

AN ANALYSIS OF HATE SPEECH DISCOURSE IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGN SONGS DURING THE
2023 ELECTION IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the discourse of hate speech in political campaign songs used during the 2023 elections in Benue State, Nigeria. The research is anchored on Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, which provides a framework for analyzing how political actors use hate speech to categorize and maintain social identities. The study adopted a **case study design** and employed purposive sampling to select relevant data. Data were sourced through secondary means by transcribing audio recordings of campaign songs from the APC and PDP. Findings reveal that hate speech is a dominant feature of political campaign discourse in Benue State, reinforcing negative stereotypes and deepening social divisions. The songs extensively employ social categorization and stereotyping, fostering an "us versus them" mentality that sustains the normalization of hate speech among party supporters. The study concludes that hate speech in campaign songs poses serious threats, including political polarization, incitement to violence, and the erosion of democratic values.

Keywords: hate speech, political discourse, campaign songs, social identity

Introduction

The 2023 gubernatorial election in Benue State were characterized by intense political rivalry, resulting in heightened tension, the spread of hate speech, and divisive campaign strategies. Politics, as described by Lasswell (cited in Omamuyorwi, 2021), concerns "who gets what, when, and how," underscoring the competitive nature of political contests. In pursuit of electoral victory, political actors often resort to strategies that prioritize personal ambition over ethical considerations, even at the expense of social harmony.

Elections remain one of the most critical aspects of any nation's democratic process because they determine leadership and influence national development in areas such as the economy, infrastructure, and education. Consequently, electoral periods attract significant public interest, emotional investment, and financial resources. In Nigeria, however, elections are frequently marred by violence, largely due to the multi-party system, ethnic diversity, and religious affiliations that often shape political alignment (Ugbechi & Damkor, 2011). As campaigns intensify, politicians and their supporters employ various persuasive strategies to gain an advantage over their opponents. One prominent strategy is the composition and performance of political songs aimed at promoting a candidate's image and, in many cases, discrediting rivals. When such songs include derogatory, inflammatory, or discriminatory expressions, they constitute hate speech.

Although there is no universally accepted legal definition of hate speech, international organizations provide working definitions. The United Nations (as cited in Ismanov et al., 2023) defines hate speech as "any kind of communication, verbal, written, or behavioural, that is hostile or uses derogatory or discriminatory language against any person or group on the basis of who they are, or their religion, ethnic origin, gender, or other identity factors." Similarly, Schneider (2004) describes hate speech as communication intended to intimidate, oppress, or incite hatred and violence against individuals or groups based on their identity characteristics. Scholars have noted that hate speech fosters discrimination, hostility, and violence (Omati, 2023), creating an enabling environment for political instability and social unrest.

Language plays a central role in this phenomenon. As a tool of human communication, language reflects and shapes social relationships. It can promote peace and unity or, when misused, breed acrimony and division (Ugechi & Damkor, 2019). In the Nigerian political sphere, the misuse of language has become a recurring problem, fueling

verbal aggression and polarization between political parties. Against this backdrop, this study investigates the discourse of hate speech in political campaign songs used during the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Benue State, with a focus on how such songs function as tools for social categorization and political identity construction.

Statement of the Problem

Political campaign songs are intended to promote candidates' visions, create awareness, and mobilize support. However, in Nigeria, these songs have largely become instruments of ridicule and propaganda, inciting negative emotions and fostering division rather than promoting issue-based politics. This trend reflects a broader concern about hate speech, which has been recognized globally as a threat to peace and democratic stability. Although international and national measures, including the proposed Hate Speech Bill in Nigeria, have sought to address the problem, enforcement remains weak, allowing the practice to persist.

Previous studies have examined hate speech in Nigerian political discourse, focusing on pragmatic interpretations (Ugechi & Damkor, 2019), political speeches (Isa, 2020), social identity perspectives (Okolo & Atiye, 2022), and social media rhetoric (Aboh, Onouha & Kalu, 2021). While these studies offer valuable insights, they do not address hate speech in political campaign songs during the 2023 elections in Benue State. This gap underscores the need for the present study, which investigates how hate speech is deployed in campaign songs to construct social identities and reinforce political polarization.

Conceptual Framework

Hate Speech

Hate speech does not have a universally accepted definition; however, scholars and international bodies have provided various perspectives. Nzeibe, as cited in Okolo and Atiye (2022), defines hate speech as any form of communication that incites others to engage in acts of violence or prejudice. Similarly, the American Convention on Human Rights conceptualizes it as speech designed to intimidate, oppress, or incite hatred or violence against individuals or groups based on religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other social identities.

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, as cited in Palmadoti and Kalenikova (2018), expands the definition to include all expressions that spread, incite, promote, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or other forms of intolerance, including those expressed through aggressive nationalism, ethnocentrism, discrimination, and hostility against minorities or migrants.

The United Nations (2019) also defines hate speech as any kind of communication—oral, written, or behavioral—that uses pejorative or discriminatory language toward individuals or groups based on identity markers such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, race, or gender. The UN emphasizes that hate speech often generates intolerance and hatred, and in certain contexts, can be divisive, demeaning, and a precursor to violence. Despite the lack of a clear legal definition in international law, the term “hate speech” has attracted global concern because of its potential to escalate conflict and destabilize societies.

From these definitions, hate speech can be understood as a form of expression aimed at demeaning individuals or groups on the basis of identity, often triggering negative emotions and violent outcomes. This makes it a pressing social and political problem, particularly in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria.

Political Discourse

Political discourse is an interdisciplinary concept studied by linguists, political scientists, sociologists, and communication scholars (Valerevna, 2022). Van Dijk (2002) describes political discourse as the discourse of politicians, a category of genres defined by the domain of politics, including parliamentary debates, government deliberations, party programs, and campaign speeches. John Wilson (2005) notes the ambiguity of the term, as it encompasses both discourse about politics and discourse enacted within political contexts, often tied to issues of power, control, and domination.

Apter (2001) conceptualizes discourse as a way of organizing human experience and establishing frames of meaning through interpretation of events and situations. Political discourse, therefore, frames the exercise of power,

representation, and accountability. It narrates political ideas, legitimizes authority, and influences public perception. Healthy political discourse promotes democratic values, whereas unhealthy discourse—marked by incivility or hate speech—poses threats to social cohesion and democracy (Renwick & Fieldhouse, 2003).

Political Campaigns and Songs

Political campaigns are structured strategies employed by political actors to persuade voters and garner support (Okolo & Atiye, 2022). Merriam-Webster defines a campaign as a series of organized activities aimed at achieving a specific goal—in this case, electoral victory. In democratic societies like Nigeria, campaigns are crucial for representation, giving voice to political actors and mobilizing the electorate (Lilleker, 2017).

Political campaigns in Nigeria often involve rallies, advertisements (radio, TV, and online), posters, billboards, door-to-door canvassing, and entertainment activities such as music and songs. Songs, in particular, have emerged as powerful tools for mobilization because of their ability to evoke emotions, foster group identity, and sustain political narratives. However, these songs sometimes contain hate speech directed at opposing parties or candidates, reinforcing negative stereotypes and hostility. Rather than focusing on developmental visions, such discourse often promotes ridicule, propaganda, and antagonism, contributing to political tension and, at times, electoral violence.

Empirical Studies

Several studies have investigated hate speech and political discourse in Nigeria, though few have focused on campaign songs. Ugechi and Damkor (2019) analyzed hate speech in Tiv political songs, emphasizing pragmatic features and contextual meanings but did not address broader discourse implications or conduct a critical discourse analysis. Okolo and Atiye (2022) examined the impact of hate speech on democratic consolidation using social identity theory, but their study centered on speeches rather than musical texts.

Isa (2020) applied critical discourse analysis to campaign speeches of Presidents Muhammadu Buhari and Goodluck Jonathan during the 2011 election, revealing the strategic use of language in shaping political identity. Similarly, Obiora, Aboh, and Dioka (2021) explored political discourse using newspaper data, while Aboh, Onuoha, and Kalu examined hate rhetoric on social media platforms. These studies highlight the prevalence and implications of hate speech in political communication; however, they do not engage with political campaign songs, leaving a significant gap in both medium and discourse context.

While previous research addresses hate speech in political speeches, newspapers, and social media, there is limited scholarship on how political campaign songs—an influential communication medium in Nigeria—function as vehicles of hate speech. This study fills that gap by conducting a critical discourse analysis of hate speech components in Nigerian political campaign songs.

Methodology

This study employed a **qualitative research approach** using a **case study design**. The research was conducted in **Benue State, located in Nigeria's North-Central geopolitical zone**, focusing specifically on **Tiv-speaking areas**.

A **purposive sampling technique** (also known as judgmental sampling) was used to select campaign songs that contained potential hate speech elements. Data were collected through **secondary sources** by listening to and transcribing audio recordings of political campaign songs used during the 2023 elections.

For data analysis, the study adopted **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**, which was complemented by the theoretical framework of **Social Identity Theory**. This approach facilitated the examination of how hate speech was embedded in the campaign songs to reinforce group identities and stereotypes.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Extract 1:

A man that cannot keep up with his church commitments has just been moving about. I am puzzled... please help me ask him, is there no more offering in healing masses?

Analysis (SIT Perspective):

This extract constructs **in-group vs out-group identities** by framing the opponent as an irresponsible figure who abandoned religious obligations for political ambition. Social Identity Theory posits that people derive self-esteem from group membership; here, the speaker reinforces PDP's moral superiority (in-group) by ridiculing the defector (out-group). By questioning his integrity ("is there no more offering in healing masses?"), the song devalues the opponent's identity as a priest and portrays him as materialistic.

Critical Discourse Analysis:

- **Textual Level:** The phrase “cannot keep up with his church commitments” signals moral failure, while “just been moving about” implies aimlessness. The rhetorical question “is there no more offering in healing masses?” presupposes greed as the opponent’s motive for joining politics.
- **Discursive Practice:** This text is performed during campaigns, circulating as a political tool to **delegitimize the opponent and strengthen in-group loyalty** among Tiv voters.
- **Social Practice:** It reflects a broader ideological struggle in Nigerian politics where defectors are labeled as opportunistic, reinforcing narratives of betrayal and corruption.

Extract 2:

...But the Priest is more interested in money, so he is going headlong. See how puzzled I am for he had taken an oath before God.

Analysis (SIT Perspective):

The song attacks the opponent’s **social identity as a priest**, contrasting religious vows with political ambition. This creates **moral polarization**: the opponent is portrayed as greedy and sacrilegious (out-group), while PDP maintains an image of integrity (in-group). SIT explains that such identity framing fosters emotional attachment to the in-group and hostility toward the out-group.

Critical Discourse Analysis:

- **Textual Level:** “More interested in money” attributes negative motives to the opponent, constructing him as corrupt. “He had taken an oath before God” uses intertextuality (religious discourse) to intensify moral condemnation.
- **Discursive Practice:** The discourse taps into **cultural values of religiosity** in Tiv society to stigmatize political defectors and legitimize PDP’s moral standing.
- **Social Practice:** It reflects political rivalry contextualized within **religious morality**, exploiting communal values to **mobilize voters through emotional appeal**.

Extract 3:

...He trespassed so much that the Bishop beat and sent him away leaving him with the Cassock. Everyone is amazed.

Analysis (SIT Perspective):

This extract uses **metaphorical language** to reinforce out-group deviance. “Trespassed so much” suggests repeated moral violations, while “the Bishop beat and sent him away” symbolizes **institutional rejection** of the opponent’s identity. SIT explains this as **social categorization**, where the opponent is stripped of positive identity markers (priesthood) and related to a disgraced category, making PDP the legitimate moral authority.

Critical Discourse Analysis:

- **Textual Level:** The verbs “beat” and “sent away” indicate punishment and exclusion. The phrase “leaving him with the Cassock” implies emptiness—he retains only the garment, not the honour of the priesthood.
- **Discursive Practice:** This function as **derogatory humour**, dramatizing moral collapse for political advantage.
- **Social Practice:** It echoes **religious disciplinary practices**, projecting political rivalry as divine justice, thus legitimizing PDP’s superiority and demonizing the opponent.

Extract 4:

Michael sent the devil away from the kingdom above. Mama daughter of Adagba, the world is in so much suffering, death and sicknesses abound. The church has sent the priest away. He is now into politics.

Analysis (SIT Perspective):

The extract invokes **biblical allusion** (Archangel Michael vs the devil) to position the opponent as an evil figure expelled from divine order. The in-group (PDP) implicitly assumes the role of righteousness, constructing a **binary opposition** between good (in-group) and evil (out-group). SIT interprets this as **social comparison** aimed at boosting the in-group’s moral image and justifying hostility toward the out-group.

Critical Discourse Analysis:

- **Textual Level:** The metaphor “Michael sent the devil away” is a powerful interdiscursive strategy linking political conflict to spiritual warfare. “The world is in so much suffering” amplifies fear and urgency, presenting the opponent as part of societal decay.
- **Discursive Practice:** This blends **religious and political discourses** to intensify emotional impact, ensuring voters perceive politics as a moral battle.
- **Social Practice:** It demonstrates how hate speech in Tiv political songs exploits **religious ideology** to delegitimize opponents, escalate rivalry, and secure electoral advantage.

Extract 5:

There is an old bat in the government house. My Priest is about to go in, so God has shone his light. The devil has packed his luggage and is screaming ‘see light oo’. Dajo get hold of him, let him not take our pension away.

SIT Perspective:

This extract constructs **in-group identity** (APC supporters and “My Priest”) as righteous, associated with divine light, while the **out-group** (the current government official, labeled as “old bat”) is dehumanized and depicted as evil (“devil”). SIT explains this as **ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation** to boost collective self-esteem and motivate loyalty.

CDA Analysis:

- **Textual Level:**
 - **Metaphor:** “Old bat” implies weakness and irrelevance; “devil” portrays moral corruption.
 - **Religious imagery:** “God has shone his light” frames APC’s candidate as divinely ordained, while the opponent is satanic, reinforcing moral dichotomy.
 - **Imperative:** “Dajo get hold of him” signals **call to action**, intensifying hostility.
- **Discursive Practice:** This song circulates during campaigns to **moralize political rivalry**, framing the election as spiritual warfare.
- **Social Practice:** Reflects **instrumentalization of religion and ageism** in political discourse, common in Nigerian politics.

Discursive Strategies:

- **Nomination:** Opponent = “old bat”, “devil”; APC candidate = “My Priest” (positive identity marker).
- **Prediction:** Opponent described as corrupt and dangerous (“take our pension away”).
- **Argumentation: Topos of threat** – if the opponent stays, pensions will be lost.
- **Perspectivization:** Speaker positions self as defender of public interest, opposing exploitation.
- **Intensification:** Phrases like “God has shone his light” and “see light oo” amplify emotional appeal.
- Across the four extracts, hate speech operates through:
- **Religious framing** (using priesthood and biblical metaphors)
- **Moral delegitimization** (constructing the opponent as greedy, faithless, and evil)
- **Social identity polarization** (in-group = righteous PDP, out-group = corrupt opponent)

From a **CDA perspective**, these songs are ideological tools reproducing power relations and shaping political identities within Tiv society. They reinforce **ethno-religious values** and exploit collective emotions, thereby influencing voting behavior.

Extract 6:

My father, Senator Andyar Gemade you are drawing close to the ban, someone should help bring down your luggage.

SIT Perspective:

This uses **age-based identity framing**: portraying the opponent as old and nearing political irrelevance (“drawing close to the ban”). The in-group (APC) is implicitly constructed as the **future**, capable and energetic.

CDA Analysis:

- **Textual Level:**
 - “Drawing close to the ban” uses metaphor of **retirement or end of political career**, signaling exclusion.
 - “Bring down your luggage” suggests **packing out of office**, symbolizing political defeat.

- **Discursive Practice:** Functions as **derogatory humor**, mobilizing voters through ridicule.
- **Social Practice:** Reinforces a cultural discourse of **political renewal vs gerontocracy**, a recurring theme in Nigerian elections.

Discursive Strategies:

- **Nomination:** Opponent = “My father” (ironically used), signaling age and paternalism.
- **Predication:** He is **old, unfit for leadership**.
- **Argumentation:** **Topos of usefulness** – old politicians are ineffective and should retire.
- **Intensification:** Urgency created by “drawing close to the ban”.
- **Mitigation:** Polite tone in “someone should help bring down your luggage” masks the insult.

Extract 7:

Also listen to what is happening in Minda, this chief debtor (Tyongi) has seized a lot of land.

SIT Perspective:

This extract constructs a **regional in-group (non-Minda voters)** versus an **out-group (Minda politician)** who is labeled as “chief debtor” and land grabber. SIT explains this as **regional identity politics**, fueling resentment by presenting the opponent as greedy and exploitative.

CDA Analysis:

- **Textual Level:**
 - **Labeling:** “Chief debtor” associates the opponent with corruption and irresponsibility.
 - **Accusation:** “Seized a lot of land” implies dispossession and injustice, evoking anger.
- **Discursive Practice:** These accusations operate as **delegitimization strategies**, eroding trust in the opponent.
- **Social Practice:** Highlights **land ownership tensions** in Tiv politics, weaponized for political gain.

Discursive Strategies:

- **Nomination:** Opponent = “chief debtor”, linked to criminality.
- **Predication:** Characterized as greedy and dishonest.
- **Argumentation:** **Topos of justice** – wrongdoers should not be entrusted with power.
- **Perspectivization:** Speaker as whistleblower exposing corruption.
- **Intensification:** Phrases like “a lot of land” exaggerate wrongdoing for stronger effect.

Extract 8:

The man from Minda has kindled a fire in Sankera and is adding wood to it so that it will burn them more. He is doing this in order to enjoy the allocation for security vote.

SIT Perspective:

The opponent is depicted as a **regional enemy** inciting violence for personal gain, while the in-group (APC) assumes the role of peacekeepers and protectors of communal welfare. SIT frames this as **moral superiority for in-group vs malevolence for out-group**.

CDA Analysis:

- **Textual Level:**
 - **Metaphor:** “Kindled a fire” and “adding wood” symbolize conflict escalation.
 - **Purpose clause:** “In order to enjoy the allocation for security vote” portrays the opponent as **self-serving and exploitative**.
- **Discursive Practice:** Represents **political violence as intentional strategy**, mobilizing fear against the out-group.
- **Social Practice:** Reflects historical tensions in Sankera and **weaponization of insecurity narratives** in Nigerian campaigns.

Discursive Strategies:

- **Nomination:** Opponent as “the man from Minda” (regional othering).
- **Prediction:** Depicted as violent, greedy, and dangerous.
- **Argumentation:** **Topos of threat and corruption** – electing him will worsen insecurity.
- **Intensification:** “Burn them more” dramatizes the level of perceived harm.

- **Perspectivization:** Positions APC as saviors who will end this threat.

Findings

The analysis of these transcribed excerpts from some campaign songs used by the PDP and APC during the 2023 gubernatorial election in Benue State show that hate speech is not incidental but **structurally embedded** in the musical discourse of campaigning. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), five interlocking patterns emerged:

1. **Identity Polarization and Moral Binarism:**

The songs consistently construct an *in-group* (the sponsoring party and its supporters) against an *out-group* (opponents), assigning virtue to the former and vice to the latter. Religious and moral indexing (e.g., “light” vs. “devil,” “oath before God,” “expelled by the Bishop/Church”) frames politics as a struggle between good and evil, boosting in-group esteem and sanctioning hostility toward the out-group.

2. **Religious Interdiscursivity as a Weapon of Legitimation:**

Biblical allusions, priestly imagery, and invocations of divine sanction are woven into the lyrics to moralize political preference. This **interdiscursive blend** of religious and political language turns electoral competition into spiritual warfare, intensifying affect, foreclosing deliberation, and legitimizing exclusion.

3. **Dehumanization, Ridicule, and Ageism:**

Metaphors such as “old bat,” expulsive imagery (“beat and sent him away”), and ridicule (“bring down your luggage”) function as **nomination/predication strategies** that strip opponents of dignity and competence. Ageist tropes naturalize political retirement for rivals and celebrate “renewal” for the in-group.

4. **Regional Othering and Securitization:**

References to place (e.g., “the man from Minda”) and accusations of land seizure or fueling violence mobilize **topoi of threat and justice**. Opponents are positioned as predatory outsiders or security entrepreneurs who profit from disorder, while the in-group is cast as protector—reinforcing territorial identity cleavages within Tiv politics.

5. **Material Interests and Fear Appeals:**

Economic scare frames (“he will take our pension”) and crisis imagery (“kindled a fire... burn them more”) are used as **argumentation strategies** to incite fear and justify rejection of opponents. Imperatives (“get hold of him”) convert affect into calls for action, normalizing verbal aggression and hinting at vigilantism.

Across these patterns, the songs privilege **negative other-presentation** over issue-based persuasion. They circulate in highly participatory campaign settings where repetition, call-and-response, and melody enhance retention and uptake, thereby **normalizing hate speech as a campaigning norm**. The cumulative effect is to reify entrenched stereotypes, deepen factional boundaries, and shift voter reasoning from programmatic evaluation to **identity-protective cognition**.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that political campaign songs in the 2023 Benue State elections functioned as potent **vehicles of hate speech**, systematically reproducing “us–them” boundaries through religious moralization, dehumanizing metaphors, regional othering, and fear-based argumentation. Within the SIT lens, these discourses elevate in-group status and derogate out-groups, fostering cohesion for supporters while intensifying animus toward rivals. CDA reveals how interdiscursivity with religious language, nomination/predication, and topoi of threat/justice collectively **legitimize exclusion and delegitimize opponents**.

The implications are consequential for Nigeria’s democratic health: such songs **undermine deliberative, issue-based politics**, heighten the risk of **electoral intimidation and post-election violence**, and **erode institutional trust** by recoding political competition as a moral crusade rather than a policy contest. Given the mnemonic power of music and its communal performance contexts, hate-laden lyrics travel farther and stick longer than ordinary speeches, entrenching polarization beyond the campaign period.

In sum, hate speech in campaign songs during the 2023 Benue elections is **pervasive, patterned, and impactful**—amplifying identity conflict, narrowing the space for democratic discourse, and posing tangible risks to peace and governance. Any credible reform agenda—whether legal, regulatory, or civic—must therefore address musical campaign content alongside speeches and social media, promote **clear party codes of conduct**, strengthen **electoral oversight**, and invest in **civic and media literacy** that equips citizens to resist affective manipulation and reward issue-driven messaging.

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