

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS SENTIMENTS IN NIGERIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS (2014 TO 2023)

Abednego Audu Datsau¹ & Musa A.B. Gaiya²

¹Religion and Philosophy Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Jos, Plateau State
abednegoaudu02@gmail.com/+2349035910061

²Religion and Philosophy Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Jos, Plateau State
mg.june1956@gmail.com/+2348034534412

ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 0230

Accepted Date: 06/03/2026

Published Date: 28/03/2026

Type: Research

ABSTRACT

Ethno-religious sentiments are gradually becoming defining factors in Nigeria elections. The ethno-religious sentiments expressed on the social media during electioneering campaigns show that religion and ethnicity are gradually becoming major factors shaping Nigeria's politics. The period under study shows that some of the campaign messages on the social media are not issue-based but are expressed through ethno-religious sentiments. The researchers are motivated to carry out this study because there is high level of ethno-religious sentiments being promoted on social media in Nigerian elections. The question which this paper answered is that what are the impacts of social media in promoting ethno-religious sentiments during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria from 2014-2023? While the aim is to examine the impacts of social media in promoting ethno-religious sentiments during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria from 2014 to 2023. The specific objectives are: to find out the extent to which social media compound ethno-religious divisions during electioneering campaigns in Nigerian elections, to explore what should be done to help Nigerians use social media to promote national unity during election campaigns. The study employed the use of qualitative method with a focus on qualitative content data on X and Facebook and oral interview. The researchers chose qualitative content analysis and oral interview as design because the research is multidimensional; hence, it requires multiple data to help answer the research questions and achieve the overall aim of the research. The researchers collected qualitative content data on X, and Facebook and conducted oral and phone calls interview of both Christians and Muslims on the Plateau. This study has revealed that ethno-religious sentiments have negative impacts on Nigerian politics.

Keywords: Social Media, Ethno-Religious Sentiments, Electioneering Campaigns

Introduction

Ethnicity and religion are increasingly emerging as dominant defining factors in Nigeria's electoral politics. The growing prominence of ethno-religious narratives on social media during electioneering campaigns provides the primary motivation for this study. The problem which this research addressed is that the periods under review witnessed a substantial increase in the circulation of ethno-religious sentiments across social media platforms, a development that influenced voter perceptions, informed electoral choices, and, in some instances, shaped electoral outcomes. Evidence from recent elections indicates that ethno-religious sentiments have polarized Nigerian politics along regional and religious lines, particularly between North and South and between Muslims and Christians. This polarization has deepened distrust across these divides and has increasingly shaped political alignments and voter behavior. Social media discourse during electioneering campaigns reveals that a significant proportion of political communication prioritizes ethnic or religious interests over broader national concerns. Consequently, ethnicity and religion have become central forces influencing Nigeria's contemporary political landscape.

These trends underscore the need for scholarly inquiry into the role of social media in amplifying ethno-religious sentiments within Nigeria's democratic process. The main question which this paper answered is that what are the impacts of social media in promoting ethno-religious sentiments during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria from 2014-2023? While the aim is to examine the impacts of social media in promoting ethno-religious sentiments during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria from 2014 to 2023. The above aim was achieved through the following objectives: to find out the extent to which social media compound ethno-religious divisions during electioneering campaigns in Nigerian elections, to explore what should be done to help Nigerians use social media to promote national unity during election campaigns.

Conceptual Review Of Electioneering Campaigns

Generally, electioneering campaigns comprises of different activities geared toward establishing a democratic government. These activities are said to include Electoral laws, party internal democracy, voters' registration exercise, campaign and campaign finance, voting process, results declaration, assessing the electoral management body, and good governance (Onigiobi, Obadiora and Oriowo quoted Global Commission of Elections, Security and Democracy 32). According to Brady, Johnston and Sides there are two conceptually distinct, but empirically linked, ways of looking at an electioneering campaign. The first concept focuses on institutional or quasi-institutional conditions while the second considers campaigns as periods of uncommon intensity in the political order (1-2). Similarly, Global Commission of Elections, Security and Democracy defines electioneering as processes that have to do with "the totality of the activities involved in campaigns and mobilizing citizens of a country for elections" (as quoted by Onigiobi, Obadiora and Oriowo 32). This mobilization could be done by body saddled with the responsibility to organize elections, political parties, aspirants, and thelectorates. The above definitions see electioneering in a broader view encompasses institutional preparation by electoral body and the period where the political parties and candidates mobilize support from voters.

In his attempt to conceptualize electioneering, Rasheed postulated that electioneering can be understood as "The entire or series of activities engaged in by persons who have agreed to submit themselves to elections, their political parties, groups, communities, political associations, friends, families, and others in order to influence the anticipated preference of the electorate or chooses positively" (Onigiobi, Obadiora and Oriowo 36). What could be deduced from the above definition is that electioneering campaign is a civic responsibility that is carried out by electorates, politicians and political parties in order to influence the decisions of voters when casting their votes.

Electioneering campaign is also seen as political advertising where it is narrowed to an activity whose central focus is “the blend or combined application of marketing and political principles in a political campaign, electioneering or for the marketing of a politician, political ideas, manifesto, ideologies, political party, governmental policies, programmes or projects” (Odigbo, Enyam, and Iroh 8). The major task which this act of political advertising is out to achieve is to gain the confidence of the electorates to accept their manifestos as well their political candidate(s). It is important to note that political advertising is different from commercial advertising because while the product of commercial advertising is goods and services, the product of political advertising is a person or political ideologies. This means that the products of political advertisement during electioneering processes are the political candidates and their manifestos. Furthermore, electioneering, also known as election campaigns, is seen as “The means by which political candidates and political parties prepare and present their ideas and positions on issues to the voters in the period preceding election day” (Open Election Data Initiative section 3).

The above definitions show that electioneering campaign is a complex term that could be looked at from broad or narrowed senses. Electioneering campaign in a broader sense encompasses different activities carried out toward establishing a democratically elected government. The activities include enacting electoral laws, party internal democracy, voters’ registration exercise, campaign and campaign finance, voting process, collection and declaration of results, assessing the electoral management body, and good governance. While electioneering campaign from narrow sense is understood as political advertisement, whose main focus is to market the political candidates and their manifestos in order to gain the confidence of the electorates, thereby cast their votes for them.

Theoretical Framework

Another theory which helps to explain this research is “Technological Determinism Theory.” Technological Determinism theory was said to be propounded in 1962 by Marshall McLuhan. Another name for this theory is “Media Ecology” (Azam Jan et al 31). This theory takes into account the influences that media has on the perspectives of human societies. This theory states that “Media technology shapes how we as individuals in a society think, feel, act, and how the society operates as we move from one technological age to another” (John and Ibe 27). What the theory tries to establish is that technology can transform any environment and in connection with its influence on social media communication, the theory shows that media technology can be a tool for societal change through the diffusion of the messages it carries (John and Ibe 27).

The theory promotes the thesis that while technology is believed to be influenced by the user and the surroundings, but more importantly by the technology itself (Hawer 1). No wonder Toffler sees technological development as “the determinant of all changes that have a fatal impact on all areas of human life” (As quoted by Hawer 1). This is in line with what Azam Jan et al says “Technology of mass media not only shapes attitudes and behaviour of people but also bring a revolution in the mode of operation of social system” (31).

This theory applies to this study in the sense that, the dominant media technology like social media can influence people’s decision on political matters, as it was rightly observed “There is a simple cause-effect analysis between the introduction of new technology and the changes in society’s way of thinking , feeling, acting or believing” (John and Ibe 27). As it was rightly said “We shape our tools and they in turn shape us” (Azam Jan quoted Hawer et al 31). The researchers adopt this theory as a framework because the use of different social media platforms in Nigerian politics have changed the perceptions of many voters. In fact, the use of social media for the promotion of ethno-religious sentiments during electioneering campaigns have deepened divisions among voters and in turn shaped their perceptions on who should be voted to occupy political offices.

Methodology

This paper was conducted through qualitative method. The researchers chose qualitative content analysis and oral interview as design because the research is multidimensional; hence, it requires multiple data to help answer the research questions and achieve the overall aim. The population targeted by this study comprises politicians and electorates in Nigeria. The paper interviewed 56 people as sample as well as data on X and Facebook. The sampling procedure used in the qualitative content data collection and oral interview data collection is purposeful sampling. The researchers conducted purposeful sampling of the qualitative content data on X and Facebook handles, and interviewed politicians, and electorates who are well informed on the subject matter in the periods under study. The researcher collected qualitative content data on X, and Facebook, through the use of defined multiple keywords, the use of phrases that capture the items on the aim and objectives of the research. They also interviewed politicians and electorates on the Plateau. The data collected were sorted out and harmonized according relevant themes that are in line with the objectives of the study.

Literatures on Social Media and the Promotion of Ethno-Religious Division in Nigeria

Ethnicity and Religion are integral part of African culture. Consequently, ethnicity and religion play important role in the daily lives of many Nigerians; they affect their choice of dressing, food, and politics and even the way they interact with one other (Kolawole, Letswa and Aminu 203). In view of this, studies have shown that ethnicity and religion have been used as significant tools in electioneering campaigns in Nigerian general elections (Kolawole, Letswa and Aminu 203).

It was noted that the influence of ethno-religious sentiments on voting patterns cannot be ignored in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries. A study conducted in Indonesia shows that “Religious and ethnic sentiments have always played major roles in Indonesian politics” (Sumaktoyo 142). Although this study is similar to this paper because of its focus on the impacts of religion on politics, nevertheless, it differs in some ways because it was conducted to show how religion influences the voting pattern in Indonesia.

Similarly, electioneering processes in Nigeria is usually a struggle for power among ethnic, religious and sometimes, regional groups. Consequently, “Ethnic and religious identities are particularly important to the political elite’s calculations in who gets what elective position and this is why politicians are always quick to use these primordial sentiments for mobilisation during elections” (Babalola 1). Commenting on the influence of ethnic sentiments on Nigerian politics Marcus says “Nigeria party politics has been characterised by ethnic chauvinism. This is one of the major challenges confronting the advancement of liberal democracy in Nigeria since independence. To the extent that ethnic sentiment is fully introduced in virtually all areas of Nigerian political system (Marcus 3). He further says, “The tendency of religious groups to politicize religious activities has made the country more difficult to govern. In some sects, political matters are viewed with the spectacle of religious, appeal to religious sentiment as a potent weapon which invariably makes the integration of Nigeria to be in shamble” (Marcus 7). This work is similar to this paper because it shows how ethnic and religious identities affect Nigerian politics. However, it differs because the focus of this paper is about the impacts of social media in promoting ethno-religious sentiments.

It was noted that the average Nigerian on the street understands something about politics as it concerns Nigeria. However, when one listens to the political arguments among Nigerians, the “arguments soon graduate into ethnic considerations and religion leaning” (Ejikeme 29-30). This shows that ethnicity and religion have always played significant role in influencing political participation in Nigeria. Seiyefa noted that

In spite of the federal character principle that was adopted to ensure equitable representation and the minimalisation of identity politics and nepotism, ethno-religious

sentiments rank high and have impacted adversely on governance processes especially in issues of managing insecurity and conflicts. The socio-political reality of the country portrays a political culture that leverages on ethno-religious divides as a tool of governance. This is evident in political appointments, allocation of resources and the formation of political parties amongst others (1).

The above submission made by Seiyefa clearly shows that ethno-religious sentiments during electioneering campaigns are realities that are affecting democratic processes in Nigeria. That is why Premack while speaking about the impact of religion in Nigerian politics says “Religion has long served as a political resource in Nigeria, with Muslims and Christians alike appealing to the faithful, and decrying each other, to win elections” (quoted by Eze, Uche 9). Yusuf and Taiwo noted that ethnicity and religious sentiments characterized the political scene in Nigeria right from post-independence, and they have shaped party formation and leadership structures respectively (58). Although showed how ethnicity and religion influence Nigerian politics, the papers did not treat the matter in relation to social media.

Generally speaking, ethnicity and religion have considerable impacts on the electioneering processes and voting pattern of the Nigerian electorates as noted by Salisu et al when they say

Ethnicity and religion have considerable influence on the voting pattern of the Nigerian electorate, although Federal Government often stresses the need for the citizens to put national interest above ethnic and religious considerations, yet there is politician in Nigeria who can win election without the full support of his or her own ethnic nationality and religious affiliation (91).

As a result of this, most politicians and electorates tend to tour the path of ethnicity and religion at the detriment of national interest in order to win an election. Omoregbe noted that Religion can influence politics in three ways namely: by direct involvement of religious men in politics, by fusing the two (religion and politics) as one, and by subjecting politics or government to religious doctrine or laws, thereby carrying out politics or governance along the lines of religious doctrine, ideals, or laws (quoted by Onyenekwe and Okpara 75).

It is easier to use religion and ethnicity in fueling ethno-religious sentiments because an average Nigerian is religiously and ethnically sentimental. Consequently, many Nigerians usually allow religion and ethnicity to becloud their sense of rationality and humanity. This was rightly put by Udeagha and Nwamah when they commented about the impacts of religion on Nigerian democracy thus, “In Nigeria, religion has been so manipulated that virtually all institutions in the public and private sectors have been polarized along religious lines” (Udeagha and Nwamah21).

It has been argued that social media has broken the official barrier to information censorship and allow for plurality of voices (other than the usual doctored official voice) that can bring about ethno-religious division in electioneering processes. The immediacy feature of social media made them to be powerful instruments for promoting religious and ethnic division in a pluralistic society. In view of this, social media platforms have become major forums for promoting ethno-religious division in contemporary Nigeria, where recently various social media platforms like Facebook, You Tube, X, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tiktok etc. are usually filled with messages, videos, pictures, and stories that promote ethno-religious division. Lack of moderation/regulation is a major concern as far as the new media and ethno-religious discourse in Nigeria is concerned. The consequence of this act is that it results in wide-scale spread of deliberate mischief and outright sentiments that can lead to either religious and ethnic division or both, as (Targema and Sanda 238).

The delicate thing about social media is that just as it can advance positive conversations that can bring about unity in diversity, it was observed that “Mass media can also reinforce divisions in Nigeria. Dangerous and polarizing speech can spread more widely

and cause more harm through digital media” (Bagga 7). According to perceptions poll conducted by Orange Door Research and the Nexus Fund in Plateau State in 2018, respondents believed that “A majority of hate speech is spread by social media, followed by family and friends, radio, and other means. (Bagga 7). He further says that “Such social media posts have the power to perpetuate stereotypes and the belief that different ethno-religious groups will be perpetual enemies, and use language that dehumanizes other ethnic and religious groups” (7).

It was claimed that since 2011 when social media played an increasing and decisive role in Nigeria’s elections, it has also become a basis for mobilizing supporters and inciting ethno-religious violence and hatred against political candidates. In view of this, Akinyetun, Odeyemi and Alausa says that “Social media which boasts of its ability to reach a large audience has proven to be more dangerous than traditional means of campaigning” (quoted Isola and Mohan 181). Similarly, Targema and Sanda submit that during the 2015 electoral process, social media platforms were used to promote campaigns along religious and ethnic sentiments, character assassination of opposition candidates from opposing parties; a situation that nearly tear the country apart along Christian-south and Muslim-north divide. They say the issue of hate and dangerous speech became a practice in the build-up to the 2015 general elections (205-206).

The above literatures are related to this paper because they have shown that social media were used to promote ethno-religious sentiments in Nigerian politics. However, the papers differ with current works because it moves further to show specific areas in which ethno-religious sentiments promoted on social media affect Nigerian politics.

Extent to Which Social Media Compound Ethno-Religious Divisions During Electioneering Campaigns in Nigeria

It is important to note that while the use of social media during electioneering campaigns have encouraged citizens’ active participation in political discuss, yet it has also been one of mediums through which ethno-religious sentiments were circulated. It is important to acknowledge that although there are instances where social media was used to engage in political discourse that promotes good representation, fairness, inclusivity, and issue-based campaigns, nevertheless, the data from the interview and the social media reveal that there are many instances where different social media platforms were used to compound ethno-religious divisions during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria. For instance, Roy @maestroroy commenting on Nigerian politics says “From 2015 to 2023 the Nigerian politics, especially on social media, have been really bad. There needs to be reoriented (sic) to stop the progress of this ethnic divide style of politics that we’ve witness (sic) in this period, because I fear for the next election.” Olamilekan and Bulus in an interview, said that ethno-religious expressions on the social media have done more harm than good as they always give negative results that undermines our democratic processes. People like Amir Umar Abubakar and someone who chose to remain anonymous said ethno-religious expressions have brought about negative impacts on Nigerian democracy (Interview). The question now is how does social media compound ethno-religious divisions during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria?

Polarization of Nigerian democracy along ethnic and religious divides

It is disturbing to notice that ethno-religious expressions on the social media have resulted in the polarization of Nigerian democracy along ethnic and religious divides. Daniel Musa pointed out that “When ethnicity and religion are brought into politics, they lead to division based on sentimental feelings and cleavages” (4280). Instead of emphasizing issues that promote national interest, Audu noted that ethno-religious expressions that were promoted on the social media made many campaigns messages to centre around issues that seem to protect one’s ethnicity and religion (Interview). NEFERTITI @firstladyship contends that “The North will always stoke ethnic and religious sentiments in all their dealings with the South while Sarki @Waspapping said “Peter Obi ran a church-driven campaign and secured the votes

of nearly all Nigerian Christians, yet he still couldn't win an election against 3 Muslim candidates. That says a lot more than you might believe. Nandang also said that ethno-religious expressions on the social media have polarized the citizens to vote on the bases of ethnic and religious affiliations (Interview). This polarization of voters, according to Daniel puts credible Christian or Muslim candidates to lose votes from regions they do not share the same religion or ethnicity (Interview).

Musa also noted that ethno-religious sentiments promoted on the social media made many Nigerians to blindly heed the call to cast their votes to candidates from their tribal or religious group (Interview). Aliyu also noted that the misinformation and propaganda which are spread on the social media, often with religious or ethnic twist influenced public opinions and sway voters. He further said that politicians manipulate and exploit ethnic and religious sentiments to mobilize support, rather than focusing on policy issue and governance (Interview). Consequently, Shittu said that ethno-religious sentiments on the social media have persuaded many voters to vote candidates they are not sure of their credibility and political ideologies (Interview). This is similar to what Folorunso and Folorunso said that in 2019 religion was used to manipulate elections indirectly when politicians and religious leaders used it to gain the support of the voters (154). This shows how religion was manipulated in order to polarize the nation. While Folorunso and Folorunso only focused on religion as a tool for polarizing the nation's democracy, it is worth noting that ethnicity has also been used for this purpose and social media is one of the major mediums that helps in promoting such ethno-religious sentiments.

Erosion of trust among diverse religions and ethnic groups

More so, Chagwa noted that the proliferation of fake news and bias campaign contents towards the buildup of Nigeria general elections between 2014 and 2023, which are shaped by ethno-religious sentimental expressions on the social media have resulted in the eroding the existing trust among diverse religious and ethnic groups in Nigeria institutions, leaders, as well as the democratic processes (Interview). Elisha Samuel Dih also expressed similar view when he said it breeds hatred and mistrust among different ethnic and religious groups (Interview). Agyeno noted that ethno-religious expressions on the social media have brought about trust deficit between ethnic or religious groups. As a result of this even where there are candidates that are eligible, qualified, and can be attested to be good leaders, you find out that they were not voted into power because they do not belong to a certain ethnic group or a certain religion (Interview). This is true as KB Mai Saje posted a video clip on his Facebook page about an Islamic cleric who said It is better for him to vote for a wicked Muslim who will result to his death than to vote an infidel who will do justice to him by helping him to get everything he needs in this world, and get food at lower price. Moreover, Jebes said that ethno-religious sentiments promoted on the social media made many Christians and Muslims to look at each other with suspicion (Interview).

Indeed, ethno-religious sentiments have resulted to erosion of trust among diverse ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. This is evident in a tweet by Solomon Buchi @Solomon_Buchi who says "My dad used to tell me that Nigeria cannot exist as one with Muslims. I would argue. Now, I believe it. Nigeria is rigged against Christians, southerners. The Muslims and northers (Hausa and Fulani) are the real problem of the country. It is important to note that trust is essential for the growth and development of democracy in multi-ethnic and multi lingual society like Nigeria. It will be difficult to have inclusive democracy when there is trust deficit among diverse ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria.

Undermines the power of unity in diversity

Aliyu noted that the impacts of ethno-religious expressions on social media greatly undermines national unity and the power of unity in diversity. He said "Ethnic and religious expressions on social media can deepen divisions, reinforcing existing biases and creating an

‘us versus them’ mentality, which undermine national unity and cohesion” (Interview). Similarly, Wandehyel said “Democracy thrives on unity, informed debate, and equal participation, but when citizens used digital platforms to promote ethnic and religious biases, it erodes the spirit of national cooperation” (Interview). Unfortunately, it is disturbing to see that ethno-religious affiliations that are being expressed during electioneering process have continued to threaten the unity and co-operative existence of our nation (Daniel Musa 4282). Therefore, Nigerians should note that our ethnic and religious differences should not be allowed to shape our democracy, instead, we should use them to promote the power unity in diversity.

Undermines the credibility of democratic processes

Although democratic elections are supposed to be without any form of ethnic or religious bias as noted by Daniel Musa (4282), it is disturbing to see that ethno-religious expressions on the social media during electioneering campaigns have undermined the credibility of democratic processes in Nigeria. Yusuf Garba noted that the choice of candidates in Nigeria, in many cases, is determined by one’s ethnic or religious affiliation. He said the main reason behind the 2023 Muslim-Muslim ticket is not based on credibility as the ruling party claimed, but President Bola Ahmed Tinubu was compelled to adopt this in order to get the votes of Northern Muslims (Interview). Senator Shehu Sani @ShehuSani tweeted on how undermines Nigeria’s democratic processes that “Nigeria’s 2023 election was heavily influenced by Mosques and Churches and not manifestos of the candidates. The Governing Party in Nigeria set the stage for the use of religion and LP acted in similar response to that. It’s action and reaction.” Similarly, Aliyu warned that “The spread of divisive rhetoric can undermine the credibility of democratic processes, and discourage citizens’ participation in election” (Interview). Moreover, Jabo, while speaking about how ethno-religious sentiments undermined the credibility of our democratic processes, noted that voting behaviour in Nigeria 2023 presidential election is shaped by ethno-religious sentiments. For instance, LP candidate, Mr. Peter Obi won south-south and south-east because of fundamental factors namely ethnicity and religion (142).

Similarly, Stephen notes that ethno-religious expressions on the social media weaken Nigerian democratic values. He said “Many politicians exploit these sentiments to gain support based on religious or ethnic identity rather than competence” (Interview). This agrees with what Daniel Musa observed when he said “When electorates are being forced to vote against their conscience democracy does not apply but pervasions ruled by ethnicity and religion” (4282). Manomi also noted that “While ethnic and religious sentiments are part of our reality due to the multi-ethnic and multi religious nature of our country, extreme views on ethnic and religious affiliations rather than competence and track record as the sole consideration for choosing a candidate and rejecting another has contributed to the dysfunction of our democracy in general and elections in particular” (Interview). Although Nigeria returned to democratic rule since 1999, however, ethnic and religious expressions on the social media during election campaigns have significantly undermined Nigeria’s democratic growth. Folorunso and Folorunso noted that “Ethnicity in Nigeria is a factor militating against the evolution of true democracy and good governance. In Nigeria ethnic affiliation has become a veritable platform where individuals and various groups mobilize primarily to actualize personal and socioeconomic goals through politics” (152).

Erosion of Federal character

Another negative impact of ethnic and religious expressions that were promoted on social media on Nigerian democracy is that it undermines federal character that is central to democratic governance. Dandam said when leaders are elected into various offices on the bases of ethno-religious affiliations, it will create the spirit of sentiment in governance. This will in turn undermine federal character as appointments will tend to be lopsided and be given based

on nepotism and ethno-religious affiliations instead of competence that respects federal character (Interview). This agrees with what Ibrahim and Shehu observed when they said the federal character principle which is aimed to ensure representation and prevent domination by any one group have become dysfunctional because of ethno-religious sentiments (11). Federal character is very essential for the growth of Nigeria's democracy because it creates room for inclusive democracy which gives people equal opportunities to benefit from democratic governance. Unfortunately, this has been undermined

Creates tension and crisis

It was noted that ethno-religious expressions on the social media during electioneering campaigns creates an avenue for cyberbullying and online harassment. These have resulted to building up tension which usually end up in crisis during and the aftermath of the elections. He further said the hate speech, misinformation and disinformation that were spread on the social media because of the impacts of ethno-religious expressions can incite violence, fuel conflicts, and undermine democratic stability in Nigeria (Chagwa). Reynolds rightly noted that when one flips the other side of social media, it has caused havoc, creating tension and crisis (Interview). Ask Perplexity @AskPerplexity said that "Both the APC and PDP have historically used ethnic and religious sentiments to influence elections, as seen in 2015 and 2023, where campaigns often leverage hate speech."

Furthermore, Ashir said that the ethno-religious sentiments promoted on the social media made our political atmosphere to be tensed and heated, especially toward the buildup of 2023 general election (Interview). Lashom opined that Ethnic and religious sentiments affect voter behavior and create hate speech (Interview). Joseph, while writing on how ethno-religious sentiments affect Nigeria politics, said "The tensed political atmosphere in Nigeria is resulting from the ethno-religious based campaign instead of issue-based, ideology-oriented electioneering process" (23). Although his paper did not look at this issue in relation to social media, however, it is clear that ethno-religious sentiments have created tension during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria. This was rightly affirmed by Iyan as quoted by Folorunso and Folorunso that "Multiethnic states are prone to political conflict and unhealthy competitive relationship as differing communities struggle to control political power and other economic resources of the state" (152). While electioneering campaigns are supposed to be peaceful and friendly, yet ethno-religious sentiments promoted on the social media made the build up toward Nigeria's elections to be tensed. This usually resulted to tension and crisis that disrupts elections and disenfranchises voters from exercising their civic responsibility. It should be noted that while national unity is crucial for the survival of Nigeria's democracy, the tension and crisis created by ethno-religious expressions on the social media have become a threat to national unity.

Spreads of Misinformation

Chagwa noted that ethno-religious expressions promoted on the social media negatively impacted Nigerian democracy because it became a medium for spreading misinformation and disinformation (Interview). It was noted that the advent of the digital age has made some people to "take advantage of social media and digital platforms to spread false information and fake news to harm, mislead, and distract others, rather than using technological tools to broaden civic discourse and educate the public" (Omilusi 1-2). Dayi said that there are instances where social media was used to spread false information about other parties or political candidates on the basis of ethno-religious sentiments for their own selfish political gain. He further said that there are instances where politicians employ the services people they call 'data boys' to be saying a lot of good things about them, and negative things about their opponents. In many cases, they tend to give false information that are seasoned with ethno-religious sentiments in order to gain the support of voters (Interview). While speaking about

It is necessary to say that Social media has great potential for national development if used responsibly. However, if it is used to misinform the general public, it can negatively affect nation's democratic processes. Anonymous NG @AnonXNG lamented in a tweet that the "Pattern for Lagos state governorship election: Divide and rule 1) use influencers, create accounts with Igbo names to twit provoking contents about Yoruba and Lagos 2) Screenshot the contents and spread on WhatsApp groups with captions driving the agenda through huge WhatsApp TVs." A study conducted by Chakrabarti et al noted that "disinformation has become an integral part of certain domestic political strategies in Africa, such as during the Kenyan 2022 and Nigerian 2023 elections" (Omilusi 2). Unfortunately, disinformation can intensify social differences like ethnic and religious affiliations, a situation that can prevent the marginalized groups from participating in politics (2). It was rightly noted by Agyeno that social media is a tool. When it is handled very well, it gives a better result, however, when it is used wrongly to spread misinformation during political campaigns, an injury can be caused (Interview).

Conclusion

This paper has shown that social media platforms were used to push ethnic and religious narratives by some politicians, religious leaders, ethnic and religious groups, and the electorates. This pattern which have persisted since 2015 is gradually becoming the defining factors in Nigeria democracy as witnessed in 2023 general elections. Ethno-religious sentiments promoted on the social media have compounded ethno-religious divisions during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria. These narratives have made ethnicity and religion to become one of the major driving forces in Nigeria's politics. The ethno-religious sentiments have negatively impacted Nigeria's politics by polarizing it along ethnic and religious divides, Erosion of trust among diverse religions and ethnic groups, undermine the power of unity in diversity, undermine the credibility of democratic processes, erosion of federal character, create tension and crisis, and spread of misinformation. The researchers therefore recommend that politicians and electorates should not use social media to promote ethno-religious narratives that will undermine Nigeria's democracy, but they should be used it to promote inclusive democracy.

Works Cited

Abubakar, Amir Umar. Interview. 3/12/2025.

Agyeno, Abari Joseph. Interview. 14/10/2025.

Akinyetun, T.S., Odeyemi D.D., and Alausa. "Social Media and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: Sustainable Development Goal 16, a Panacea?" *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 2, no 2 (2021), pp. 169-194. <https://kijhus.kui.ac.ug>. Accessed 23 June 2024.

Aliyu. Interview. 5/11/2025. Google Form.

Anonymous NG @AnonXNG. "Pattern for Lagos state governorship election: Divide and rule". X. 21 March 2023. Accessed 24 June 2023.

Ashir, Ismail. Interview. 6/12/2025.

Ask Perplexity @AskPerplexity. "The rise of bigotry in Nigerian politics is tied to multiple regions and political actors, with no single origin." X. 7 April 2025. Accessed 2 Dec. 2025.

Audu. Interview. 5/11/2025.

Azam Jan, Sujaat et al. "Marshal McLuhan's Technological Determinism Theory in the Arena of Social Media." *Pakistan Journal of Social Media*. Vol. 18, no 2 (2021), pp 30-34. <https://www.makhillpublications.co>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2024.

Babalola, Dele. "Ethno-Religious Voting in Nigeria: Interrogating Voting Pattern in the 2019 Presidential Election." *Research Space Journal*. Canterbury Christ Church University, 2020. <https://www.researchgate.net>. Accessed 19 March 2025.

Bagga, Ferdaouis. "Central Nigeria Overcoming Dangerous Speech and Endemic Religious Divides." *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. Feb. 2019. <https://www.uscirf.gov>. Accessed 15 July 2024.

Buchi, Solomon @Solomon_Buchi. "My dad used to tell me that Nigeria cannot exist as one with Muslims. I would argue. Now, I believe it. Nigeria is rigged against Christians, southerners." X. 28 Dec. 2023. Accessed 3 June 2023.

Bulus, Yahaya. Interview. 7/11/2025.

Chagwa, Haluta Saleh. Interview. 5/11/2025.

Dandam, Amos. Interview. 9/11/2025.

Daniel, Musa. "Ethno-Religious Sentiment and Voting Behaviour in Nigeria: A Survey of Adamawa North-Senatorial District in the 2019 General Elections." *International Journal of Science and Human Research*, vol. 8, no6, June 2025, pp. 4280-4289. <https://www.ijshr.in>. Accessed 22 Jan. 2026.

Dayi, Gyang Sunday. Interview. 15/10/2025.

Dih, Elisha Samuel. Interview. 17/10/2025.

- Ejikeme, Peter Okey. "Religion and Election in Nigeria." *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, vol. 2, no 1 (2019), pp 29-40. <https://www.acjol.org>. Accessed 28 Nov. 2024.
- Eze, Uche Nkatta Idika. "The Role of Religion as Political Mobilization Tool: The Case of Nigeria." *Social Science Research*, pp. 1-20. <https://semanticscholar.org>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.
- Folorunso, Morufu A. and Serifat A. Folorunso. "Nigeria Political Arrangement: The Challenges of Ethno-Religious consideration." *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*. No 29 (2023), pp. 150-158. <https://doi.org/10.47743/jopafi-2023-29-14>. Accessed 22 Jan. 2026.
- Futu, Samaila James. Interview. 28/11/2025.
- Garba, Yusuf. Interview. 20/11/2025.
- Hawer, Thomas. "Technological Determinism and New Media". *International Journal of English, Literature and Social Science*, vol. 2, no 2, March-April 2017: 1-4. <https://ijels.com>. Accessed 14 July 2024.
- Ibrahim, Khadeja and Kamaludeen Shehu. "Ethno-Religious Sentiments and Cultural Diversity: A Threat to Sustainable Development and Governance in Nigeria." *ResearchGate*. <https://www.researchgate.net>. Accessed 4 Jan. 2026.
- Jabo, S.M. "Manipulation of Ethno-Religious Sentiments in the 2023 general Elections: Implications on Nigeria's Unity." *Wukari International Studies Journal*, vol. 9, no 1, April 2025, pp. 134-144. <https://wissjournal.com.ng>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2026.
- Jebes, Golfa Nelson. Interview. 14/10/2025.
- John, Godswill and Ukam Ekum Ibe. "Social Media and Political Mobilization: A Study of Electorate's Preparation for 2019 Presidential Election in Cross River." *International Journal of Advanced Mass Communication and Journalism*. Vol 1, no 1 (2020), pp 23-32. <https://www.masscomjournal.com>. 17 May 2024.
- Joseph, Benike. "Ethno-Religious Politics in Nigeria: A Threat to National Unity." *Journal of Research in Education and Society*, vol. 6, no 2, Aug. 2015, pp 22-27. <https://icidr.org>. Accessed 5 Feb. 2025.
- KB Mai Saje. "video clip of an Islamic cleric who said It is better for him to vote for a wicked Muslim who will result to his death than to vote an infidel who will do justice to him." *Facebook*. Accessed on 13 Oct. 2025.
- Kolawole, Victor Are, Ahmed Muhammed Letswa and Musa Safiyanu Aminu. "Religion, Politics and 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria." *Journal of Politics*, vol. 4, no 1 (2016), pp. <https://oja.ibbuajournals.com.ng>. Accessed 30 June 2024.
- Lashom, Paul Shidol. Interview. 23/10/2025
- Luka, Simda. Interview. 1/12/2025.
- Manomi, Dogara Ishaya. Interview. 28/11/2025.
- Marcus, Babatola Adeleye. "Ethnic Politics and Religion in Nigeria: Implications for National Integration." *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration*, vol.3, no.3,

June 2015, pp.1-11. Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK. <https://ejournals.org>. Accessed 20 March 2025.

Nandang, Yakubu. Interview. 7/11/2025.

NEFERTITI @firstladyship. “The North will always stoke ethnic and religious sentiments in all their dealings with the south. X. 21 April 2021. Accessed on 12 Feb. 2024.

Odigbo, Ben E., Joseph-Kevin Enyam, and Agwu Kalu Iroh. “Marketing Concept and the Political Marketing of Political Parties during Elections.” *Journal of Global Peace Marketing and Communications*, vol 1, no 1 (2022), pp 7-20. <https://parajournals.com>. Accessed 4 Jan. 2025.

Olamilekan, Yusuf Ibrahim. Interview. 17/10/2025.

Omilusi, Mike. “Fake News, election-Related Disinformation Laws, Citizens’ Rights in African Political Ecology”. *Journal of African Elections*, vol. 24, no 1 (2025), pp. 1-25. Doi:10.20940/JAE/2025/v24i1a1. Accessed 2/2/2026.

Onigiobi, O, A.J Obadiora and T.S. Oriowo “Electioneering in Nigeria: Citizen’s Knowledge of Responsibility and Engagement.” *Nigerian Journal of Social Studies*. Vol. xxiii, no 1, April 2020, pp 31-50. <https://www.njss.org.ng>. Accessed 5 Aug. 2024.

Onyenekwe, Ogochukwu and Chioma Okpara. “A Content Analysis on Discourses About Influence of Religion on the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria”. *Journal of Social Science and Humanities*. Vol. 8, no (2023), pp 73-84. <https://esutjss.com>. Accessed 24 July 2024.

Open Election Data Initiative. <https://openelectiondatainitiative.net>.

Reynolds, James J. Interview. 14/10/2025.

Roy @maestrroy. “From 2015 to 2023 the Nigerian politics, especially on social media, have been really bad. X. Accessed 24 June 2023.

Salisu, Aminu et al. “An Analysis on the Influence of Religion and Ethnicity on 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria.” *Journal of Political Discourse*. Vol. 2, no 4, Dec. 2024, pp 90-99. <https://jopd.com.ng>. Accessed 4 Jan. 2025.

Sani, Senator Shehu @ShehuSani “Nigeria’s 2023 election was heavily influenced by Mosques and Churches and not manifestos of the candidates. X. 28 Feb. 2023. Accessed on 7 Aug. 2024.

Sarki @Waspapping. “Peter Obi ran a church-driven campaign and secured the votes of nearly all Nigerian Christians, yet he still couldn’t win an election against 3 Muslim candidates.” X. 13 March 2023. Accessed on 9 July, 2025.

Seiyefa, Ebimboere. “Ethno-Religious Politics in Nigeria and its Impact on Governance for Security.” *ResearchGate*, 2022. <https://www.researchgate.net>. Accessed 3 Jan. 2025.

Stephen, Abel. Interview. 26/11/2025.

Targema, Tordue Simon and Hajara Umar Sanda. “Social Media and the Management of Ethno- Religious Conflicts: Stakeholders’ Perspectives”. *The Journal of Society and Media*. Vol. 6, no 1, April 2022, pp232-256. <https://journal.unesa.ac.id>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2024.

Udeagha, Nduka and Grace Nwamah. “Ethno-Religious Sentiments and the Need for Restructuring in Nigeria”. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*. Vol. 7, no 8 (2020), pp 17-34. Web. 15 Dec. 2024. doi:10.14738/assrj.77.8695.

Wandehyel, Dowell B. Interview. 30/11/2025.