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## A critical discursive analysis of hate speech strategies in select online platforms in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Text analysis has received significant attention from different discourse perspectives. However, there has been limited critical discourse investigation into the discursive strategies of hate speech in Nigeria. This study, therefore, provides a critical discourse analytical perspective of the discursive strategies of hate speech in selected online platforms in Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative descriptive research approach, the study relies on van Dijk's ideological square theoretical framework in the analysis of social representations that construct the 'Us' versus 'Them' discourse stance in online platforms in Nigeria. Twenty (20) text samples were purposively selected from five online versions of newspapers—Premium Times, Daily Post, Nigerianeye, Sahara Reporter and The Punch, and two social media platforms—Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) in Nigeria. The findings revealed evidentiality, number game, generalization, categorization, distancing and positive self and negative other-representation as discursive strategies characteristic of hate speech. The study concludes that discursive strategies and process-types serve as parameters for detecting hate speeches in Nigeria. It recommends the introduction of a national language as a medium of communication across Nigeria to help bridge the gap in communication, and its attendant consequences on Nigeria's unity, associated with the recourse of socio-political groups to tribal or ethnic languages.*

*Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, discursive strategies, hate speech, ideological square and social representations*

### Introduction

Language is unarguably a unique human attribute that has a strong influence on peoples' lives, beliefs and their perceptions of life. Obviously, there is no human society without a functional language. While it is very important in the expression of the lived experiences of a people within a given geographical area, it equally serves a variety of needs in the society which are either positive or negative (Eze, 2017:1). In other words, language is a

double-edged sword that should be used tactfully as it could be used to build or destroy a nation (Obiora et al, 2021), just as the case of Rwandan genocide (Ajali: 2007). Language is a necessary instrument in the enactment of democratic principles. Whether in speech or writing, its significant role in a democracy goes beyond the guarantee of freedom of speech. Depending on the circumstances of its use, language has the potential to demean, incite, malign, offend and hurt, especially when the goal of language users is to stereotype or stigmatize a group of persons on the basis of their religion, race, ethnicity, gender, colour, sexual orientation, age and other protected characteristics. This latter role of language is often characterized as hate speech (Brown, 2017).

This study therefore, has the goal of investigating the discursive strategies deployed by social actors operating within Nigeria's political landscape in the enactment of hate speech in Select Online Platforms in Nigeria. This is to achieve the objective of identifying and characterizing the various discursive strategies in the framing of hate speech. Consequently, the research question central to the purpose of this study is; what are the discursive strategies of hate speech?

## Discursive Strategies

Discursive strategies are linguistic moves, such as lexicalization, categorization, passivization, polarization, positive self-representation and negative other-representations used by language users to influence or control the readers' minds. (Van Dijk, 2003; Wodak, 2005) In other words, discursive strategies are intentional practices and tactics employed in discourses to construct social, cultural, political, psychological or linguistic categories. Its major tactics include the use of authority, evidentiality, actor description, number game, categorization, distancing, positive self-representation, negative other-representation often deployed by language users to achieve communicative goals in text and talk. (van Dijk, 2003, 2012; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

Taking an ideological stance, Khuong et al (2016) opine that discursive strategies mirror the ideological permutations beneath the representations of social events by possibly opposed and conflicted groups. Such representations are often projected along 'Us' versus 'Them' dichotomy, in-group and out-group representations—the underlying structure by which hate speech is sustained.

## Hate Speech Discourse: A Conceptual Overview

The examination of the concept of “hate speech” is highly contextual and in absolute terms can present complicated philosophical discussion because what is considered hate in one culture or country may be seen as free speech in another culture. However, there is yet to be a consensus on a universal definition of hate speech, Siegel (2020: 57) defined hate speech as a “bias-motivated, hostile and malicious language targeted at a person or group based on their actual or perceived characteristics”, such as ethnicity, religion, political orientation, or gender. Elliott et al (2016) state that hate speech can be broadly defined as a speech act that antagonizes or marginalizes people based on their identification with a particular social or demographic group.

The United Nations (2019) in its strategy and plan of action on hate speech affirms that there is no international legal definition of hate speech and the characterization of what is ‘hateful’ is controversial and disputed. In their argument, the United Nations opines that hate speech is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language regarding a person or a group based on who they are; in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. Hate speech is often rooted in and generates intolerance and hatred and in many contexts, it can be demeaning and divisive. Cohen-Almagor (2013: 43) defines hate speech as a bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics. It expresses discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or prejudicial attitudes toward those characteristics; which include gender, race, religion, ethnicity, colour, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation. Hate speech is aimed to injure, dehumanize, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade and victimize the target groups and foment insensitivity and brutality against them.

Cohen-Almagor’s (2013: 43) description is a thorough explanation of how hate speech can be interpreted. Establishing a definition, however, is one element in understanding the concept of hate speech. How it is negotiated within a particular context, in a given society and at a particular point in time is equally important. Hate discourses on social media has received significant scholarly attention in recent times (Neisser, 1994; Musoiff, 2015; Mrabure, 2016; Fasakin et al 2017; Esimokha et al, 2019), and most of the existing literature has concentrated on aspects of the sociological, legal (Brown, 2017) and psychological issues surrounding hate speech. More so, there are other scholars, who have investigated various aspects of hate speech in language use

(Iroka, 2013; Ezeibe, 2015; Rahmadsya et al, 2019; Ayodele, 2020; Chiluwa et al, 2020; Taofeek & Adewale, 2020; Ayansola, 2021; Sopuruchi & Bestman, 2021; Meagan et al, 2022), but whose studies werenot hinged on critical discourse analytical parameters for identifying hate speech in Nigeria. Thus, this study is significant for adding to existing literature further strategies of hate speech construction in Nigeria, such asevidentiality, number game, generalization, categorization, distancing and positive self and negative other-representation:

## Theoretical Framework

This study anchors its theoretical underpinning on van Dijk's (1998) ideological square. The ideological square is the key strategy in van Dijk's approach to CDA and the concept is premised on positive self-representation of those viewed as in-group and negative other-representation of those considered as out-group (van Dijk, 1998, 2006). Van Dijk's view is presented through his four micro-semantic strategies. The micro-semantic strategies are demonstrated by in-group favouritism and out-group derogation which emphasize our good actions, emphasize their bad actions, and in a similar manner de-emphasize our bad actions, de-emphasize their good actions. Van Dijk's (1998) states that in propositions where the acts are good 'Our' people (i.e. in-group) tend to appear as actors whereas when the acts are bad 'Their' people primarily appear as actors. According to van Dijk (1998, 2006, 2012) this is a general strategy for the expression of shared, group-based attitudes and ideologies through in-group favouritism and out-group derogation.

## Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design and data was sampled from six (6) online versions of newspapers (*Premium Times, The Punch, The Daily Post, The Guardian, Sahara Reporter, Nigerianeye*) and two social media platforms (*Facebook and X (formerly Twitter)*) in Nigeria. The samples were purposively selected from these online versions of the select newspapers and social media platforms to uncover ideological underpinning in the discourses of hate speech in Nigeria. The data analysis was done using Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis. The wide readership and easy accessibility of these media outfits informed their selection as our main source of data collection. More so, the need to access sufficient data for comprehensive review of hate speech in Nigeria made us to look towards getting data from the select social media platforms-Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). In addition, it should be noted that the choice of social media as a source of data is due to its advantage over the news media in terms of text producers' liberty to express views and

information that may not be published by the news media, especially if such cannot be verified.

The collection of data for a study to characterize the nature of hate speech in Nigeria started about January 2020, when the issue of hate speech gained global attention. However, the data for this study were largely restricted to those obtained in 2024, to allow for inclusion of data with current information on hate speech in Nigeria. The focus of analysis in the study is to unravel the discursive strategies and process-types that underscore the manifestation of hate speech in Nigeria using thematic analysis as analytical framework.

Coding of Discursive Strategies in Hate Speech Discourse

The table below shows the linguistic moves used by language users to influence or control the minds of the readers, stating their meaning and giving examples.

Discursive Strategies	Meaning	Samples	Description
Number Game	Numbers and statistics are used in discourse to persuasively present objectivity. It is a discursive strategy used to emphasize objectivity and enhance credibility in news reports.	Daily post reports how marauding Fulani herdsmen killed fifty (50) people again in Eha-Amufu, Enugu State.  Killer Fulani herdsmen have killed over five hundred and forty eight (548) people in repeated attacks in Irigwe community of Bassa local government of Plateau State in four years – Christians Association of Nigeria.  Suspected Fulani herdsmen invaded Ondo church and killed forty (40) people during Sunday service.  Fulani attackers have killed as many as 29,000 Yoruba people in a year since 2015-Yoruba agitator’s letter to President Tinubu	number game emphasizes bad actions of ‘them’and good actions of ‘us’.  The use of number game to denote the degree of havoc caused by Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria.  The construed mental model depicts the height of atrocities committed by Fulani herdsmen.  Adverb intensifiers are used as strategies to amplify the numbers and degree of atrocities in order to draw attention.

<p>Evidentiality</p>	<p>Evidentiality is the use of evidence or proof to make opinions, claims or viewpoints plausible. When speakers present evidence or proof in discourse to back their arguments, their opinions influence the mental model of the recipients and make them accept the viewpoints as real and true.</p>	<p>Betty Akeredolu: Nigeria is a zoo, Ondo APC primary election was perfected by professional election riggers.</p> <p>AKintayo, it baffles me a times that idiots will unjustly start comparing people that have clean upbringing with chaotic Yoruba drug pusher of false information, Please Akintayo mind your business.</p> <p>The insurgents in the south east are claiming they want their own country. No, we will not allow them. The constitution is supreme and Nigerian government has to stand, fight them and give them what they want – Senator Adamu.</p> <p>Buhari is a religious bigot, an Islamic terrorist. His Islamisation policy is gradually taking shape. Take a look at his appointments starting from service chiefs, they are all north, no single Igbo in all these positions, senate president, north. Why?</p>	<p>Evidentiality is deployed in discourse to make opinions or viewpoints plausible.</p> <p>The use of evidence has the power to be easily reflected as episodic mental model.</p> <p>Evidence in hate speech discourse helps to project the negative attributes of the others, out-group and the positive attributes of 'Us', the in-group.</p> <p>Media information forms an important part of evidentiality strategy because speeches in the media are ideologically based.</p>
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Generalization	<p>The strategy of generalisation is intended to make opinions and claims broader and more generally applicable.</p>	<p>Let us kill all the Igbos, Let's flush them out of everywhere in Yoruba land. I hate these people with passion. They are violent people. They are animals, they are worst. They hate us, let's hate them without holding back.</p> <p>He (Buhari) is a terrorist himself. You know, they baptize them with terrorist water after birth. That is why they are always thirst for blood.</p> <p>Yes, Boko Haram are terrorists. In fact, all Muslim are terrorists.</p> <p>I will deport Peter Obi to Malaysia, and all his supports dumped inside dustbin because they are all maggots.</p>	<p>The speaker stereotypes Igbos as violent people.</p> <p>The north was profiled by an Igbo speaker as terrorists.</p> <p>The speakers used quantifiers all, always and everywhere to generalize their targets as bad while presenting themselves as good</p> <p>Generalization of negative acts or events is the basis of prejudice, profiling and stereotyping in ideologically based discourse.</p>
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Categorization	<p>Categorization is a strategy that is used to distinguish and categorize individuals and groups with positive attributes or negative characteristics</p>	<p>We'll chase these Fulani terrorists out of the south east, Hausa safe with us.</p> <p>They could have been a coup if a non-northern Muslim president had done a fraction of what Buhari did.</p> <p>This is what I expect from those cows in the north, I'm not surprise at all. We are not like them.</p> <p>When a pitiable political harlot calling notable party loyalists political harlots, isn't that laughable? I'll teach those political idiots of River state a lesson.</p>	<p>There is negative presentation of Fulani and positive presentation of others.</p> <p>Accentuation of a group superiority over others.</p> <p>Speakers categorized groups using pronominal referencing technique to distance in-groups from out-groups.</p>
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Positive Self and Negative other Representations	Positive self-representation is a strategy that is characterized by in-group favouritism and out-group derogation	<p>I'm speechless. You have spoken so well but we are not the same, you remain the same almajiri.</p> <p>No matter what you say, I support Buhari unconditionally and for that matter, no lies, propaganda or negative politicking can change our perception of his personality and vision. For the first time, Nigeria is blessed with a leader who is free from corruption and yet some of you fools and sponsored liars want to spoil his image. It can't happen.</p> <p>When Yorubas were in charge of the theatre, people were not buying local films to watch in their homes, it was the Igbos that made people like local movies.</p> <p>Buhari unleashed his killer terrorist soldiers on unarmed Biafran protesters in cities across the south east but we will not attack, they are terrorists we are not.</p>	<p>Positive self and negative other-representation is a strategy used to project the positive face of in-group members.</p> <p>In-group members are presented in positive light while the out-group is depicted in negative light</p> <p>The in-groups are intelligent while the out-groups are almajiris.</p> <p>The in-group members are corruption free while the out-groups are corrupt.</p> <p>Igbos are business oriented while the Yorubas are not.</p> <p>Buhari and his government are labelled terrorists while the south east region is viewed as victim of their attacks.</p>
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Distancing	Distancing is a strategy in discourse that discusses ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in text and talk. It is an ideological discourse strategy used to create emotional and psychological distance between in-groups and out-groups.	Those insurgent in the south east are claiming they want their own country. No, we’ll not allow them. The constitution is supreme and Nigerian government has to stand, fight them a give them what they want.  Those Aboki with suya brains will come after you...You are exactly the kind of people Allen is referring to.	The samples contain lexical items that imply distance between in-group and out-group members.  Demonstrative pronouns co-existing with nouns in a nominal group or existing as an independent element in replacement for a nominal serve as pointers to the nouns the modify or replace.
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**Discursive Strategy of Number Game in Hate Speech Discourse**

Number game is a powerful tool in ideological management (Khuong et al, 2016). It is a discursive strategy used to emphasize objectivity and enhance credibility in news reports (Igwebuike, 2016). Numbers and statistics are used in discourse to persuasively present objectivity. It is a means of representing facts against opinions and impression. A recourse to the use of numbers is often an attempt to emphasize bad action of the others while emphasizing our good actions. On the other hand, it is also used to de-emphasizethe good actions of the discourse other (Them) while also de-emphasizing the bad actions of the discourse self (Us). Van Dijk (2006) posits that numerical description of victims in discourse predominantly signal precision and truthfulness. Therefore, in hate discourse, especially the one that deals with ethnicity and religion presented in the media, numbers are used to represent ‘facts’ against mere opinion and impression (van Dijk, 2012). This strategy is used in the media to discursively construct the quality, compassion and contrast between the ideological US and the ideological THEM as shown in the samples below:

**Sample 1:** Daily post reports how marauding Fulani herdsmen killed fifty (50) people again in Eha-Amufu, Enugu State - @BobbyDzzler (X 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2023).

**Sample 2:** Killer Fulani herdsmen have killed over five hundred and forty-eight (548) people in repeated attacks on Irigiwe community of Bassa Local Government of Plateau State in four years-Christian Association of Nigeria (The Guardian 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2021)

**Sample 3:** Suspected Fulani herdsmen invaded Ondo Church and killed forty (40) people during Sunday service (Nigerianeye 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2022)

**Sample 4:** Fulani attackers have killed as many as twenty-nine thousand (29,000) Yoruba people in a year since 2015 - Yoruba agitator's letter to president Tinubu (Daily post, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 2024)

The samples above used numbers and statistics to denote the degree of havoc caused by Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria. The numbers '50 people' (sample 1) 'over 548 people' (sample 2), 'over 40 people' (sample 3) and 'as many as 29,000 people' (sample 4) are used to show large number of Nigerians that have been consistently killed by Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria. The speakers of samples 1, 2, 3 and 4 are presumably non-Fulani and Christian southerners who have been affected by the heinous activities and consistent killing orchestrated by Fulani herdsmen across Nigeria. The construed mental model presents the height of atrocities committed by the group. Thus, adverbs such as 'over' in sample 2 and 'many' in sample 4 are used as strategies to amplify the number, drawing attention to it. The implication of amplifying the number using the adverbs (over and many) is a rhetorical ploy to emphasize the large number and consistency of attacks orchestrated by Fulani herdsmen against innocent Nigerians. The overall ideology in the samples is the representation of the negative deeds of the Fulani herdsmen.

On the other hand, the use of the material process verbs 'killed', 'invaded' and 'have killed' in samples 1, 2, 3 and 4 show the actions performed by the subject 'Fulani herdsmen' and the effects of the actions continued even to the present moment and have been consistent for four years. The process-type revealed the action of 'doing'. Thus, 'repeated attacks' in the excerpt presents the consistency of the atrocities perpetuated by the Fulani herdsmen against the target. The material process verb 'invaded' in sample 3 shows the manner

of operation of these killer herdsmen. It projects the fact that these Fulani attackers come unexpectedly and carry out their dastardly acts. The hate speech in the samples is revealed by negatively tagging the Fulani herdsmen as ‘attackers’ and ‘killers’.

## Discursive Strategy of Evidentiality in Hate Speech Discourse

Evidence is an important move to convey objectivity, reliability and credibility in discourse. Van Dijk (2012) states that evidentiality is the use of evidence or proof to make opinions, claims or viewpoints plausible, reliable and credible in news reports. When speakers present evidence or proof in discourse to back their arguments, their opinions influence the mental model of the recipients and make them to accept the viewpoint as real and true (Igwebuike, 2016). In using evidentiality as a discursive strategy, proof, evidence or references to authorities are used by speakers to authenticate their arguments and persuade the readers/ listeners to accept their opinions. In discourses of hate, discourse participants use evidence to support in-group’s good deeds and out-group’s bad deeds. This strategy is evident in the following samples:

**Sample 5:** Betty Akeredolu: Nigeria is a zoo, Ondo APC Primary election was perfected by professional election riggers (Facebook post 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2024)

**Sample 6:** Those insurgents in the South East are claiming they want their own country. No, we will not allow them. The constitution is supreme and Nigerian government has to stand, fight them and give them what they want - Senator Adamu Bulkachuwa (Daily post, 18<sup>th</sup> July, 2022)

**Sample 7:** Buhari is a religious bigot, an Islamic terrorist. His Islamisation policy is gradually taking shape. Take a look at his appointment starting from service chiefs, they are all north, no single Igbo in all these positions, senate president, north. Why? – Chijioke Hub (Facebook 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2018)

The strategy of evidentiality is deployed in the samples above to portray the negative actions of the ‘other’ and the perception of the victims in an ethno-religious and politically polarized society, such as Nigeria. In sample 5, the speaker is Betty Akeredolu, perhaps grieving the death of her husband (who was previously the Governor and leader of the Party in the State)

appears to be playing opposition in the Ondo All Progressive Congress (APC). Governor, Rotimi Akeredolu's death necessitated the emergence of the deputy governor, Lucky Aiyedatiwa as the Governor. Consequently, Betty and her family were sidelined in running the party's (APC) affairs in the state. This factor made her to be perceived as playing opposition within the APC.

In Sample 5, her outburst describing APC members who conducted the Ondo APC Primary election as 'professional election riggers' points to the division in the party. The division, understandably, exists between the group loyal to the late former governor and the group committed to enthroning the former deputy governor. The professional election riggers are therefore those in the party who have been perceived as not following the party's procedures for the conduct of the primary election. The Akeredolu political camp to which Betty belongs could be represented as the 'us' (in light of Sample 5), while the APC leadership in Ondo State (superintending over the APC Primary Election) is the 'them'. Feeling aggrieved by the outcome of the primary election, Betty Akeredolu, expressing the sentiments of the Us group, simply labelled the APC leadership in the State as 'professional election riggers.' The outburst is indicative of the group's level of frustration probably due to being treated as irrelevant. What remains unclear is whether she would have said the same thing if the election turned out in her group's favour. It is, therefore, against the background of the polarization existing between these two groups that Sample 5 fits into the description of hateful expression characteristic of hate speech.

In Sample 6, the text producer, an Hausa, profiled people from the South East (mainly Igbo) as insurgents. While this label may appear appropriate in view of the agitations and insecurity currently being experienced in the part of the country, would the text producer also have said the same of the activities of bandits, herdsmen and kidnappers that have made the north of Nigeria unsafe? It may not be unlikely therefore that the text producer's (who is from the North) perspective is representative of views of members of his group. In juxtaposition, the speaker of Sample 8, an Igbo, profiled Buhari (representative of the North) as a religious bigot and Islamic terrorist, due mainly to his considered lopsided policies and parochial interests. Each of these samples provided their speakers' views of other tribes or out-group (Them) in Nigeria. Excerpts 5-7, through generalizations, reflect the perception of members of an in-group (Us) presenting other ethnic out-groups (Them) in a negative light, often describing them as drug pushers, insurgents, bigots and Islamic terrorists respectively. This characterization is an exponent of hate speech.

## Discursive Strategy of Generalization in Hate Speech Discourse

The strategy of generalization is intended to make opinions and claims broader and more generally applicable. Van Dijk (2006, 2012) avers that generalization as a discursive strategy signals the cognitive relation between more concrete examples as represented in the mental model and more general opinions such as those of social attitudes or ideologies (p.55). This strategy is often exploited to create an impression that many people or institutions are involved in a discourse as exemplified below:

**Sample 9:** Let us kill *all* the Igbos. Let's flush them out of *everywhere* in Yoruba land. I hate these people with passion. They are violent people. They are animals, they are worst. They hate us, let's hate them without holding back – Kehinde Adekusibe (Premium Times, 16th June, 2023)

**Sample 10:** He (Buhari) is a terrorist himself. You know, they baptize them with terrorist water after birth. That is why they are *always* thirsty for blood (Facebook, 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2021)

**Sample 11:** Yes, Boko Haram are terrorists. In fact, *all* Muslims are terrorists (Facebook, 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2021)

**Sample12:** I will deport Peter Obi to Malaysia, and *all* his supporters dumped inside dustbin because they are *all* maggots – FFK, Tinubu spokesman during 2023 general election (Daily post, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2022)

The speaker of sample 9 is a Yoruba person and the 'target' is Igbo whom he stereotyped as violent people. On the other hand, the speakers of samples 10 and 11 are Igbo people who profiled the north and Muslims as terrorists while the producer of sample 12 is Femi Fani Kayode (FFK), the campaign spokesperson of Bola Tinubu, the presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) in the 2023 general election in Nigeria. He referred to Peter Obi, the presidential candidate of Labour Party (LP) in the 2023 presidential election and his supporters as maggots to be dumped inside dustbin. Thus, the italicized words in the samples above are quantifiers. For instance, 'all' is a quantifier for nouns and noun phrases "the Igbos" in sample 9, in much the same way as 'Muslim' in sample 11, 'his supporters' and 'maggots' in sample 12. In sample 9, 'everywhere' expresses location or place, whereas 'always' in sample 10 indicates frequency. The lexical choices 'all', 'everywhere' and 'always' are used to make readers believe that the ethnic

group, religion or persons involved in these propositions are representations of all the constituents, a more general representation of the groups than particularization. Generalization of negative acts or events is the basis of prejudice, profiling and stereotyping in ideologically based discourse.

For instance, in sample 9, the speaker stereotyped 'Igbos' as bad and deserving of extermination. Samples 10 and 11 profiled north and muslims as terrorists while sample 12 stereotyped 'Obi and his supporters' as undeserving and a waste to be trashed out in the dustbin. The religious symbolism of baptism (in 10 and 11) perhaps is an attempt to reinforce the culture of violence that is often erroneously assumed as entrenched in muslims. Though the identity of the text producer is not revealed, it is almost certain that the producer does not belong to the same religious or ideological group as the referent, which may explain the disdain and resentment for the average northerner represented by Buhari. The speaker equally referred to Peter Obi's supporters as maggots. 'Maggot' is a pejorative and dehumanizing slur often used in hate discourses to degrade and debase individuals or groups. The deliberate use of these denigrating terms; maggots, terrorists, and hateful expressions such as "I hate these people with passion. They are violent people.. are animals", is a pointer to the deep animosity between the ethnic groups in Nigeria, hence the perpetuation of stereotypes against the target group for political reasons.

## **Discursive Strategy of Categorization in Hate Speech Discourse**

According to van Dijk (2005), the construction of in-group and out-group associating the people with different ideological groups is called categorization. The ideological description of people as 'us' and 'them' is the foundation of ideological discourse. This discursive construction starts with labeling of social actors, proceeds to the generalization of in-group with positive attributions and out-group with negative attributions and polarization of 'Us' versus 'Them'. Social actors are polarized on the basis of inclusion and exclusion. This categorization become ideological when the in-group, 'us' is depicted with positive attributions for positive self-representation and the out-group, 'them' is polarized with negative attributions for negative other-representation which establish negative sense of 'others' and positive sense of 'self' (Mckinlay & Mcvittie, 2008).

Categorization as a strategy in discourse is used to distinguish and classify individuals and groups with positive attributes or negative characteristics. The basis of categorization in Nigeria for instance is ethnicity, tribe, religion and political affiliations. Categorization creates 'us' and 'them' dichotomy in terms of tribe, ethnicity, religion and other bases that define group membership. In Nigeria, the discursive strategy of categorization symbolically represents the

disparities that seemingly exist between the north and the south or between Islam and Christianity and other sub-categorization that exist in the country. The strategy of categorization relates to supremacist ideology that accentuates the blame game which exists in the socio-political and ethno-religious environments in Nigeria. Ellah (2023) refers to supremacist ideology as the belief that a particular person or group of persons is superior to another. Thus, supremacist ideology results in the categorization of society into 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomy with positive self-presentation and self-glorification strategies. Categorization in discourses of hate is instantiated in the samples below:

**Sample 13:** We'll chase these Fulani terrorists out of the south east, Hausa safe with us – IPOB (Daily Post, 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2022)

**Sample 14:** There could have been a coup if a non-northern Muslim president had done fraction of what Buhari did (The Nation, 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2020)

**Sample 15:** This is what I expect from those cows in the north, I'm not surprise at all. We are not like them – Benard Onye (Facebook comment, 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2021)

**Sample 16:** When a pitiable political harlot calling notable party loyalists political harlots, isn't that laughable? I'll teach those political idiots of River State a lesson – Wike  
(Daily Post, 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2024).

The discursive strategy of categorization is exercised in the samples above to show disparities on the basis of tribe, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation and so forth in order to accentuate distance between the speaker's groups and the target group. The speaker of sample 13, IPOB spokesperson categorized the visitors in the South East into two groups: Fulani terrorists and Hausas. The speaker said that the Fulani will be chased out of the south east while the Hausas are safe to live with the people in the region. With reference to the history of Fulani and their clashes with farmers across the country, the speaker has profiled 'Fulani' a tribe in Nigeria as 'terrorists' while the 'Hausa' is categorized as peace loving people and safe to co-habit with the people in the region. This is a negative presentation of Fulani and positive presentation of the Hausas by the speakers. In a similar manner, sample 14 also makes



categorization between two groups: non-northern Muslim and southern Christians. The speaker reminisces the attitude of Buhari, a northern Muslim Fulani president who was alleged by some social actors especially those from the south as protecting the interest of his co-northern Muslims, and Fulanis to be precise. The speaker states that there would have been a coup in Nigeria if Buhari were a non-northern Muslim or a Christian. The conditional clause “if a non-northern Muslim president” accentuates the feeling in some quarters in the country that some “people are born to rule” while others are born to follow. This ideology conflates that “those born to rule” can do anything in Nigeria and get away with it while others are meant to follow or obey. This also corroborates Ellah (2023) supremacist ideology of one group claiming superiority over other groups.

In sample 15, the speaker, in a manner of speaking, compares the north with cows. Taking a look at “ **those cows** in the north, (I’m not surprised at all) **We** are not like them”, the contrast lies in how the speaker metaphorically equates *cows* (referring to people from the northern domain of Nigeria) with *we* (humans, impliedly from Southern Nigeria going by the identity of the speaker). Obviously, ‘we’ shares a co-reference ‘with *people* in the north’ (of which cow is an exponent). It smacks of resentment to refer to humans as cows, hence, transferring the negative attributes and unpleasant traits of cows in the description of people from the north. This negative representation might not be unconnected to the heinous activities of Fulani herdsmen across the Nigerian state. Fulani herdsmen are cattle breeders from the north who move their cows to different parts of Nigeria in search of grazing field. This group of people are known for continuous clashes with farmers who object to their cows from feeding on their farmlands. The speaker’s metaphoric representation of the people in the north as cows reveals their attitudes as inhumanly and debase as cows. This is because Fulani herdsmen have the history of clashing, attacking and killing of people across the country. This metaphorical reference suggests the perception of the speaker’s group (in-group) against the other (out-group), the Fulani. The speaker categorized the groups using pronominal ‘those’ in ‘those cows in the north’ and ‘we’ in ‘we’ in the south are not like them”, to distance the in-group from the out-group.

Again, sample 16 categorized the groups into “pitiable political harlots” and “notable party loyalists”. The speaker is a former governor of River State, Nyesom Wike who is currently embroil in a political battle with his anointed political son, Sim Fubara. He referred to those who oppose to his governance of the state by proxy as “pitiable political harlots” while those in support as “notable party loyalists”. Harlot is a pejorative and misogynistic slur used in hate speech discourses to disparage, degrade and debase individuals (Bick,

2023). This is a derogatory labelling of political opponents as promiscuous, immoral and illegitimate in the discourse of party politics in River State, and for which the ex-governor vowed “to teach them a lesson”. Hence, he used rhetorical question “isn’t that laughable?” to ascertain their right in the party, People Democratic Party (PDP) and then delegitimize their right and authority in running the affairs of the state. The overall strategy in the samples above is polarization formulated to distance the in-group from the out-group and create ‘US’ and ‘Them’ dichotomy in the society.

### **Discursive Strategy of Positive Self-Representation and Negative other-representation in Hate Speech Discourse**

Positive self and negative other-representations are discourse strategies that are characterized by in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. These strategies take the form of face keeping or impression management in which the speaker emphasis the positive characteristics of their own group, such as political party, ethnic group or religious group (van Dijk, 2012) while threatening the face of the out-group. Van Dijk’s ideological frame states that the bad deeds/actions of the ‘others’ are being emphasized and given prominence while the negative acts of the ‘in-group’ are de-emphasized and mitigated. In the context of hate speech discourse especially in Nigeria where ethnicity and religion are strong instruments or tools in public discourses, positive self-representation will often manifest as an emphasis of own tolerance, lack of bias and having superior knowledge over others. Positive self-representation is an ideological frame that is based on the positive self-schema that defines the ideology of a group with strong lexicalization describing and attributing positive actions to in-group such as emphasis, assertion, hyperbole, topicalization, high prominent position, headlining, detailed description, attribution of personality, explicitness, narrative illustration, argumentative support and impression management (van Dijk, 1995). This strategy is used to project the positive face of the in-group members while presenting the other in a bad light. The concept of ‘we’ are good and ‘they’ are bad is clearly apparent in the following samples:

**Sample 17:** I’m speechless. You have spoken so well but we are not the same in knowledge, your brain remains the same almajiri – Obiekwe Nwaulu (Facebook 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2021)

**Sample 18:** No matter what you say, I support Buhari unconditionally and for that matter, no lies, Propaganda or negative politicking can change our perception of his personality and vision. For the

very first time, Nigeria has been blessed with a leader who is not corrupt and yet some of you fools and sponsored liars want to spoil his image. It can't happen – Kastina Ahmed (Whatsapp comment, 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2021)

**Sample 19:** When Yorubas were in charge of the theatre, people were not buying local films to watch in their homes, it was the Igbos that made people like local movies. Actor Kanayo O. Kanayo counters actress who said Yoruba started Nollywood (Facebook, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2023).

**Sample 20:** Buhari unleashed his killer terrorist soldiers on unarmed Biafran protesters in cities across the south east but we are not like them– IPOB (Daily post, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2017).

The speaker of sample 17 is probably a southerner of Igbo extraction and the sample indicates positive self-representation of the in-group (us, we) and negative other-representation of the out-group (you, them). It shows that the in-group 'we' are good and intelligent while the out-group 'Them' are bad, and illiterate almajiris. Almajiri is an Arabic word which refers to people who move from one place to the other in-search of Islamic knowledge. Almajiri when used by a non-northerner or a Christian in Nigeria is a derogatory reference to northern Muslims as those who are uneducated, illiterate, poor and move from one place to the other begging as means of survival. They are viewed as public nuisances, uneducated, illiterate and poor individuals who contribute nothing to national growth. Here, the speaker viewed his own group positively as having superior knowledge against the 'other' who is less educated and low in knowledge just like the almajiris.

Also in sample 18, the speaker is a northerner and a representation of a group who believed in Buhari's personality and vision for Nigeria which is noted in the phrase 'our perception'. The speaker presented his group as not corrupt' while the 'other' group as 'corrupt'. Corruption is endemic in Nigerian socio-political space and its effect on the country's economy is alarming and devastating. So, the speaker's perception of Buhari who is a representation of in-group (north) as an anti-corruption crusader is a positive self-representation of the in-group as good while the out-group is represented negatively as corrupt, liars, fools and propagandists who want to spoil Buhari's good image. The speaker viewed the out-group as being biased against the preponderance of textual and contextual evidence of what Buhari represents. The mental model constructed by the speaker is that the in-group

is 'corruption free' while the out-group is 'corrupt'. In sample 19, the in-group is represented positively as "intelligent and business oriented" while the out-group is represented negatively as not having business strategy or being entrepreneurial oriented.

The text producer intertextually draws on the comment of the in-group to construct the identity of the out-group as having no capacity to make Nollywood movies saleable and watchable among Nigerian homes. This is an indirect reference of Yoruba Nollywood actors/actresses as not good enough to manage the movie industry. The metal model is constructed to profile Yoruba Nollywood actors/actresses as non-entrepreneurial while Igbo actors/actresses as entrepreneurially oriented. In sample 20, the text producer apparently creates categorization of 'Us' versus 'Them'. The 'US', in-group is presented in positive self-representation while the 'other', the out-group is represented negatively. The 'self' (in-group) is represented positively as 'peace loving' who are victims of terror attack by "killer terrorist soldiers", the out-group. The speaker labelled the out-group as "terrorists" who victimized the in-group. Indeed, the text producer seeks to draw the reader's sympathy towards the plights of the in-group members and to represent the 'other' group as 'terrorists'. This labelling accentuates the negative acts of the out-group as it draws on a stereotypical image of 'soldiers' as 'terrorists for attacking and killing unarmed protesters.

## Discursive Strategy of Distancing in Hate Speech Discourse

Distancing is one of the discourse strategies that discusses the way 'Us' versus 'Them' dichotomy may be expressed in text and talk. Distancing strategy is a discourse strategy that ideologically or psychologically separates the in-groups from the out-groups. To distance the in-group from the out-group, demonstrative pronouns are invaluable linguistic devices used by speakers to communicate hateful emotions. Distancing is an ideological discourse strategy used to create emotional or psychological distance between groups in discourse (van Dijk, 2012). The examples below are samples illustrating Us-Them dichotomy.

**Sample 21:** Those insurgent in the south east are claiming they want their own country. No, we will not allow them. The constitution is supreme and Nigerian government has to stand, fight and give them what they want. Senator Adamu Bulkachuwa (Daily Post, 18<sup>th</sup> July, 2017)

**Sample 22:** Those Aboki with suya brains will come after you ... You

are exactly the kind of People Allan is referring to – Tochukwu Chioma (Facebook comment, 2017)

Samples 21 and 22 contain lexical items that imply distancing between in-group members and the out-group members. Demonstrative pronouns co-existing with nouns in a nominal phrase or existing as an independent element in replacement for a nominal serve as pointers to the nouns they modify or replace indicating time, place or distance (Ayodele, 2020, Nwugo, 2024). In discourse of hate speech, demonstrative pronouns present emotional, psychological and ideological distance. For example, ‘those’ in ‘those insurgents in the south east’ in sample 21 shows the ideological distance between the speaker and the target. A demonstrative pronoun, *those*, functioning as a modifier to the nominal group head, contrasts with *these* (if occurring in a similar position), in terms of the locational distance (which may not necessarily be physical) of the referent to the speaker. In ‘those insurgents’, the speaker, who obviously is from the North of Nigeria), has a different stance on the issue of insurgency from that of the group referred to as ‘insurgents’ (who hail mainly from the South of Nigeria). A similar scenario obtains in sample 22, where the speaker (from the South of Nigeria) used ‘those’ in “those Aboki with suya brains” to derogatively profile the target group as senseless. Thus, it is an ethnophaulic reference because Aboki literally means ‘my friend’ in Hausa Language but when used by a non-northerner, it is a pejorative or derogative reference of the target person or persons as senseless or having no brain.

## Conclusion

This study has investigated a critical discourse analysis of the discursive strategies in hate speech discourse in selected online platforms in Nigeria, using Van Dijk’s (1998) ideological square to unravel different manifestations of hate speech in text and talk. The research revealed that discourses embody ideologies that are useful in the detection of hate speech in Nigeria. The strategies of evidentiality, number game, generalization, categorization, distancing and positive self and negative other-representation are deployed to create polarity categorizing the various ethnicities, religious groups and ideological groups into in-groups and out-groups. These groups have become mutually antagonistic, with their members playing the solidarity card whenever issues affecting their groups are thrown up. Efforts should therefore be made to foster a sense of patriotism that will bring about unity among the many groups in Nigeria, thereby mitigating the fault lines that fuel the incidences of hate speech in the country. The significance of this study lies

in its enabling discourse participants to understand different manifestations of hate speech with a view of making them avoid circumstances that may promote hateful emotions with its attendant negative effect on the unity of the country.

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