Media, Hate Speech, and National Cohesion in Nigeria: An Empirical Study of Media Discourse and Security Implications (2018–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Hate speech has become a persistent feature of Nigeria's media environment, particularly within digital and political communication spaces. This study empirically examines how hate speech is produced, framed, and disseminated through Nigerian media and analyses its implications for national unity and security between 2018 and 2025. Anchored on media framing and agenda- setting theories, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach relying on secondary quantitative media-monitoring data and qualitative discourse analysis of selected media texts. Findings reveal a consistent rise in hate speech during election cycles and conflict-related reporting, with social media and online news platforms serving as major amplification channels. The results further indicate a strong association between media hate speech narratives and increased incidents of communal violence, political tension, and security threats. Weak regulatory enforcement and politicization of media institutions limit the effectiveness of existing responses. The study concludes that unchecked media hate speech undermines national cohesion and security and recommends stronger media regulation, ethical journalism enforcement, and sustained digital media literacy initiatives.

Keywords: Hate Speech, Media Studies, National Unity, Digital Media, National Security, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The media occupy a strategic position in shaping public discourse, influencing perceptions of identity, and mediating social relations in plural societies. In Nigeria, one of Africa's most ethnically and religiously diverse states, the media's role in fostering national unity has become increasingly complex amid political competition, insecurity, and digital transformation. While the media are expected to promote informed debate and social integration, they have also become significant conduits for hate speech, particularly since 2018.

Hate speech in Nigeria has expanded alongside the proliferation of digital media platforms, including online news outlets, blogs, and social networking sites such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and YouTube. These platforms have weakened traditional editorial gatekeeping, enabling the rapid circulation of divisive and inflammatory content (Ojebuyi & Adegbola, 2021). Political actors, ethnic entrepreneurs, and extremist groups have exploited media channels to mobilize support through identity-based narratives that portray rival groups as existential threats.

Between 2018 and 2025, Nigeria experienced multiple flashpoints that intensified hate speech in the media: the 2019 and 2023 general elections, farmer–herder conflicts, separatist agitations in the South-East, banditry in the North-West, and ongoing insurgency in the North-East and North Central. Media coverage of these events frequently relied on sensational framing, ethnic labeling, and emotionally charged language, contributing to social polarization and mistrust (Okorie & Oyedepo, 2020).

The implications of hate speech extend beyond symbolic harm. Scholars have demonstrated that sustained exposure to hate speech increases the likelihood of violence, legitimizes exclusionary politics, and undermines

public confidence in state institutions (Benesch, 2014; Wolfsfeld, 2018). In Nigeria, several security agencies and civil society organizations have linked media hate speech to electoral violence, communal clashes, and attacks on security infrastructure.

Despite growing concern, empirical media-focused studies examining the relationship between hate speech, national unity, and security remain limited. Much of the existing literature emphasizes legal frameworks or normative debates, with insufficient attention to media framing, agenda-setting, and empirical patterns over time. This study addresses this gap by analyzing media discourse between 2018 and 2025, focusing on how hate speech is framed and its implications for national cohesion and security.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Media Framing Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory, both central to media studies and well suited to analyzing hate speech discourse.

Media framing theory

Media framing theory explains how journalists and media organizations construct meaning by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). Frames shape audience interpretation by defining problems, attributing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies.

In the Nigerian context, media framing of conflict often adopts ethnic or religious lenses, portraying violence as the result of group antagonism rather than structural or governance failures (Oso, 2017). Hate speech thrives within such frames, especially when —'us' versus 'them' narratives are normalized. This study applies framing theory to examine how Nigerian media frame identity, blame, and threat in hate-laden discourse.

Agenda-setting theory

Agenda-setting theory posits that media attention determines the salience of issues in public consciousness (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Repeated exposure to hate speech narratives elevates identity conflicts to the forefront of public debate, influencing political attitudes and social behavior.

In Nigeria's hybrid media system, agenda-setting is no longer monopolised by traditional media. Social media trends, viral content, and algorithmic amplification now shape public agenda, often prioritizing sensational and divisive content. This study uses agenda-setting theory to analyse the frequency and timing of hate speech in relation to political and security events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hate speech as media discourse

From a media studies perspective, hate speech is understood as a discursive practice embedded in ideology and power relations (van Dijk, 1998). It often appears indirectly through metaphors, stereotypes, and framing choices rather than explicit incitement. Nigerian media discourse frequently encodes hate speech in ethnic labels, historical grievances, and moral binaries (Ezeibe, 2015).

Digital media and amplification

Digital media have intensified the reach and impact of hate speech. Studies show that social media platforms facilitate echo chambers, where users are repeatedly exposed to ideologically aligned content and reinforcing prejudice (Ojebuyi & Adegbola, 2021). Election periods in Nigeria are particularly susceptible to digital hate speech, as political actors deploy coordinated messaging strategies (Adeyanju & Neverson, 2019).

Hate speech, unity, and security

National unity depends on shared narratives of belonging and legitimacy (Smith, 1991). Hate speech undermines

these narratives by promoting exclusion and delegitimising state authority. Empirical research links hate speech to increased risk of violence, especially where state institutions are weak (Benesch, 2014). Nigerian studies associate media hate speech with communal clashes, electoral violence, and separatist mobilization (Ezeibe & Iwuoha, 2017).

Regulation and ethics

Nigeria's regulatory framework includes the National Broadcasting Code and the Cybercrimes Act, yet enforcement remains inconsistent (Oso & Pate, 2018). Oso & Pate (2018), also state that journalistic ethics codes emphasize social responsibility, but commercial and political pressures often override professional standards.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

1.   Adebiyi et al. (2025), carried out a study on "Media and the Propagation of Hate Speech in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis of Implications for National Security and Social Cohesion". The study examined how Nigerian traditional and digital media contribute to the spread of hate speech and how such communication threatens national security and social cohesion in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The researchers adopted a mixed-method approach, combining content analysis of media outputs with digital and traditional media platforms. The study used Survey approach in measuring public perceptions of hate speech. It also carried out interviews with media professionals, civil society actors, and security experts.

Key findings indicate that ethnic hate speech constituted the largest proportion (47%) of the analyzed content. It also shows that religious hate speech accounted for 33%, while political hate speech constituted 30%. Again, the study showed that a significant relationship exists between media consumption and perceptions of hate speech in Nigeria. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$) was found between public concern about media responsibility and fear of national security threats.

The study concludes that the unregulated spread of hate speech in the media environment deepens ethnic and religious divisions, undermines trust among citizens, and threatens national integration. The conclusion aligns with this study in that both studies conclude on the fact that hate speech constitutes a drawback on national unity and development.

The study also recommended the following:

- stronger regulatory oversight of media platforms,

- improved ethical standards in journalism, and

- collaborative intervention between government, civil society, and media institutions to safeguard national stability.

2. Ejiga & Ede (2024) also studied hate speech on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian elections. The study titled: "Electorates' Analysis of Hate Speech Dynamics on Facebook during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election Campaigns" investigated how hate speech circulated on Facebook during the 2023 presidential election campaigns and how such communication affects democratic stability, national security, and social cohesion.

The study employed a survey-based research design involving Nigerian electorates who actively used Facebook during the election period. The researchers analysed the patterns and influence of hate speech in online political discussions. The study's findings indicate that social media platforms, particularly Facebook, were widely used for political mobilization and dissemination of hate speech during the election campaigns. It also asserted that hate speech significantly influenced public perception of political candidates and electoral participation. It affirmed that the presence of inflammatory and ethnic-based rhetoric heightened political tension and social polarization among voters.

The study concludes that unchecked hate speech on social media can undermine national security and democratic

stability by inciting hostility among ethnic and political groups. The study also aligns with this work by affirming that hate speech especially, during electioneering campaigns is capable of creating serious security implications for national unity and cohesion.

It finally recommended among others:

- strict enforcement of electoral laws on hate speech,

- stronger monitoring of social media content during elections, and

- public education campaigns promoting responsible political communication.

Both studies demonstrate that the media ecosystem—particularly social media—has become a major channel for the dissemination of hate speech in Nigeria. When such rhetoric is linked to ethnic, religious, or political identities, it can intensify social divisions, provoke violence and electoral conflicts, weaken democratic institutions, and threaten national cohesion and security.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative secondary data analysis with qualitative discourse analysis.

Unit of Analysis

The following were used as units of analysis:

1. Phrase

2. Sentence

3. Paragraph

4. Whole statement

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected using a coding procedure drawn on the normative framework of Waldron (2012), Parekh (2012) and the UN Rabat Plan Test (2013).

A statement is coded as hate speech if it satisfies any of the following criteria:

- Contains derogatory or insulting language towards a social group.

- Attributes negative traits to an entire group.

- Advocates discrimination or exclusion.

- Encourages hostility or violence.

Coding Categories (Codebook)

The coding matrix below was adapted to ascertain which of the units of analysis were present in the object of study. They were categorised as:

Code	Category	Description	Example
HS1	Direct insult	Explicit derogatory language directed at a group	"Those people are useless and backward."
HS2	Dehumanization	Language comparing a group to animals, diseases, or objects	"They are like parasites destroying the nation."
HS3	Threat or incitement	Encouragement of violence or harm	"They should be chased out of this country."
HS4	Stereotyping	Generalized negative characterization of a group	"All of them are criminals."
HS5	Exclusionary rhetoric	Calls to deny rights, participation, or belonging	"They do not deserve to live here."
NH	Non-hate speech	Neutral or non-discriminatory expression	"We must work together as a nation."

Inter-coder Reliability

Two independent coders were trained on the use of the coding procedure. After that, a pilot coding was conducted using the same matrix. Based on Cohen's Kappa value interpretation, the inter-coder reliability had a substantial agreement-(0.75) (Cohen 1960).

Data sources

Media monitoring reports from the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), and EU Election Observation Missions (2019, 2023).

Security data from SBM Intelligence, CLEEN Foundation, and Nigeria Police Force annual reports.

Media texts (news headlines, opinion pieces, and viral social media posts) purposively selected from national newspapers, television broadcasts, and online platforms, as documented by the various data sources earlier mentioned.

Data presentation and analysis

Quantitative data were presented in tabular form. Data were analyzed descriptively to identify trends in hate speech incidents. Qualitative discourse analysis focused on framing, metaphors, and identity construction.

Table 1: Frequency of Media-Reported Hate Speech Incidents in Nigeria (2018–2025)

Year	Print Media	Broadcast Media	Online News	Social Media	Total (%)
2018	42	55	63	98	258 (8.1%)
*2019	88	132	165	312	697 (21.9%)
2020	47	69	94	176	386 (12.1%)
2021	52	71	103	188	414 (13.0%)
2022	61	84	126	231	502 (15.8%)

*2023	102	149	198	356	805 (25.3%)
2024	48	66	97	162	373 (11.7%)
2025	41	59	86	143	329 (10.3%)
Total	481	685	932	1,666	3,164 (100%)

*Election years

Source: Compiled from NBC Sanctions Reports, CDD Media Monitoring Data, and EU Election Observation Mission reports (2019, 2023).

Interpretation

The temporal distribution of hate speech incidents indicates sharp increases during election cycles. Table 1 illustrates a steep rise in media hate speech in 2019 and 2023, followed by noticeable declines in post-election years. The trend line for social media shows the most dramatic increase, underscoring its role as the primary amplifier of politically charged hate narratives.

Election years (2019 and 2023) account for 47.2% of all recorded hate speech incidents, confirming a strong link between electoral competition and media-amplified hate speech.

These findings align with agenda-setting theory, as election-related issues dominated media discourse, crowding out conciliatory narratives and elevating identity-based conflicts to national prominence.

Table 2: Dominant Hate Speech Frames in Nigerian Media Discourse (2018–2025)

Frame Type	**Description**	**Frequency (%)**
Ethnic Blame Frame	Assigns conflict responsibility to ethnic groups	34.6
Existential Threat Frame	Portrays groups as threats to national survival	27.3
Victimhood Frame	Emphasizes historical marginalization	21.5
Political Demonization Frame	Depicts opponents as enemies of the state	12.1
Religious Moralization Frame	Frames conflict in religious absolutes	4.5
Total		100

Source: Qualitative Discourse Analysis of selected print, broadcast, and digital media texts as compiled from NBC Sanctions Reports, CDD Media Monitoring Data, and EU Election Observation Mission Reports (2019, 2023).

Interpretation

The table illustrates hate speech frames derived from a qualitative discourse analysis of the various media reports documented.

Qualitative discourse analysis identified recurring frames through which hate speech was constructed and legitimized. As presented in Table 2, the most dominant frames were ethnic blame (34.6%) and existential threat (27.3%), both of which portray social conflicts as zero-sum struggles between identity groups. These frames simplify complex socio-political issues and encourage antagonistic interpretations, thereby weakening narratives of shared national identity.

The dominance of ethnic blame and existential threat frames suggests that hate speech is often legitimized as defensive or patriotic discourse, increasing its social acceptability.

Table 3: Relationship Between Hate Speech Peaks and Security Incidents

Period	Hate Speech Level	Reported Security Incidents	Nature of Incidents
Q1–Q2 2019	Very High	Electoral violence,	communal clashes
Q3–Q4 2019	Moderate	Post-election protests	
Q1–Q4 2020	Moderate	Farmer–herder conflicts	
Q1–Q2 2023	Very High	Election violence, arson, attacks	
Q3–Q4 2023	High		Separatist violence
2024–2025	Moderate–Low	Banditry,	sporadic unrest

Source: SBM Intelligence and CLEEN Foundation Security Reports correlated with media monitoring data.

Interpretation

To examine the relationship between hate speech and national security, media data were compared with reported security incidents from SBM Intelligence and CLEEN Foundation reports. Table 3 shows that periods of high hate speech intensity often coincided with or preceded increased levels of violence, including electoral unrest, communal clashes, and separatist attacks.

This pattern supports existing scholarship that links sustained exposure to hate speech with heightened risk of violence, particularly in fragile political environments.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of NBC sanction reports and media monitoring data indicates a steady increase in hate speech incidents, peaking during election years. In 2019 and 2023, over 60% of recorded broadcast sanctions related to inflammatory or hate-laden political content was reported (NBC, 2023).

Social media analysis from CDD reports shows that ethnic and religious hate narratives accounted for approximately 45% of viral political posts during the 2023 elections, compared to 28% in 2019. This reflects the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping political discourse.

Framing patterns

Qualitative analysis reveals three dominant frames:

Ethnic blame frame, portraying conflicts as inherent ethnic antagonism. Existential threat frame, depicting rival groups as threats to survival.

Victimhood frame, emphasizing historical grievances to justify hostility. These frames normalize hate speech by presenting it as defensive or justified. **Relationship with security incidents**

Security data indicate that spikes in media hate speech often preceded or coincided with communal violence and political unrest. For example, SBM Intelligence reports show increased violent incidents following periods of intense online hate speech during election campaigns.

The findings confirm that Nigerian media - especially digital platforms - play a central role in amplifying hate

speech. Framing and agenda-setting mechanisms normalize divisive narratives, weakening national cohesion. The correlation between media hate speech and security incidents supports existing theories linking communication practices to conflict escalation. Weak regulation and politicization of media institutions exacerbate the problem. While regulatory frameworks exist, inconsistent enforcement undermines their deterrent effect.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the foregoing the study recommends consistent and transparent enforcement of media regulations, regardless of political affiliation.

Regulatory agencies should strengthen monitoring mechanisms and apply sanctions fairly.

Media organizations should reinforce professional ethics through regular training on conflict- sensitive and peace-oriented reporting.

Editorial policies should explicitly address hate speech and identity-based framing.

Digital media literacy programs should be expanded to help citizens identify and resist hate speech and misinformation.

Social media companies should collaborate with Nigerian regulators and civil society to improve content moderation and accountability.

Finally, media narratives should emphasize shared national identity, dialogue, and social integration rather than division.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that hate speech within Nigerian media discourse poses a measurable threat to national unity and security. By empirically analysing media framing and trends between 2018 and 2025, the study highlights the urgent need for coordinated regulatory, professional, and educational responses. Addressing media-driven hate speech is essential for strengthening Nigeria's social cohesion and democratic stability.

Ethics Declaration Ethic Approval Not applicable

Consent for Publication

All participants provided consent for their anonymized responses to be used in this publication.

Competing Interests

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

In the course of preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to paraphrase the original text for improved grammatical clarity. After that, the author carefully revealed and edited the content and take full responsibility for the publication of the content.

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