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PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE INTERPLAY OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND HATE SPEECH IN THE NIGERIAN MEDIA DURING THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

The study examines the complex dynamics between freedom of expression and the rise of hate speech within the Nigerian media landscape during the critical 2023 General Elections. It investigates public perceptions of these fundamental aspects of communication and their implications for the democratic process in a democratic society. Employing a mixed-methods approach rooted in pragmatism and social construction of reality theory, the research utilizes qualitative and quantitative data gathered through surveys and interviews, employing questionnaires and interview guides as research instruments. The study focuses on the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), with a population of 1,693,400, drawing a sample of 384 from various districts. Findings reveal that the media significantly influences public perceptions of freedom of expression and hate speech, with news biases, language trends, and differing viewpoints shaping attitudes toward these concepts in electoral discourse. Factors such as tone and language, context and intent, source credibility, verifiability, emotional appeal, and historical context were found to influence public perception during the 2023 elections, with audiences holding a negative view of the media's role as political tools. The study concludes that stakeholders, including media practitioners, politicians, policymakers, and the public, must promote a communication environment that upholds democratic values to mitigate the adverse effects of hate speech during critical political events. Recommendations include clarifying regulatory frameworks on hate speech, media self-regulation to prevent incitement to violence, imposing sanctions on offenders, and enhancing media literacy programmes for the public to critically evaluate information.

Keywords: Freedom of Expression, Hate Speech, Public Perception, Mass Media, 2023 Elections.

Introduction

All over the world, the mass media play an important role in shaping public perception and influencing opinion regarding issues. As such, the mass media are expected to serve as the compass of a peaceful society by preserving its integrity of impartiality in reporting on matters of public interest. The mass media are expected to ensure the audience's right to a balanced and unbiased information through objective coverage of matters of public interest, particularly political matters such as electioneering campaigns. This explains why globally, there is a common understanding that freedom of expression, especially freedom of the press (media) is the fulcrum and basic pillar of all democratic societies and freedom of expression is often acknowledged as a universal basic human right. Notwithstanding, the interplay between freedom of expression – freedom of speech and the freedom of the media – and hate speech (social conflict) is theoretically ambiguous and politically highly-contested (Leśniczak, 2023; Ezeibe, 2021; Milczarek, 2021).

On one side of the debate, scholars argue that freedom of expression can be abused through hate speech to create social conflict by giving people and organized interests the opportunity to spread disinformation and disagree in public, creating or exaggerating visible conflicts and political polarization as well as enabling people to incite hatred against others or groups in attempts to marginalize them (Leśniczak, 2023; Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2021; Ezeibe, 2021; Milczarek, 2021). On

the other side, the proponents of freedom of expression argue that free speech and free media act as safety valves that allow substantial disagreement to be expressed in a peaceful manner reducing the risk of physical violence, Freedom of speech and media enables deliberation among different groups and furthers the understanding and potential acceptance of substantially different points of view. Moreover, opponents of limiting even extreme speech frequently highlight that restrictions on speech is a cure worse than the disease and can be abused to target dissent and criticism of the powers that be (Mchangama, 2022; Strossen, 2018).

Hate speech has today become a major issue of public debate and controversy in Nigeria, challenging the extent to which freedom of expression can guarantee a peaceful democratic society. The concept which lies in a complex nexus with freedom of expression and freedom of the press (media) presents a challenge not just to journalism in Nigeria but society as a whole. The challenges of hate speech are however, not unique to Nigeria as several nations of the world are grappling with the ever spiraling threats of hate speech. Citing Parekh (2012), Ilori (2023, p. 89) observes that hate speech expresses, encourages, stirs up, or incites hatred against a group of individuals distinguished by a particular feature or set of features such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, political affiliations and sexual orientation. In the light of its corrosiveness, hate speech has been described as an adversative to peace building and development, and as well antithetical to peaceful co-existence among diverse groups in democratic societies (Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2021).

There are various evidences of how hate speech, couched under the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the Press (media) has destabilised, shaken foundations and threatened existence of several societies. Heralding some of the horrendous corrosiveness of hate speech around the globe, Fasakin, Oyero, Okorie & Amodu (2017) observe that hate speech had ignited violent conflicts in different parts of the world including civil wars, and genocides. Within this regard, the anti-Semitic propaganda that helped bring the Nazi party to power in Germany, the anti-Muslim rhetoric leading to the Bosnian conflict; and the anti-Tutsi propaganda campaign of the Rwandan genocide readily comes to mind. Related instances where hate speeches inflamed political violence are the 2007 post-electoral violence in Kenya, the 2011 post-electoral violence in Nigeria and the statement by the Northern Youth Congress (NYC) giving an ultimatum to Igbos residing in the North to leave, and the response from youth groups in Eastern part of Nigeria to all Northerners, and the threat by the Oba of Lagos to throw non-indigenes into the Lagoon amongst several incidences across Nigeria.

These hate speeches were reported by the media and significantly inflamed apprehensions, agitations, moral, political, social, economic, ethnic and religious panic, discrimination and isolation in varying degrees across the country and threatened the unity of Nigeria. It has been however argued that for speech alone to be a crime, it must entail threats. According to Ogbonna, Okafo, and Wogu (2020), the issue of hate speech in Nigeria is already receiving significant attention even from legal authorities since it is feared that hate speech usually could be the gateway to discrimination, harassment, and violence as well as forerunner to serious harmful criminal acts that could lead to instability. Although proponents for open and inclusive societies fear that containment of hate speech through legal instruments can impinge on freedom of expression and of the media, states are expected not to fuel conflicts, but to mitigate them, not to spread intolerance, but to promote pluralism. As such public authorities are expected to take adequate preventive steps and become active managers of diversity, in order to achieve social cohesion by guarding against hate speech in all ramifications.

The impasse however, is that any interference and regulation of freedom of expression and of the media under the context of hate speech has to be well justified, proportional, and accompanied by sufficient procedural safeguards, especially when under the political lens (Leśniczak, 2023). This dilemma, however, does not arise when hate speech has direct relation or threatens other legitimate rights of citizens, such as the right to private and family life, non-discrimination and human dignity, or even the right to life and freedom from degrading treatment. The implication is that the concept of media pluralism is intertwined with a rather unusual situation where in order to balance the interplay between freedom of expression and hate speech, the need to secure other incontrovertible rights of citizens, challenges the extent to which freedom of expression can be

guaranteed in a society.

Although the mass media are expected to be the conscience of the society, in Nigeria, they often lose their guard on hate speech during electioneering campaigns. Alakali, Faga & Mbursa (2017) note that indeed the media in Nigeria do fall to the trap of reporting hate speech by quoting directly from interviews, press statements, advertorials and sometimes from alleged online sources. As such they inadvertently or intentionally import the misinformation, falsehood crass and discriminatory language of political parties, political groups, and politicians thereby displaying crass abuse of the right of freedom of expression. As perpetrators of hate speech take advantage of the variety of media platforms to convey or express their distasteful opinions to the public, this study analyses how the public perceives such reports. Also, how such perception shapes people's opinions regarding the Nigerian media is of interest to the study. This is hinged on the arguments of scholars that without manifesting in the media, the impact of hate speech would remain narrowly confined to the immediate environment where it was pronounced (Bjørnskov & Mchangama, 2023; Eskildsen, & Bjørnskov, 2022; Charron & Annoni, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Politicians in Nigeria seem to be taking center stage as providers of media content with hate speeches, particularly during campaigns. Studies have shown that journalists in Nigeria are also increasingly becoming veiled supporters of political parties and candidates, and do play major roles in setting political agenda through the lens of political coverage to shape public opinion regarding the parties and candidates (Adegoju, 2022).

The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria represented a critical juncture in the nation's democratic journey, where the principles of freedom of expression and the emergence of hate speech intertwine, shaping public discourse and influencing the democratic process. The Nigerian media, as a key player in disseminating information and shaping public opinion, plays a pivotal role in this interplay. However, there exists a need for a comprehensive analysis of public perception concerning the dynamic relationship between freedom of expression and hate speech within the Nigerian media landscape during the 2023 General Elections.

Against the backdrop of a democratic society, understanding how citizens perceive the balance between freedom of expression and hate speech during such pivotal political events is essential for safeguarding democratic values and promoting social cohesion. However, the nuanced dynamics and potential implications of this interplay remain understudied, raising critical questions about the public's perception of these fundamental aspects of communication and their impact on the democratic process. The need to fill this gap necessitates this study to assess the public's perception of the interplay in order to inform policy decisions and media practices in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to analyse public perception of the interplay of freedom expression and hate speech in the Nigerian media during the 2023 general elections. Specifically, however, the study seeks to:

1. Examine audience understanding of what constitute hate speech reportage.
2. Identify factors used in discerning hate speech in the media by the Nigerian audience.
3. Assess how hate speech reportage is perceived by the Nigerian audience.
4. Examine how the perception of hate speech by the audience impact perceptions of the image of the Nigerian media.

Research Question

Based on the broad and specific objective of the study, the following research questions are put forward to guide the study:

1. What is Nigerian audience understanding of news reportage that constitute hate speech?
2. What were the factors used by the Nigerian audience in discerning hate speech reportage in the media?
3. How does the Nigerian audience perceive hate speech reportage in the media during the 2023 general elections?
4. How does the perception of hate speech by the audience impact perceptions of the image of the Nigerian media?

Media Reportage and Public Perception of Hate Speech

The media exists and serves for the public good. They do this through provision basic knowledge and information to the public on all aspects of a single issue or on various issues of

national and international level as fourth pillar of the state and an important agent of society. In carrying out this responsibility, the media does not only provide information and updates of issues but also gives a direction to the public, which enables them to make up informed judgments and perceptions. Oliveira (2023) observes that the social phenomenon known as public perception is the difference between absolute truth based on facts and a virtual truth which is shaped by popular opinion, media coverage and/or reputation. Obviously, people form perceptions according to what media present to them. It is within this context that perception is also considered as the sorting out, interpretation, analysis and integration of stimuli involving the sense organs and brain. It explains how different people react to same message in very different ways, and relates to the process of decoding and processing specific information or sensory data (Liao, 2023).

The media itself can be very helpful in examining the extent and ways in which the public affirm or disagrees about hate speech and other related phenomenon. Supporting this position, Ngene (2016) notes that perceptions were largely media influenced. Charron & Annoni (2021) add that achieving altruistic behaviour among the audience depends on whether they perceive the news from mass media positively or negatively. The fact that the audience demonstrates behaviour that either supports or does not support altruism depends on their perceptions and attitudes toward the positive and negative impacts of mass media news. However, how people perceive an issue is dependent upon certain fundamental factors. The different psychological factors influence perceptions and they include past experience, cultural expectations, motivations, moods, needs and attitudes. This simply means that certain variations exist in perceptions and behaviours of different human beings (Wang, 2022).

There is evidence from studies in Nigeria which indicate that people seem to have a negative perception of media reportage of issues. Findings from the study by Adisa, Udende, Abubakar and La'aro (2017) indicate that the mass media have not been timely in their reportage of conflicts and insurgencies, and that the Nigerian media often do not display a high level of objectivity in their reports due largely to the fact that most of the organisations in the country are owned by state (sub-national) governments and individuals. They add that as such have been primarily used to promote the interests of their owners. Also, Ashindorbe (2018) notes that people form perceptions according to what media present to them. Perception of the Nigerian media by the audience thus plays very important role in making some issues important and some unimportant in the country.

This is consistent with the view of Oliveira (2023) that media exposure and usage have a significant impact on shaping views, attitudes, and behaviours among media users. It implies that the frequency of communications or media content to which individuals are exposed and the extent to which they retain that information is what helps in forming perceptions. Thus, Ezeibe and Ikeanyibe (2017) argue that media plays a crucial role in influencing peoples' perception and behaviours by disseminating information, raising awareness, and providing education. It facilitates communication among individuals and enables them to gain insights into various global, social, and environmental concerns.

Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech in Nigerian Politics

Charron and Annoni (2021) observe that freedom of expression is guaranteed by all democratic societies as an important fundamental right because the right to speak one's mind freely on important issues in society, access information and hold public officers to account plays a vital role in the healthy development process of any society. Therefore, freedom of expression and that of the media are cherished and held in high regard by democratic societies. Msughter (2023) notes that indeed, the participation of informed citizenry in the democratic process requires the existence of free speech and vigorous discussion. Nevertheless, Aniche (2017) note that freedom of expression has its own attendant challenges for democratic societies, one of which is hate speech which is in opposition to the presence and promotion of political and social equality and freedom from ethnic, religious, racial, social or sexual discrimination – considered essential for a properly functioning democracy. This implies that not all forms of free expression can be guaranteed or protected. Although hate speech covers abusive, denigrating, harassing, intimidating and inciting speeches targeting individuals or groups based on their individual or group political, religious or ethnic affiliation or identity, Eskildsen and Bjørnskov (2022) argues that it is an elusive concept, which must be carefully guarded.

Okolie, Enyiazu and Nnamani (2021) note that the consolidation of democracies at different stages of development has proven to be vulnerable to various acts of hate speech and its attendant negative effects. Across the globe and Nigeria, election campaigns continue to provide particularly fertile ground for hate speech and incitement to hatred. Ezeibe and Ikeanyibe (2017) points out that, political leaders in Nigeria have often taken advantage of existing ethnic and religious fault-lines to use hate speech for a divide and rule system against the people. According to him, these leaders employ hate speeches in politicking which incites coexisting ethnic and religious groups. The effect is the generation of all forms of violence especially election related ones. Fasakin, Oyero, Okorie and Amodu (2017) observe that the use of hate speech in Nigeria dates back to the pre independence period. The negative manifestation of the phenomenon was however managed by the colonial administration through their big whip until after independence, when politicians during the First Republic began to employ hate speeches in an aggressive manner. This tendency has since helped in heating-up the polity for electoral violence, sectarian killings, military coups and civil war.

Many scholars and political analysts have at various times, noted the role of the media in helping to sustain freedom of expression and curtail hate speeches, and its many effects especially during political campaigns (Adisa, Udende, Abubakar & La'aro, 2017). According to Asadu (2018), such scholars and analysts are convinced that adherence to professional ethics and principles of journalism would substantially guarantee free speech and mitigate hate speech. Notwithstanding, George (2016) avers that noncompliance to professional procedures which include how news is defined may tend to amplify the voices of hate purveyors or propagandists. In this regard, Adisa, Udende, Abubakar and La'aro (2017) explain that the current role played by some media organisations, particularly popular newspaper outfits in Nigeria, in the name of political campaigns become worrisome. They observe that despite Nigeria's Electoral Act of 2010 which spells out detailed provisions specifically barring politically inspired hateful speech, cases of offensive images of major aspirants continue to flourish during elections, to create a vivid picture of a bad person.

With regards to current efforts by the government to curtail hate speech, which Ikeanyibe, Ezeibe, Mbah and Nwangwu (2018) say critics and skeptics believe is a veiled attempt to muzzle the media, suppress free speech and silence opposition voices, proponents believe the anti-hate speech bill which being considered by National Assembly should be passed. However, given a web of intrigues that often characterise political contests in Nigeria, skeptics such as Ashindorbe (2018) fear that the bill which prescribes death for persons found guilty of any form of hate speech that results in the death of another person, can be used for political witch hunt and muzzling of the media.

Irrespective of the stance, Adisa, Udende, Abubakar & La'aro (2017) note that hate speech and information disorder have long been weapons and enablers of conflict in the Nigerian political arena, used to create and reinforce sentiments of mistrust, exclusion, fear, and anger toward perceived opponents and enemies, and simultaneously to unite allies. According to Ikeanyibe, Ezeibe, Mbah and Nwangwu (2018), the instrumental use and impact of hate speech under the labels of propaganda, information warfare, and psychological warfare in Nigerian politics have been widely documented and researched. This implies the necessity of measures to isolate hate speech from freedom of expression and tame the monster.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical approaches are used in this study to analyse the interplay between freedom of expression and hate speech, and how best to regulate hate speech with respect to the media's right to freedom of expression – the theory of pragmatism and the social construction of reality theory. The theory of pragmatism proposed by Carlsen and Mantere (2007) centers on the balancing of hate speech interventions - laws and other measures that prohibit hate speech with the right to freedom of expression. Such interventions may include traditional or non-traditional interventions. Nkrumah (2018) notes that traditional interventions according to the theory of pragmatism are the use of laws to combat hate speech, while non-traditional interventions are the use of other social methods, such as education, training, and public awareness. Workneh (2020) adds that non-traditional interventions may also be called alternative methods or alternative measures of hate speech interventions.

Analysing applications of the theory, Cassim (2015) observe that oftentimes, on one hand, most states adopt traditional interventions as they seek to combat hate speech through laws; on the other hand, most international law instruments use non-traditional interventions by referring to the use of other social methods in hate speech interventions. What distinguishes non-traditional interventions from other approaches is that it considers hate speech as socio-pathological and for this reason, requires more than criminalization and the legislative impulse to combat hate speech (Carlsen & Mantere, 2007).

The social construction of reality theory proposed by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1967 suggests that humans create their own understanding of reality, through their interactions and communications with others (perception). Social construction of reality holds that the meaning of acts, behaviours, and events is not an objective quality of those phenomena but is assigned to them through social interactions. In this context, meaning is socially defined and organized and thus subject to social change.

The theory conceptualises that "any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be perceived as a norm (Collins, 2016). Social construction of reality theory is helpful in understanding the subjective processes lead to how humans create meaning in their lives, develop impressions, and build perceptions about things, events or issues. Knoblauch & Pfadenhauer (2023) note that social construction of reality significantly influences how people perceive things, events or issues, their perception of the severity of the things, events or issues, and the extent to which the things, events or issues are seeing as problems to society. Therefore, how societies understand, define and respond to things, events or issues, and the context of the situation is the outcome of the perception of numerous complex factors between different groups of actors.

The two theoretical approaches adopted for this study though from distinct backgrounds are similar in providing the basis for analysing the interplay between freedom of expression and hate speech in the media within the context of audience perceptions. The theory of pragmatism provides the prescriptive basis for balance between hate speech and the right to freedom of expression, while the social construction of reality theory provides a more context-based and practical application of the influence of audience perceptions on hate speech intervention measures. Conversely, the theoretical framework provides context on the nexuses between the interplay between freedom of expression and divergent perspectives on applying legal goals for mitigating hate speech.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data using survey and interview as research design to analyse public perceptions on the nuanced relationship between freedom of expression and hate speech in Nigeria. The population of the study is the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC) which has a population size of 1,693,400 according to the 2022 National Population Commission (NPC) projection.

The decision to study residents of Abuja Municipal Council (AMAC) out of the six Area Councils in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was justified by the cosmopolitan nature of AMAC. Given the difficulty associated with studying all the population, a sample size of 384 respondents was drawn from Maitama, Garki, Wuse, Asokoro, Apo, Wuye and Central Business District (CBD) using the Taro Yamane formula. Applying the multi-staged sampling technique, 179 males and 205 females were sampled for the study from Maitama, Garki, Wuse, Asokoro, Apo, Wuye and Central Business District (CBD). A 13 items questionnaire and 8 questions interview guide were used as instruments for data collection.

Findings/Analysis

Public Perception of the intricate interplay between freedom of expression and hate speech within the Nigerian media landscape during the pivotal 2023 general elections was conceptualised drawing on the mixed-methods approach. The complete sample of 384 participants for the study was taken; however, the removal of incomplete surveys reduced the sample size to 378 from which 11 respondents were selected for interviews. Therefore, the quantitative data accounts for 367 respondents and qualitative data accounts for 11. Reliability and validity of the data was measured using the Cronbach's Alpha, and the coefficient value of .91 and .97 which is greater than .70 considered acceptable was arrived at. The demographic data was presented and followed by data on responses to the research questions.

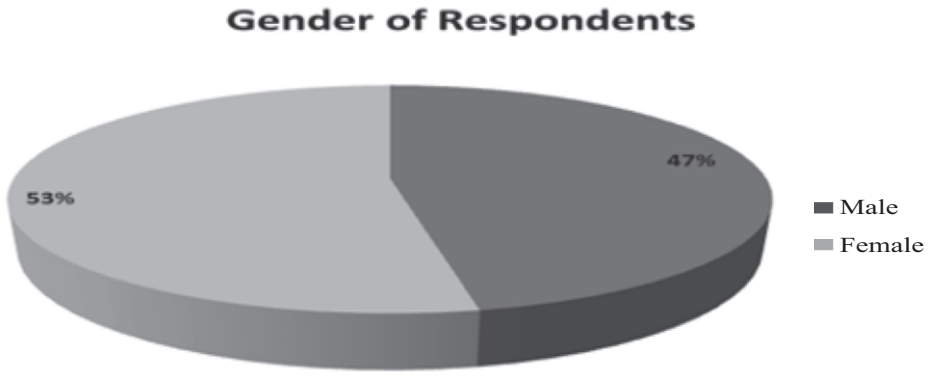
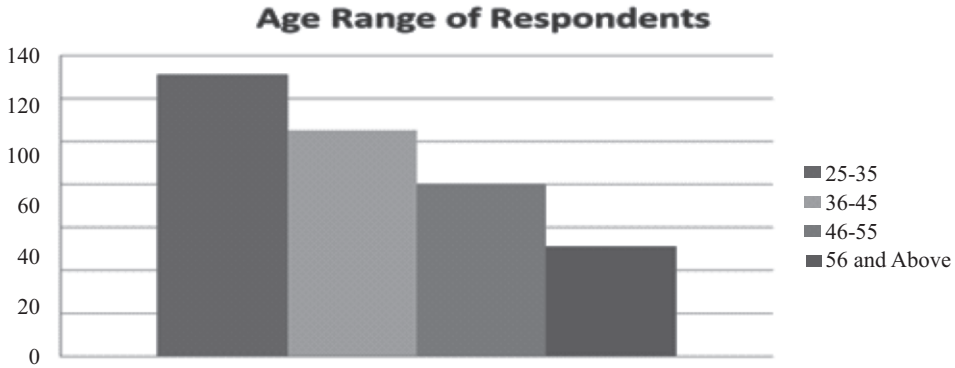


Figure 1: Gender Representation & Age Distribution of Respondents

The graphical gender distribution of respondents in the pie chart indicates an almost evenly divided sample between females (201) and males (177). This implies that conclusions drawn from the study may be more reflective of male perspectives, potentially skewing the findings if gender-specific attitudes towards freedom of expression and hate speech differ significantly between males and females, therefore, highlighting the importance of considering gender dynamics in media consumption and perception.



The bar chart shows that while respondents between the ages of 25 to 56 years and above were sampled, a greater population of people between the ages 25 and 45 years were more represented in the study. The data underscores the importance of taking into cognizance the diverse perspectives and experiences of different age cohorts in understanding contemporary media dynamics as it relates to policies and initiatives aimed at fostering a media environment that upholds democratic values and promotes constructive public discourse.

Research Question 1: *What is Nigerian audience understanding of news reportage that constitute hate speech?*

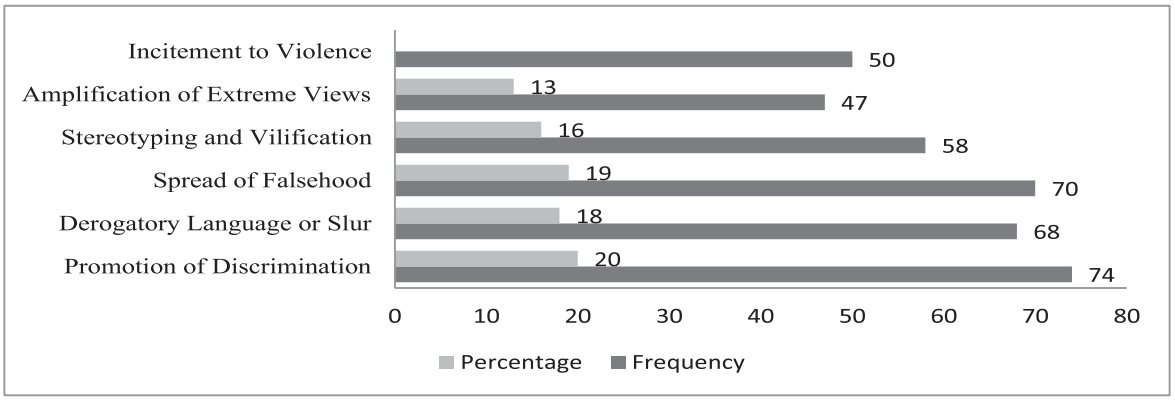
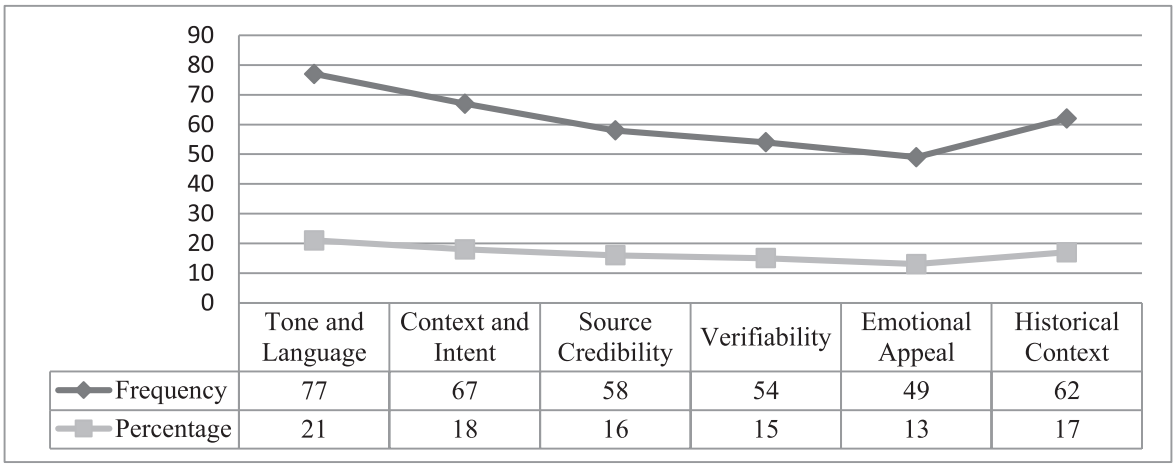


Figure 2: Audience Understanding of Reportage that Constitute Hate Speech

Data on Nigerian audience understanding of news reportage that constitute hate speech indicates that news reports that promotes discrimination; news reports that are skewed to spread falsehood; news reports containing derogatory language or slur; and news reports with stereotyping and vilification labels during the 2023 general elections were used as the basis. Also news reports with incitement to violence labels, and news reports that amplified extreme views formed audience understanding of news reportage that constituted hate speech during the 2023 general elections.

The qualitative data share the same characteristics as the interviewees noted news reports that targeted and promoted discrimination against specific ethnic or religious groups, reporting that used derogatory language or slurs against individuals or groups based on their ethnicity, religious affiliation, political leaning or views; and news stories that intentionally spread false information to incite violence or hostility, stereotype and vilify certain communities and contribute to prejudice as their understanding of news reportage that constituted hate speech during the 2023 general elections.

Research Question 2: *What were the factors used by the Nigerian audience in discerning hate speech reportage in the media?*



	Tone and Language	Context and Intent	Source Credibility	Verifiability	Emotional Appeal	Historical Context
Frequency	77	67	58	54	49	62
Percentage	21	18	16	15	13	17

Figure 3: Factors used in Discerning Hate Speech Reportage

Data contained in figure 3 shows that tone and language; context and intent; source credibility; verifiability; emotional appeal; and historical context were revealed as the factors used by the Nigerian audience in discerning hate speech reportage in the media during the 2023 general elections. The implies that choice of words (inflammatory or derogatory language), perceived intention behind the reported information and understanding of its context as well as the trustworthiness and reliability of the source providing the information or quoted in the news reports were amongst the means used to determine whether or not, a story to constitute hate speech. The data also infer availability of evidence or supporting facts for the reported claims, the emotional impact of the stories, and understanding of the historical background and context of the issues being reported helped the audience in discerning hate speech reportage during the 2023 general elections.

This is in concordance with the data from the interview which shows the interviewees all noted that hate speech hinders civil discourse by promoting hostility and animosity, thereby, discerning hate speech in the media during elections by the audience is significant for safeguarding democratic values, promoting informed voting, preventing polarization, fostering civil discourse, protecting vulnerable groups, ensuring media accountability, promoting social cohesion, and preventing manipulation in the political landscape. This in turn encourages a culture of respectful dialogue that leads to healthier political environment where differing opinions can be discussed without resorting to vitriol.

Research Question 3: *How does the Nigerian audience perceive hate speech reportage in the media during the 2023 general elections?*

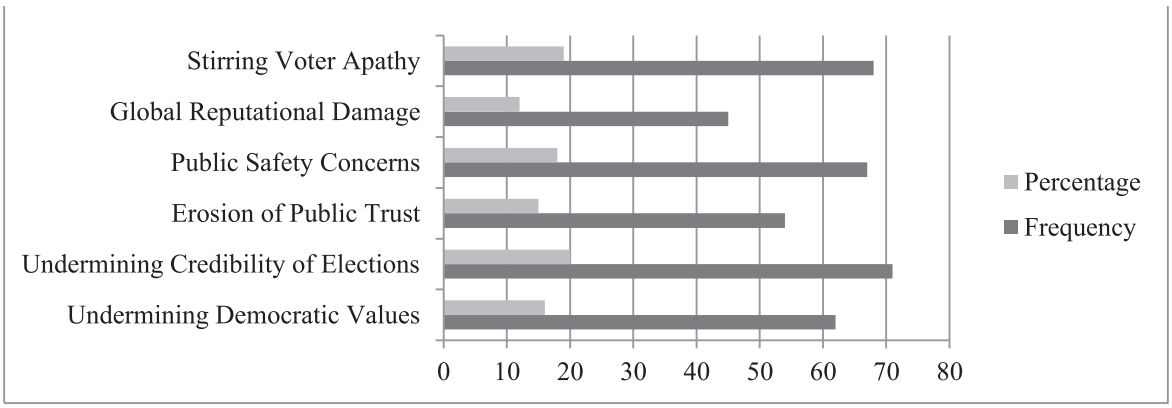


Figure 4: Perception of Hate Speech Reportage during the 2023 Elections

How the Nigerian audience perceived hate speech reportage in the media during the 2023 general elections was also measured. The data shows that Nigerian audience members perceived hate speech reportage as undermining democratic values and principles by fostering an environment that stifles free and open discourse; thereby contributing to the marginalization of certain voices, and hindering the democratic ideal of diverse and inclusive public debate. The data shows also that hate speech reportage is perceived to undermine credibility of elections by raising doubts about the integrity of the process and negatively impacting perceptions of the electoral management stakeholders such as INEC, security agencies, observers and other critical stakeholders. It is evident from the histogram that Nigerian audience further perceived hate speech as eroding public trust through amplification of divisive narratives, reinforcing stereotypes, and deepening existing societal fault lines that led to increased polarization and hostility among different groups during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria; and public safety concerns that caused voter apathy in some parts of the country as well a global reputational damage to Nigeria, affecting perception of Nigeria by the international community, and the relationships between the Nigerian media with their international partners and audiences.

Views of the interviewees in the study corroborate the quantitative data by noting that hate speech reportage in the media have severe consequences for the electoral process. According to the interviewees, continuous exposure to hate speech narratives in the media during the 2023 general elections contributed to the normalization of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours which desensitized certain citizens about the whole electoral process. Data from the interviews further indicate that hate speech narratives in the media during the 2023 general elections were targeted at undermining the credibility of the elections, and were used to manipulate public opinion, spreading false or misleading information about candidates or issues, and undermining the public's ability to make informed decisions. Findings also show that hate speech narratives in the media during the 2023 general elections targeted ethnic, religious, regional and other minority groups to create a hostile environment of fear and intimidation, and undermine trust in state institutions responsible for the electoral process. This exacerbated social divisions along ethnic and religious lines, and resulted in animosity among different groups. The findings further reveal that hate speech narratives in the media during the 2023 general elections were used to undermine integrity of the elections by delegitimizing results with false claims and inflammatory language casting doubt on the fairness and integrity of the electoral process.

Research Question 4: *How does the perception of hate speech by the audience impact perceptions of the image of the Nigerian media?*

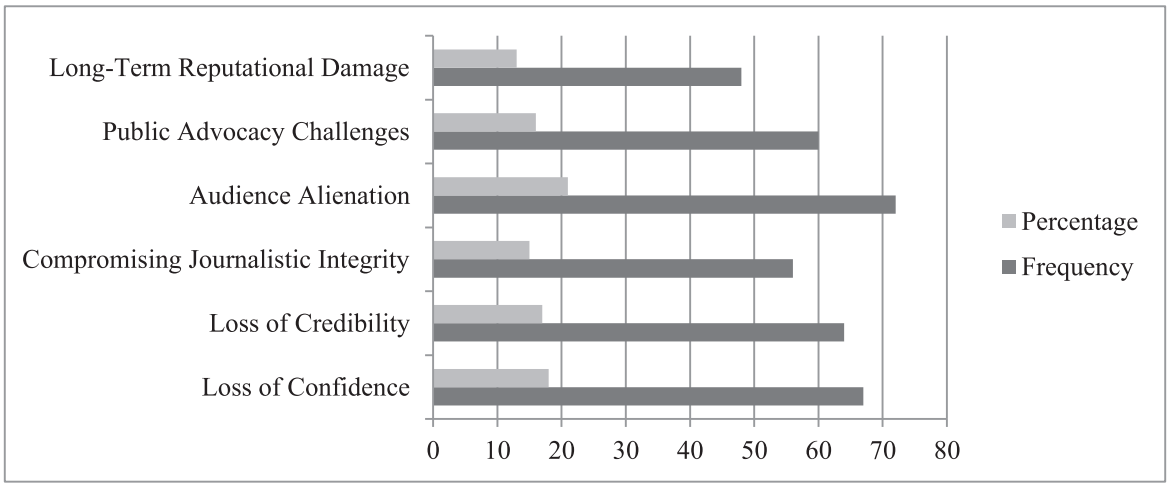


Figure 5: Impact of Hate Speech Perceptions on Image of Nigerian Media

Data in figure 5 show that all the sampled respondents are of the view that perception of hate speech by the audience impact perceptions of the image of the Nigerian media negatively. The data indicates loss of confidence in the media; erosion of trust and confidence in the news media; loss of credibility which led to distrust in some media outfits during the 2023 general elections; compromising journalistic integrity; audience alienation; public advocacy challenges, and concern over long-term reputational damage to the Nigeria media were identified as the negative effects of hate speech during the 2023 general elections on the image of the Nigerian media. This implies that persistent negative perceptions can result in lon-term reputational and credibility challenge for the Nigerian media within the Nigerian society and the broader global media community, which in turn may constrain the Nigerian media from advocating for press freedom and defending their role as the watchdogs of society.

Although the general perception of the impact of how the media handles hate speech on the image of the Nigerian media tilts more to the negative side as can be deduced from the quantitative data; the interviewees feel it depends on the media outlet and the audience in question. From a positive side, they note that it enhances the credibility of the Nigerian media, showcasing their commitment to free speech. On the negative side however, it's the opinion of the interviewees that it leads to diminished perception of the media's professionalism and impartiality. As such the interviewees note that it depends on the media outlet, with some being praised for addressing hate speech responsibly while others are criticized for not doing enough.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the analysis highlight the intricate relationship between freedom of expression, hate speech, and public perception within the Nigerian media landscape during the 2023 General Elections. The results corroborate studies cited in the literature and underscore the importance of a responsible and accountable media environment in preserving democratic values and fostering informed citizenry. The findings reinforce the view of Cassim (2015) for regulatory measures, and Bjørnskov & Voigt (2021) and Asadu (2018) call for media literacy initiatives, and a collective effort to promote a media landscape that contributes positively to democratic processes and societal cohesion in Nigeria.

It is evident from the findings that hate speech emerged as a notable concern during the 2023 General Elections, with participants in the study identifying various forms of discriminatory language, ethnic and religious bias, and personal attacks within media content. The findings suggest that hate speech was prevalent across different media platforms, ranging from traditional outlets to social media, amplifying its impact on public discourse. A significant portion of both quantitative and qualitative data expressed a desire

for media content that fosters societal harmony and inclusivity. This is in tandem with emphasis of Alakali, Faga & Mbursa (2017) on the importance of responsible journalism in providing balanced perspectives and avoiding content that could deepen ethnic, religious, or regional divides.

The findings underscore the nuanced relationship between hate speech and freedom of expression. While the latter is a cornerstone of democratic societies, the former has the potential to infringe upon it by inciting violence, perpetuating discrimination, and creating a chilling effect on open dialogue (Adegoju, 2022; Bjørnskov & Mchangama, 2023). This implies that the interplay between hate speech and freedom of expression is intricate and multifaceted. While freedom of expression is a fundamental right that must be protected, the challenges posed by hate speech require careful consideration and thoughtful regulation. The findings show that striking the right balance is essential to ensure a society that upholds the principles of democracy while safeguarding individuals from the harms associated with hate speech.

The integration of pragmatism and social constructionism as a theoretical framework offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the interplay between hate speech and freedom of expression. Pragmatism encourages a focus on the consequences of speech, urging societies to consider the tangible effects on individuals and communities. By embracing a pragmatic perspective that considers the real-world consequences of expression and integrating it with an understanding of how language constructs social realities, societies can strive for a balanced approach. This approach aims to preserve the democratic ideals of free expression while actively engaging in the responsible construction of a reality that is inclusive, just, and respectful of the diverse voices within society (Collins, 2016; Knoblauch & Pfadenhauer, 2023; Nkrumah, 2018; Workneh, 2020).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The analysis of public perception on the interplay of freedom of expression and hate speech within the Nigerian media during the 2023 General Elections unveils a complex and multifaceted landscape that requires a delicate balance between promoting freedom of expression as a democratic ideal and preventing the spread of harmful narratives. The study thus concludes that media practitioners, politicians, policy makers and the public must foster a communication environment that upholds democratic values in order to guarantee freedom of expression and mitigate the negative impacts of hate speech during crucial political events and on image of the Nigerian media.

In order for freedom of expression to thrive without frontiers in Nigeria, the study recommends that there should be clear terms in regulatory frameworks prescribing what constitute hate or offensive speech, so that no one abuses their power and privilege with regards to freedom of speech and expression; the media as key agents of nation building, must make deliberate efforts to understand the thin line between freedom of expression and speech that present 'clear imminent danger' as well as those capable of triggering violence'. Through their unions, media organizations should incorporate the meaning and danger of hate speech as part of good journalistic practice and impose sanctions on erring members. Also, media literacy programmes to empower the public in critically evaluating information; and ongoing dialogue and collaboration are necessary to navigate this complex terrain and build societies that are both free and inclusive

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