

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF HATE SPEECH AND ITS CONSEQUENCE ON SAFETY OF LIVES IN ANAMBRA STATE OF NIGERIA. A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

*Hate speech covers many forms of expressions which advocate, incite, promote or justify hatred, violence and discrimination against a person or group of persons for a variety of reasons. Hate speech poses grave dangers for the cohesion of society, the protection of human rights and the rule of law. If left unaddressed, it can lead to complete breakdown of law and order. For any control measures to be meaningful the perceptions of the community should be sought and incorporated into any remedial programme. Consequently, little or no empirical studies have focused on public perceptions on hate speech and its consequences on safety of lives. **This study determined** public perceptions on hate speech and its consequences on safety of lives in Anambra State of Nigeria. The study adopted a cross sectional survey design which involves in depth interview of 250 adults in two Local Governments Areas in Anambra State. The study revealed that people are informed of what constitutes hate speech in Nigeria. Factors that influences hate speech include: unemployment, frustration and perceived marginalization of a group among others. People perceive hate speech as a way to promote ethnicity and demean people. The consequences of hate speech are: discrimination and violence against a person or group of persons. It is recommended that massive enlightenment and adequate implementation of hate speech bill as well as effective execution of programmes to reduce tendencies to hate speech should be conducted.*

Keywords: Discrimination, Hate speech, Perception, Safety, Violence

Introduction

Globally, hate speech incites violence and undermines social cohesion and tolerance. The devastating effect of hatred is sadly nothing new. According to Uzochukwu and Okafor (2019), its scale and impact are nowadays amplified by new technologies of communication, to the point that hate speech - including online - has become one of the most frequent methods for spreading divisive rhetoric and ideologies on a global scale and threatening peace. Nowak (1993), posited that the United Nations has a long history of mobilizing the world against hatred of all kinds to defend human rights and advance

the rule of law. The impact of hate speech cuts across numerous existing United Nations areas of focus, from human rights protection and prevention of atrocity crimes to sustaining peace and achieving gender equality and supporting children and youth (Vasmatics, 2010)

In recent decades, hate speech has turned many African communities to hotbeds of mayhem, social violence, and unrest. Kitrosser (2017), affirmed that sometimes caused by political differences, but also religious and economic competition play obvious roles. Fueling such frequent and destructive episodes are hate and extreme speech inspired by the active production and dissemination of public speech acts designed to injure (emotionally and/or physically) individuals or a group because of religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, skin color, or even political affiliation. According to Landau, Loren, Jean (2009), the African conversational environment is suffused with dangerous speech practices aimed at religious, ethnic, national, or sexual others. Stereotyping persons and groups, whether minority or majority segments of society, is on the rise as the postcolonial states are increasingly unable to meet citizens' demands for public services, security, gainful employment, and sustained socioeconomic development. As resources diminish and competition and desperation grow, extreme speech has become a strategy of management (for some politicians and state actors) and competition for scarce public goods (for a visible segment of the population) (Downs and Cowan, 2012). The realization that free speech has an important role in building liveable, vibrant, and peaceful communities and societies but can also generate, or rather degenerate into, extreme and dangerous communication is slowly dawning on various African governments. Increasingly, ethnoreligious conflagrations have literally set communities, for example, in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria, the harm of hate speech is an ever-present reality the state is beginning to grapple with through legal protocols (Baba and Aeysinghe 2017)..

In Nigeria today, one hears so many news on radio, television stations and in various newspapers. Some of the news items are validated while some are not before being aired. Some are true, some are false and others are exaggerated. All these invalidated speeches coming from media houses, newspapers and those found on social media have created a lot of problems not only for individuals indicted and their families but it has led to disunity and conflicts of various types in Nigerian communities. Unfounded and unverified stories have led to killings and crises of various types in the country. This is why the Federal Government of Nigeria thought it is expedient to draw the line on hate speech declaring hate speech as a form of terrorism (Mamah, Akinferon, Agbakwuru and Afer, 2017). Tackling hate speech is also crucial to deepen progress across the United Nations agenda by helping to prevent armed conflict, atrocity crimes and terrorism, end violence against women and other serious violations of human rights, and promote peaceful, inclusive and just societies (United Nations Report, 2022)

Even those who stand for free speech posit that hate speech requires to be handled carefully, especially when it is targeted against minorities who are weak to challenge it. Anambra commissioner of police decries hate speech ahead of governorship poll in 2021 and warned politicians in the state to stop heating up the polity or be ready to face legal consequences. The warning came amidst increased rumor peddling and hate speeches trailing the November 18 election in the state (Daily Trust 2017). Similarly, it was also reported in Guardian newspaper in March 2017 about high concerns that violence, hate speech and character assassination may define the November 18 governorship election in Anambra State (Sobechei and Nzeagwu 2017). According to Uzoka (2020), hate speech is harmful and divisive for communities and hampers social progress in fighting discrimination. Although the right to free speech is a fundamental right, it should not be allowed to outweigh the basic human rights of other people, especially their right to life (Uzoka, 2020). If left unaddressed, hate speech can lead to complete breakdown of law and order. For any control measures to be meaningful the perceptions of the community should be sought and incorporated into any remedial programme. Consequently, *little or no empirical studies have focused on public perceptions on hate speech and its consequences on safety of lives*. **This study determined** public perceptions on hate speech and its consequences on safety of lives in Anambra State especially Onitsha North LGA, through the following questions: (1) Why does hate speeches occur? (2) How do people perceive hate speeches? (3) What are the consequences of hate speeches?

Theoretical Framework

Frustration–Aggression Theory

It was proposed by psychologists, Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mower, and Sears in 1939. It has two major propositions: that all aggressions are as a result of frustrations and all frustrations is aggression (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer & Sears 1939). They argue that human beings are not naturally born with aggression but it's a condition that is activated by conditions that led to frustration (Feierabend and Feierabend 1966). The classical statement of the frustration-aggression theory was modified later, when it was demonstrated that there are other causes of aggressions apart from frustration. Additionally, both concepts are correlated for instance an individual may become frustrated and aggressive if his goals are not achieved and if he discovers all other alternatives are not successful. It has also been established that aggression does not always follow frustrations especially in cases of instrumental aggressions, role aggressions and socially organized aggression. These conceptual problems with the frustration-aggression theory mean that while it is useful in explaining aggression at the individual level, it does not explain it much at the social level (Kulik and Brown 1979).

Study Area

The researcher felt that there is the need to undertake the study in Anambra State, considering the fact that police decries hate speech ahead of governorship poll in 2021 and Guardian newspaper report in March 2017 about high concerns that violence, hate speech and character assassination may define the November 18 governorship election in

Anambra State The police warning came amidst increased rumor peddling and hate speeches trailing the November 18 election in the state Anambra State was created on 27th August, 1991. However, this study used Onitsha North as study area. The LGA is made up of several districts and streets which include Odakpu, Anotogu Street, Limca road, Old market road, Oguta road, Nkpor, and Niger Bridge Layout. The estimated population of Onitsha North LGA is put at 281,543 inhabitants. The predominant language is Igbo with minor dialectical differences. The predominant religion in Anambra State is Christianity. More than 70% of the people are professing Christians.

Sampling Procedure

In selecting respondents from the Onitsha North local government area, a typical urban area, three streets from each selected residential area were selected using simple random sampling method. This gave a total of twenty-one (21) streets in all. Each street was allocated 1 respondent. To get these twenty-one (21) respondents, the researcher used purposive sampling method in selecting the desired number of respondents from each of the selected streets. One respondent above 18 years was chosen from each selected household. The researcher alternatively chose one sex from a selected house and another sex from the next. This was to ensure gender balance. In all, a total of 21 adults participated in the study

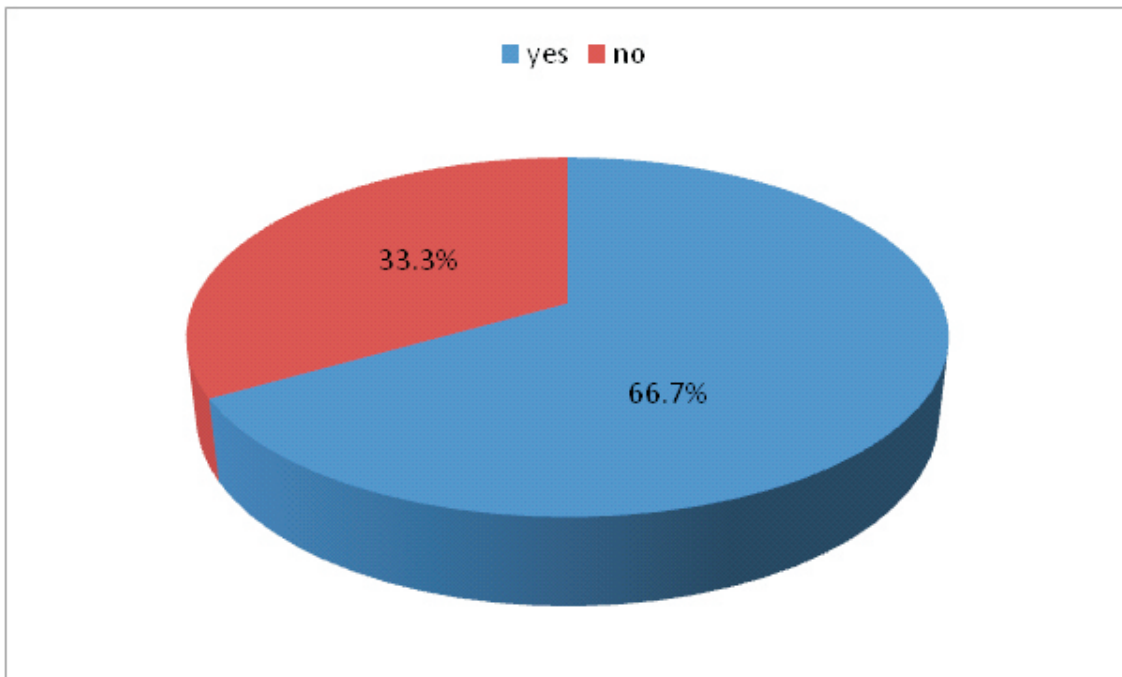
Data Collection

In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were used in sourcing data from 210 adults between June and September 2020. IDIs were employed because of the sensitive nature of the topic, as group-discussion might not allow persons to express in a free manner their experiences. Again, the study employed IDIs owing to seasonal rainfall which is also heavy within the period of this research since it may be difficult to get to a central venue for a group-discussion. Interviews with our respondents were done when respondents felt it was convenient for them. Interviews were conducted using a blend of English and Igbo languages, given the preferences of respondents. The IDI guide was collectively designed by the researchers so they could uniformly conduct the interviews at varied times and different places. The interviewers were proficient in the native and English languages, as well as those who served as note takers and recorders. Interviews were scheduled and designed to last for 40 minutes to avoid fatigue. Regarding ethical issues, oral informed consent on the premise of full disclosure (including permission to use a recording gadget) was sought and obtained from participant. Likewise, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality while guaranteeing willful participation.

Data Analysis

Responses from the IDIs were recorded together with notes taken by the note-takers and did a verbatim transcription in English Language and compared with the notes for the sake of coherence. Themes were generated after reading the transcripts, and paying attention to the relationship between responses and research questions. The researchers designed an analysis spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel, where each response was placed

under the thematic category best suited for it. The final analysis spreadsheet was vetted by two scholars who were not part of the research team and their suggestions were used.



Data revealed that 33.3% do not know what constitutes hate speech while majority (66.7%) of the respondents is aware of what constitutes hate speech. The study revealed that people are informed of what constitutes hate speech in Nigeria

Reason for hate speeches

The findings show that belittling people and equating them to culturally despised subhuman entities, such as pigs, rats, monkeys, or even germs or dirt/filth and actions from other groups is a reason for hate speeches. For instance, data from IDI show that when derogatory words are used against a people it becomes a reason for people are making hate speeches. Qualitative data from IDI in Odakpu with 46-year old male participant corroborated this. For example he said:

There are people who like calling people bad names or referring to other people as if they are nothing. This is really bad. Why would you refer to someone God created as “ewu” (goat). Maybe you feel your people have more advantages than the people you are referring to. You consider your people more fortunate than others so you decided to let them down. For instance, in this place you such name calling as “nwaAbakaliki”, “nwaNsukka” used to refer to certain group of people in a derogatory manner. This can generate hate speeches and before you know it, violence

and all of that will arise.

The study indicated that frustration due to unemployment is a reason for hate speeches. This was expressed in the narrative of a 51-year old female participant who indicated that, “sometimes people speak in a manner that will cause problems and when you try to caution them, it becomes an offence”. This was almost the same for a 36-year-old female who said:

Many people who talk carelessly, they don't know that what they say and how they talk will either cause problems or not. This happens mainly when you see people who are dissatisfied with the way conditions of life treat them, especially people who don't have jobs doing. Some will say “this life no balance” especially if the government are showing concern to their conditions. It really bad when you see a frustrated individual speaking. Sometime you see the person say what is not expected of him/her. Frustration cause hate speech

Also, a 48-year-old male with a similar narrative, but this time mentioned that denial of historical events is also a reason for hate speeches. She narrated thus:

In this period of internet people can go online and get information. But many of these information got from online are distorted. Someone may not have been in a place but read something online and believe it line and sinker without verification. Now when he/she want to say it, he/she will say it with all surety. For example, some historical accounts of people uploaded online are not correct especially it pains when someone is using it as if it is correct. It pains the more if the person narrating it is not from your place just because he/she got information from that is not correct. This can lead to hate speeches and misunderstanding

Perception hate speeches

While the previous theme indicates the reasons for hate speeches, this theme show how respondents perceive hate speeches. The result from IDI reveals that people perceive hate speech as a way to promotes ethnicity. This was captured in the views of the participants. A male adult of 49 years

Sometimes you will see some people use certain privileges or advantages they have over others to cajole them. Then it will look as if nature is indifferent to this people. By doing that, words which are uncalled for would be used to communicate, then those it was targeted at will feel humiliated. Meanwhile, you are now bringing your ethnic group to fore front.

Furthermore, the finding also revealed that respondents perceive hate speeches as a way to preserve of group interest. For instance, data from IDI show that people have one

or more shared concerns, or attempts to influence public policies in its favour. Therefore, hate speeches can be used as a way to preserve of group interest. Qualitative data from IDI in with women leader corroborated this. For example, she said:

When you observe something happening and you know that if allowed it may end up affecting you negatively and what you stand for, so you will not fold your hands and watch it continue, you will look for a way to control it. Hate speeches and use of foul languages may be used although it is not the best but all depends on the satiations one finds himself/herself

Consequences of hate Speech

The respondents agreed that hate speech has moral consequences to peace and unity. According to them, since peace and unity are supposed to be maintained, hate speech and foul languages may mislead the public into accepting or rejecting a person or group of individuals targeted by the speech. Also, it will surely cause conducive atmosphere for peace and unity to lose their meaning in the eyes of the public. The respondents contend that hate speech and use of foul language especially on social media can ignite crisis and discrimination in the society. In like manner, all the respondents agreed that hate speech increase moral decadence in the society and prejudice as well as cultivate loss of morals among children particularly when they are still young. All the participants also agreed that there is need to take legal measures to regulate hate speech and use of foul language online in Nigeria. Data from IDI indicated that all participants denied having knowledge of any existing legal measure in place to regulate hate speech in Nigeria. On the other hand, all the participants agreed *that massive enlightenment and adequate implementation of hate speech bill and effective execution of programs to reduce tendencies to hate speech should be conducted*

Discussion

The findings indicate that belittling people and equating them to culturally despised subhuman entities, such as pigs, rats, monkeys, or even germs or dirt/filth and actions from other groups is a reason for hate speeches, inciting violence against a particular group and that denial of historical events is also being reasons for hate speeches. These findings are in line with the findings of Garba, Tsegysu and Mohammed (2020) who found that perceived marginalization, eroding societal norms and values, ethno-religious difference, eroding patriotic feelings and poor crusade on dangers of hate speech are some of the factors responsible for the perpetuation of hate speech

The study found that hate speech has consequences to peace and unity and can ignite crisis and discrimination in the society. This finding corroborates with Equality and Anti-Discrimination on Hate Speech and Hate Crime (2015) which revealed that hate speech fans prejudice, creates fear and anxiety among the affected groups and it deprives people of dignity. Hate speech can therefore trigger discrimination and harassment

and/or violence. Stating the effects of hate speech, Leets (2002) posits it violates the individual's dignity, resulting in humiliation, distress and psychological or emotional pain. Similarly, Nemes (2002) avers that hate speech can provoke pain, distress, fear, embarrassment and isolation to individuals. However, while hate speech towards groups of people can bring inequality problems and isolation, it creates the feeling of fear and discourages them from participating in the community and expressing their opinions. Furthermore, Nielsen, (2002) avers that the degradation and humiliation brought by hate speech can silence the 'victims' and therefore reinforce existing hierarchies in society while Parekh, (2006) indicated that hate speech can also lead victims to become aggressive and dangerous.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study in this paper, we conclude that hate speech people know what constitute hate speeches, people perceive hate speech as a way to promotes ethnicity and preserve group interest which has consequences in the society. The paper thus, recommends that legal measures to regulate hate speech and use of foul language online in Nigeria. *Massive enlightenment and adequate implementation of hate speech bill and effective execution of programs to reduce tendencies to hate speech should be conducted.*

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