names on his official document.

*COMTs 51 and 52* were used to socially abuse former President of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (also called GEJ during the political campaigns). The user in *COMT 51* adopted a pseudo name (*GEJisaDISASTER*) that suggests that Goodluck Jonathan was a 'disaster' as Nigerian President. The user described Jonathan as a 'donkey in the Aso Rock' that 'could not win the election.' *COMT 52* contains further social abuse of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan. The user indicted most of President Jonathan's aides and political supporters (with reference to Oritshejafor [former President of the Christian Association of Nigeria], Edwin Clark [an Ijaw man from Jonathan's ethnic group and his political godfather], and Doyin Okupe [his Spokesperson]). Like the user in *CMT 46*, the user here in *CMTs 51 and 52* also used satiric images (which we also removed from the comments because of their potential negativity) to suggest President Goodluck Jonathan's anticipated inglorious return to his village (Otueke) after he must have lost the election on March 28—which he eventually lost. The salient element in the image (see Van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Caple, 2009; Kress, 2010; Bednarek & Caple, 2012) is a caricature representing former president Goodluck Jonathan trekking back home along a water-logged road depicting a much neglected, underdeveloped community. This image further indicts the former President of neglecting his community while he was in power.

The foregoing findings in this study have their basis in the concepts of *otherness* (Meddaugh & Kay, 2009; Al-Saidi, 2014; Ibelema, 2014) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Douglas, McGarty, Bliuc & Lala, 2005; Hogg, 2006; Tajfel, 2010; Trepte, 2013) as already espoused in literature. As Al-Saidi (2014) explains, the concept of *Otherness* considers the world as an entity that is polarised into mutually excluding opposites where the *Self* is considered as an insider who is rational, strong, standard, ideal, ordered and good, whereas the *Other* is seen as an outsider who is chaotic, irrational, weak, evil, substandard, lesser, disadvantaged and unfortunate. Similarly, one of the core tenets of the SIT that is relevant to this current study is that group members are likely to express intergroup discrimination by believing that their own group is superior to other groups and, consequently, be ready behaviourally to express prejudice towards other groups, and feel good about their own group and themselves (Brown, 2000). As established in this study, most users discriminate against other users along the divides of ethnicity (e.g., Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and South-South minorities), politics (e.g., the PDP and the APC as the major political parties), religion (e.g., Islam, Christianity, and ATR), and social class (e.g., level of civilisation, education or literacy) that characterise the Nigerian nation. The online audience, as reflected in the analysed UGC, used negative, disparaging and provocative tags to describe members of the other groups while they showed sentiment and support for their groups and their members. Our findings here corroborate the earlier argument of Daniels (2008), who submit that the digital space has created serious consequences for race, ethnicity and civil rights, and that the early myth that cyberspace represents peaceful enclave is rapidly disappearing.

Although, the digital space represents Habermas's concept of the public sphere as a forum for citizens to share collective aspirations and concerns, and nurture deliberative democracy in such manners that reduce the hegemonic control of the media by the political elite (Molly, 2014; Habermas, 2006), it has been argued that an ideal and well-functional

public sphere depends not only on access to critical information about state affairs, but also on citizens' ability to engage in rational, critical discourse that contributes positively to governance and social coherence (Haas, 2004). Findings of our current study have, therefore, confirmed the concern by Haas and other scholars (e.g., Banks, 2011; Bernik et al., 2013; Marwick & Miller 2014; Carney, 2016; Gagliardone et al., 2016) that access provided by the digital public sphere has double-edged effects, where the citizens, as the case in Nigeria, have the opportunity to be active actors in deliberative democracy as well as engage in negative rhetoric (Ojebuyi, 2016) that may be simultaneously counter-productive to the same democratic project.

## Conclusion

Our study shows that Nigerians, who use the comment sections of Nigerian online news media, do not only interact to discuss issues reported in the media; they also, even more aggressively, transfer the socio-cultural order of intergroup discrimination that characterises the pluralistic fabrics of Nigeria. Discrimination in terms of ethnicity, political affiliation, religious groups and social class that has remained the consequence of the colonial creation of Nigeria from different nationalities in 1914 (Rafiu, Owolabi, & Folasayo, 2009; Odeyemi, 2014) are still being intensified in digital space of the online community. Presence of negative messages in the UGC sections of Nigerian news media aimed at attacking members of other groups has implications for the social, religious and political climates in the country. Apart from the fact that the phenomenon is capable of causing further grave ethnic disaffection among the various nationalities in Nigeria, it is capable of provoking social, political and religious disorder. When the notion of *otherness* is promoted among Nigerians through the digital space as the current study has established, where members of one ethnic group or one religious sect see themselves as being superior to the other and treat members of the out-groups as enemies, inferior, marginalised or disadvantaged, the corporate unity of Nigeria faces serious threats. Besides, unless this trend of cyber-harassment is addressed, it may intensify racial and ethnic segregation and social mistrust, and encourage abuse of civil rights and freedom of expression among Nigerians.

This situation appears more worrisome given the fact that the Internet has provided a new gatekeeping order where news media gate has become semi-porous (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012; Singer, 2014), and, in Nigeria, there has not been any extant law restricting freedom of expressions on the Internet or any effective regulatory framework to track and punish the cyber culprits. Even in the United States of America, where online harassment and discriminating utterances online have also constituted a significant problem, the current legal landscape in the country provides little help to victims. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, for example, gives to Internet service providers, substantial immunity from taking responsibility for user-generated content. The implication of this is that the online host (news media in particular) has no obligation to remove content, delete user accounts, or discipline users that post negative messages (Marwick & Miller, 2014).

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding the multiple consequences of the social media. It also adds to studies on internet participatory (citizen) journalism and user-generated content by employing the tenets of the Social Identity Theory to explain Nigerian participation in the debate of public issues through the digital public sphere. Findings of the study have established that apart from the fact that social media provide the open space for political engagement, deliberative democracy, social interaction and expression (Conroy et al., 2012; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Yeku, 2016), political activism

and social mobilisation (Nam, 2012) among other benefits, they also provide the space for negative discourse as evident in the UGC sections of Nigerian news media.

*Limitations and Direction for Future Studies:* The current study relies on qualitative textual analysis of some samples from readers' comments to establish presence of intergroup discriminations in the users' comments sections of Nigerian news media. Although textual analysis of the selected UGC provides an in-depth qualitative picture of intergroup differentiation exhibited by users, lack of quantitative analysis that captures more expansive data is a limitation to this study as only qualitative data may not be enough to adequately establish patterns. Nevertheless, we consider this current study to be a strong groundwork that could provide directions and inspiration for future studies. It is, therefore, suggested that future research efforts should focus on combining both qualitative and quantitative data that provide depth and breadth towards establishing patterns of hate speech and intergroup discrimination.

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