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# Social Media, Religious Extremism, and Ethical Responsibility in Nigeria: Balancing Free Speech and Moral Consequences.

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**Abstract**

This study examines the relationship between social media, religious extremism, and moral responsibility in Nigeria, with particular attention to the dual role of digital platforms as spaces for free expression and as channels for the dissemination of harmful ideologies. Against the backdrop of a communication landscape increasingly shaped by social media, the study addresses the rise of hate speech, misinformation, and the radicalization of vulnerable groups, especially within Nigeria's context of deep ethnic and religious divisions and persistent security threats from extremist groups such as Boko Haram. The study seeks to explore how free expression can be protected while addressing the ethical consequences of digital communication and the underlying drivers of radicalization. Drawing on evidence from academic literature, policy texts, and illustrative case examples, the analysis shows that weak content moderation systems, legal and regulatory gaps, and enduring socio-economic grievances facilitate the spread of extremist narratives online. The study further highlights the roles of state institutions, technology companies, religious leaders, and the wider public in mitigating these risks. It concludes that unchecked online discourse can intensify extremist beliefs, fuel


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violence, and undermine social cohesion, thereby necessitating stronger multi-stakeholder cooperation to develop ethical, context-sensitive responses that safeguard democratic freedoms while promoting religious peace and national stability.

**Keywords**: Social Media; Religious Extremism; Hate Speech; Ethical Responsibility; Content Moderation

## Introduction

The expansion of social media has reshaped communication, creating new opportunities for global links, the sharing of information, and open debate (Sanusi, Ifedolapo & Ayinde, 2025:222). Yet, together with these gains, social media has also become an effective channel for spreading extremist beliefs, including those tied to religion (Zhang, 2025: 33). In Nigeria, a country with a strongly religious society and a record of interfaith unrest, the meeting point of social media and religious extremism raises serious ethical and security concerns (Yusuf, 2025: 81). While these platforms support freedom of speech and democratic involvement, they also risk boosting hate speech, false reports, and radicalisation, making it necessary to consider ethical duties in digital communication (Barroso, 2023:33).

In Nigeria's diverse society, where religion is closely tied to cultural heritage and communal life, online communication cannot be treated as if it were free from moral responsibility. As Oyebanji et al. (2025b:21) note in their work on Yoruba naming traditions, even personal decisions such as altering one's name carry spiritual and ethical significance, showing that actions are understood to affect ancestors, the wider community, and the divine order. This perspective highlights a shared moral awareness that should guide how digital expression is judged, not simply as an exercise of private freedom, but as an act rooted in community and spiritual responsibility. From this standpoint, the unchecked spread of hate speech on social media is more than a legal or political concern; it represents a moral breakdown within Nigeria's religious and ethical framework.

The moral implications of digital communication intersect with longstanding religio-ethical concerns regarding human responsibility and accountability before the divine. As Oyebanji (2025) argues in his examination of the Ogunpa floods in Ibadan, natural disasters are frequently understood not solely as physical or environmental events

but as reflections of moral failings, representing the consequences of collective ethical lapses. From this perspective, the rampant spread of hate speech on social media can be seen not merely as a legal or political problem but as a form of communal ethical negligence with potential social and spiritual repercussions. This interpretation highlights the critical need to integrate moral responsibility into online interactions, particularly in contexts where religious and ethical frameworks play a central role in shaping public values.

The country's religious life is mainly divided between Christianity and Islam, with regular clashes between followers of both traditions, especially in areas such as the Middle Belt and the North (Haruna, 2025: 54). Armed groups, including Boko Haram and its offshoots, have turned to social media to draw in members, spread messages, and stir violence (Malefakis, 2021: 168). The privacy and vast coverage of platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp allow extremist actors to evade normal media restrictions, adding to the difficulty of resisting radicalisation (Montasari, 2024: 124). This development brings forward urgent concerns about how to protect freedom of speech while also tackling the harmful outcomes of unmonitored online exchange (Poland, 2024: 57).

Questions of ethical conduct in digital interaction are now a shared concern for academics and lawmakers (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2021: 191).Some maintain that too much censorship damages democratic rights, while others note that leaving hate speech unchecked encourages violence in society (Kulenović, 2023: 524). In Nigeria, where social media has been used both to organise protests (such as EndSARS) and to promote sectarian division, the call for a fair system of oversight is pressing (Ogunbanjo, 2024: 154). Government efforts to control social media, such as the proposed Social Media Bill, have faced criticism for possibly silencing opposition in the name of fighting extremism (Ganesh, & Bright, 2020: 13). This research examines the twofold role of social media in Nigeria as a medium for free expression and as a pathway for religious extremism. By studying the ethical obligations of actors such as technology firms, government authorities, religious figures, and individual users, the study seeks to suggest approaches for reconciling free expression with the moral costs of digital communication. The work will add to ongoing discussions on digital ethics, efforts to counter extremism, and the lasting regulation of social media in religiously diverse settings.

## Research Method

Given the study's focus on the ethical, social, and security implications of social media–driven religious extremism in Nigeria, a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is most appropriate. This approach relies on documentary and content analysis of academic studies, policy instruments (such as Nigeria's Cybercrime Act and the draft Social Media Bill), extremist communications, and verified case studies including events like EndSARS and farmer-herder conflicts. These sources are examined to understand how digital platforms facilitate hate speech, deepen in-group/out-group divisions, and promote radicalisation.

The methodology further incorporates critical discourse analysis and contextual ethical assessment, drawing on indigenous Yoruba religio-ethical perspectives to evaluate moral responsibility in online interactions. By focusing exclusively on secondary sources rather than primary data collection, this research aligns with the study's theoretical and normative objectives. It provides a framework for balancing freedom of expression with ethical accountability and supports evidence-based recommendations for managing religious extremism within Nigeria's pluralistic society.

## Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, serves as the foundation for this research. The theory holds that people see themselves not only in terms of personal qualities but also through the groups they belong to, and they place strong value on such affiliations. In diverse societies like Nigeria, where religious and ethnic identities influence both cultural life and politics, the theory is especially significant.

Through social media, extremist groups use identity markers to strengthen in-group loyalty while portraying out-groups as enemies, a pattern that breeds suspicion and conflict. This supports Tajfel and Turner's (1979: 38) view that comparing groups often produces discrimination against outsiders. In Nigeria, organisations such as Boko Haram have used religious rhetoric online to justify violence as a form of protecting the in-group, furthering division and weakening national unity. Current studies also show that digital platforms increase these divisions, with hate speech and extremist messaging gaining force through appeals to identity (Rea, 2022: 21). Therefore, Social Identity Theory shows that online religious extremism in Nigeria is not only a matter of communication but an identity-based struggle that poses serious ethical concerns for free speech and social responsibility.

**Religious Extremism in Nigeria**

Religious extremism in Nigeria has become a continuing security concern with long historical roots (Yusuf, 2025: 84). The nation's religious setting, divided between a mainly Muslim north and a largely Christian south, has witnessed repeated violent clashes since the 1980s (Abbink, 2020: 205). The Global Terrorism Index (2023) records that Nigeria was placed eighth globally for terrorist incidents in 2022, with religion-inspired violence responsible for a large share of deaths.

The disruption of moral order by extremist actors parallels the ways in which religious communities navigate the tensions between modernity and tradition. Oyebanji (2024) notes that within the Christ Apostolic Church, practices such as faith healing and the use of herbal remedies are more than medical alternatives; they function as sociocultural responses to secular knowledge systems. This demonstrates that religious identity can serve simultaneously as a source of ethical strength and a field of ideological negotiation. When these markers of identity are exploited online as in the messaging strategies of Boko Haram or other sectarian groups they have the potential to turn spaces intended for spiritual support into sites of exclusion and polarization. Consequently, examining the sociological dimensions of religious practice is critical for understanding how digital platforms may either amplify extremist narratives or provide avenues for their containment.

The Boko Haram conflict is the most severe example of this trend. Formed in 2002, the movement has been responsible for around 350,000 deaths and the displacement of over 2 million people in the north-east (Liman, & Muhammad, 2020: 215). Mohammed (2010: 59) explains that Boko Haram's beliefs combine Salafist readings of Islam with strong rejection of Western education and non-religious government. Its actions have included suicide attacks, assaults on churches and mosques, and kidnappings, the most notorious being the abduction of schoolgirls at Chibok in 2014 (Oyewole, & Onuoha, 2021: 42).Religious violence in Nigeria is not limited to Boko Haram. The Middle Belt continues to face farmer-herder disputes that often assume religious tones, with Christian farming groups in conflict with mainly Muslim Fulani pastoralists (Olamide Sowale, 2024: 13).The International Crisis Group (2019: 5) noted that these clashes killed more than 1,300 people in 2018, though some writers stress that competition over land and resources

may be as significant as religious difference (De Jong, De Bruin, Knoop, & Van Vliet, 2021: 234).

The use of religious symbols and language by extremist groups reflects a wider twisting of moral order, a pattern considered in philosophical discussions of moral evil. Oyebanji et al. (2024a: 3) state that moral evil in Nigeria, especially as seen in banditry and insurgency, stems not only from poverty or lack but from a chosen reversal of ethical rules, where acts of violence are presented as divine duty or communal justice. This reversal of morality is strengthened online, as social media systems promote content that stirs emotion, giving extremists the means to present cruelty as devotion and criticism as betrayal of faith. In this way, religious extremism in the digital era is more than a question of security; it is a spiritual disorder, a corruption of the standards by which truth and moral value are judged.

State responses have relied heavily on military measures through campaigns such as Lafiya Dole (Peace by Force). Rights organisations have recorded serious abuses by troops, including unlawful killings and arbitrary arrests (Walsh, Conrad, & Whitaker, 2024: 483). Observers argue that such harsh tactics have deepened radicalisation and failed to address issues such as poverty, joblessness, and weak governance (Mwangi, 2023: 521). More recently, online elements of religious extremism have appeared. Social media networks now serve both extremist outreach and the spread of interfaith hostility (Risky, 2023: 32). The Centre for Democracy and Development (2022) reported that religiously provocative material on Nigerian social media rose by 38% between 2020 and 2022, making it harder to sustain peaceful relations between faith groups.

**Hate Speech in Nigeria: A Growing Threat to Social Cohesion**

Hate speech has become a major and rising danger to unity in Nigeria, worsening existing divisions along ethnic, religious, and political lines. It is understood as any form of expression that demeans individuals or groups based on identity markers such as faith, ethnicity, gender, or political leaning, and it is now widespread in both digital and offline settings in the country (Andreevskikh, & Muravyeva, 2021: 212). The spread of social media and the simplicity of publishing content online have opened fresh channels for distributing hate speech, often with harmful effects on relations between groups and on national stability.

Nigeria's entrenched ethnic and religious divides create an environment in which hate speech flourishes. With more than 250 ethnic groups and two dominant religions—Islam and Christianity—each carrying its own traditions and perspectives (Kaba, 2022: 33), the nation's diversity is regularly exploited by political leaders and others for advantage. Hate speech in this context functions as a weapon for stirring hostility and widening rifts within society. During election periods, for example, hate speech on social media frequently rises as political parties and their supporters exchange hostile remarks targeting rival communities. Adeyanju (2020: 56) shows how insults and stereotypes are used to strip opponents of dignity, strengthening an "us versus them" outlook that weakens inclusiveness and respect. Religious minorities, such as Christians in northern states dominated by Muslims and Muslims in southern states with Christian majorities, are also common targets, facing both Islamophobic and anti-Christian messages (Alexander, 2021: 258).

Digital platforms have greatly increased the scope and effect of hate speech in Nigeria. Social media spaces like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become arenas for divisive ideas, often unchecked due to weak moderation (Ayaz, Shakeel, Ali, & Amjad, 2024: 27). Anonymity further enables users to avoid responsibility for their actions, while platform algorithms that push sensational material for greater engagement unintentionally boost the visibility of hate speech. Encrypted services like WhatsApp are especially difficult, allowing the swift circulation of inflammatory content within closed circles. During the EndSARS movement in 2020, for instance, false and inciting messages spread through WhatsApp, fuelling violence and mistrust between demonstrators and security forces (Aubyn, & Frimpong, 2022: 77). Similarly, targeted online abuse of particular ethnic groups has been linked with outbreaks of violence in Kaduna, Plateau, and Taraba states (Adigun, 2023: 23).

The effects of hate speech extend beyond online spaces, often driving violence and frustrating attempts to build social unity. In Nigeria, it has been tied to communal fighting, election-related disorder, and attacks on religious sites (Yusuf, 2025: 85). For example, inflammatory social media messages have been blamed for clashes between farmers and herders in central Nigeria, where land disputes are often given a religious or ethnic frame (Nwankwo, Ayadiuno, Ali, & Madu, 2020: 214). Hate speech also undermines trust in public institutions and weakens society by fostering suspicion, hostility, and separation between groups. It fosters an atmosphere in which dialogue and reconciliation are harder

to achieve, with communities withdrawing into protective camps built on grievance and resentment (Bigabo, 2025: 62). This not only blocks efforts to address root causes of conflict but also prolongs cycles of hostility and revenge.

**Social Media and Religious Extremism in Nigeria**

The link between social media and religious extremism in Nigeria has become a pressing concern, as digital spaces are increasingly used to spread extremist beliefs, recruit vulnerable people, and coordinate violent actions. Nigeria's political and social setting, marked by sharp religious divisions, economic inequality, and weak governance, creates a favourable environment for extremist actors to use social media to push their agendas and extend their reach (Ganesh, & Bright, 2020: 14). This section explores the many ways in which social media has been turned into a tool for weakening national security and social stability.

A central method by which social media supports religious extremism is through propaganda. Groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) have made extensive use of platforms including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram to share films, photographs, and texts that celebrate violence, excuse attacks on civilians, and promote their worldview (Oguejiofor, & Agbaenyi, 2023: 9). These materials are designed to trigger strong emotions—fear, anger, or admiration—depending on the target audience. Boko Haram, for example, regularly circulates videos of its leaders' speeches, combined with violent scenes of attacks, executions, and appeals to jihad. Such content strengthens the group's ideological draw and works as a tool to attract recruits. The anonymity of online platforms allows extremists to act without immediate consequences, while encrypted services like Telegram and WhatsApp provide private channels that security agencies find hard to track (Bloom, & Lokmanoglu, 2020: 161). Adeyanju (2020: 60) shows that extremists use Telegram to circulate guides, exchange attack details, and radicalise individuals by stressing issues such as poverty and exclusion.

Recruitment and radicalisation are other major functions of social media in this context. Extremist groups often focus on disaffected youth and those who feel excluded, using socio-economic hardship and alienation to present themselves as alternatives to a state seen as corrupt and unresponsive (Ramasamy, 2023: 234). Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube host echo chambers where radical messages are repeated and reinforced, easing the process of indoctrination. During times of economic strain or political disorder, posts

in support of Boko Haram's vision of a caliphate attract attention online, particularly among northern youths with limited access to education or work (Nnorom, 2021: 87). Social media algorithms, designed to keep users engaged, often heighten the visibility of such posts, creating cycles that strengthen extremist messages. This shows the need to confront not only the social roots of radicalisation but also the online systems that amplify it.

The actions of social media firms also raise ethical questions. Although companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have introduced steps against harmful material, their measures are often criticised as inadequate (Öhman, & Aggarwal, 2020: 37). Systems that favour sensational material end up giving extremist posts wider exposure, creating a contradiction where tools for connection deepen division. The lack of openness in moderation policies has also led to claims of unfair treatment. While high-profile cases of incitement may be addressed, less visible extremist material frequently remains unchecked (Sevdiren, 2025: 134)This weakens confidence in online platforms and highlights the demand for stronger ethical standards in Nigeria. Technology companies, critics argue, must act beyond the pursuit of profit to ensure their platforms are not exploited for destructive purposes.

The outcomes of social media-fuelled extremism are serious and damaging. In Nigeria, extremist organisations have used digital tools to trigger violence, threaten security, and destabilise communities. Inflammatory content has been linked with farmer-herder conflicts in Kaduna, Plateau, and Taraba, where land disputes are framed in religious or ethnic terms (Nlewem, & Akhagba, 2024: 52). Hate messages aimed at religious groups have also led to assaults on places of worship, worsening division and weakening trust in public authority. The widespread nature of extremist content encourages suspicion and fear, making dialogue and reconciliation more difficult. Communities turn inward, defined by common grievances and hostility, which prolongs violence and revenge (Singh, & Misra, 2024: 382). Anger, Aggression, and Violence and Their Management. In Emotions in Cultural Context (pp. 377-396). Cham: Springer International Publishing.). This obstructs attempts to address root causes and hinders the building of a more united and inclusive society.

**Ethical Responsibility of Stakeholders in Addressing Social Media and Religious Extremism in Nigeria**

Addressing the overlap between social media and religious extremism in Nigeria is a complex ethical challenge that requires coordinated action from all relevant actors. This section explores the roles and duties of religious leaders, technology companies, and government authorities, emphasising their ethical responsibilities, dilemmas, and potential strategies. Each group has a distinct part to play in reducing the harms of extremist ideologies while maintaining freedom of expression, privacy, and inclusivity.

Religious leaders occupy a central position in shaping values and influencing public opinion. Their guidance carries significant weight in a country where religion is closely linked to cultural identity and social cohesion. Consequently, they bear a strong ethical duty to ensure that online sermons, statements, and teachings foster peace, tolerance, and coexistence rather than inflaming division or violence. Digital platforms allow religious leaders to reach large audiences through live streams, recorded sermons, and social media posts. While this enables the promotion of reconciliation and unity, misuse can have severe consequences. For example, some clerics have been accused of spreading inflammatory rhetoric during elections or communal conflicts (Agunyai, & Ikedinma, 2021: 65), exacerbating existing tensions and creating conditions conducive to extremism. Conversely, many religious figures have used these platforms to call for calm, condemn violence, and encourage rejection of extremist ideologies (Muhaimin, Mustafa, & Khan, 2023: 1107). During the EndSARS protests of 2020, several prominent clerics urged peaceful demonstrations, while some played key roles mediating farmer-herder disputes in central Nigeria.

Religious leaders exercise ethical authority within a framework shaped by enduring doctrinal teachings on life, community, and moral responsibility. Oyebanji (2022) demonstrates that within the Christ Apostolic Church, even biomedical practices such as artificial insemination are assessed through a religio-ethical lens that emphasises divine sovereignty over individual autonomy. This interpretive approach, in which technological and social developments are measured against sacred norms, can be applied meaningfully to the digital environment. By extending this ethical scrutiny to online communication, clerics can encourage adherents to approach digital interactions as a form of spiritual

practice, recognising that every post, comment, or share carries moral significance and potential eschatological implications.

Religious leaders do more than explain doctrine; they act as shapers of moral direction within public life. In Southwest Nigeria, joint initiatives by Christian and Muslim clergy have shown that steady dialogue can ease communal tensions and restore trust weakened by violence (Oyebanji & Oyunwola, 2024b: 18-21). These projects achieve results not by altering core beliefs but by fostering a common commitment to the ethic of mutual care and neighbourly love that crosses theological boundaries. When such figures openly resist hate speech online and practise responsible digital conduct, they present religious authority as a tool for unity rather than division. Their impact is especially marked among young people, who often turn to religious voices for moral guidance in an increasingly fractured media space.

Technology companies face ethical challenges in balancing content moderation with respect for free expression. Measures taken to combat harmful material have been uneven, raising questions about commitment to ethical practice. Nigeria's linguistic diversity, cultural nuances, and limited resources complicate content moderation. Platforms rely heavily on artificial intelligence (AI) and user reports, but AI often fails to interpret coded or culturally specific language used in extremist propaganda (Fernandez, & Alani, 2021: 154). WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption further hinders monitoring, creating spaces where extremist activity can go undetected. Solutions include developing machine learning tools trained in local languages, partnering with fact-checking organisations, and training moderators with contextual knowledge to ensure fair enforcement (Voinea, 2024: 381).

The ethical concerns raised by artificial intelligence go further than questions of bias and lack of clarity; they affect the very process of spiritual judgement. According to Oyebanji et al. (2025a:39), in their study of Christian youth spirituality, AI-driven religious material—though improving access—can weaken the communal and reflective sides of faith by giving priority to popularity over depth. In the case of extremism, AI tools that identify or promote content based on virality rather than accuracy may unintentionally spread hostile speech under the label of "trending" discussion. Ethical control of content must therefore move past reactive removals and instead foster digital spaces that give weight to truth, compassion, and mutual respect between communities—principles consistent with democratic values as well as Nigeria's long-standing moral traditions.

Content removal and account suspension present ethical dilemmas. Removing harmful material protects public safety but can raise censorship concerns, especially where political dissent is mislabelled as extremism (Sold, & Junk, 2021: 371). Inconsistent enforcement undermines trust, highlighting the need for transparent policies and appeals processes. Cultural sensitivities further complicate moderation; content deemed offensive in one context may be acceptable in another. Collaboration with local stakeholders, universities, and civil society can produce tailored solutions, demonstrating ethical commitment while improving effectiveness.

Governments and policymakers must regulate social media to limit extremism while upholding constitutional freedoms. Nigeria's Cybercrime Act (2015) and proposed Social Media Bill criminalise digital threats to national security, including terrorism and hate speech. However, vague definitions leave room for misuse, enabling targeting of political opponents or activists (Goshen, & Steel, 2022: 124). Excessive censorship may suppress genuine discussion, weaken trust in institutions, and drive extremist actions into secrecy (Meserve, & Pemstein, 2020: 757). Ethical control calls for precise legal terms, protection against misuse, and independent bodies of oversight to maintain balance between security and rights.

**Balancing Free Speech and Religious Harmony in Nigeria**

The conflict between the defence of free expression and the pursuit of religious harmony stands out as one of the most pressing ethical challenges in Nigeria's digital environment. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees freedom of speech as a core human right and places it at the heart of democratic life (Sule, 2022: 53). This right allows citizens to share opinions, question authority, and take part in public debate. However, its misuse on digital platforms has become a serious concern. When speech is employed as a tool for hate campaigns, the incitement of violence, or the spread of religious extremism, it not only distorts the purpose of this freedom but also poses grave threats to communal peace, social cohesion, and national stability.

The ethical dilemma here arises from the need to uphold the liberty of expression while at the same time safeguarding society from the destructive effects of hostile and divisive speech. Addressing this complex challenge requires far more than legal restrictions alone. It demands a broad approach that takes into account constitutional guarantees, ethical principles, cultural sensitivities, and the lived realities of Nigeria's plural society. Any

response must therefore balance the duty to protect rights with the responsibility to prevent harm, ensuring that free expression continues to serve as a foundation for unity and constructive dialogue rather than a weapon of division.

**The Importance of Free Speech in a Democratic Society**

Freedom of speech is widely regarded as one of the cornerstones of democratic life. It offers individuals the opportunity to express their views openly, challenge state authority, and engage in dialogue on issues that affect the wider community. In Nigeria, this right assumes even greater importance because of the country's complex ethnic and religious makeup. The recognition of free expression provides marginalised groups and minority voices with the means to be heard within a political order that is often marked by mistrust and exclusion. By allowing citizens to scrutinise the actions of public officials, organise campaigns for justice, and demand accountability from their leaders, freedom of speech functions as both a safeguard of democracy and a mechanism for social participation (Mohyeddin, 2024: 68).

Despite its democratic value, the misuse of free expression has generated profound risks in Nigeria's contemporary digital landscape. The rapid growth of social media has expanded opportunities for communication but has also provided a platform for the spread of harmful and divisive messages. Research shows that Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter are among the main outlets through which hate speech circulates, and that much of this speech is driven by political rivalries, ethnic bias, and religious sentiments (Chekol, Moges, & Nigatu, 2023: 223). During the 2023 general elections, for example, inflammatory posts on social media were widely reported to have inflamed sectarian and tribal divisions, undermining public trust and fuelling tensions across communities (Aldamen, & Thasleem, 2025: 42). Similarly, studies of WhatsApp group discussions reveal that speech directed against ethnic and religious groups, as well as gendered and political insults, has become commonplace. While some administrators attempted to regulate such discourse, these efforts were inconsistent and often ineffective in curbing the spread of hostility (Wieslander, 2021: 25).

The Nigerian state has at times sought to regulate online expression, yet such measures are not without controversy. The suspension of Twitter in 2021–2022 was justified by officials as a national security necessity, but many scholars have argued that this form of regulation risked undermining democratic dialogue and silencing legitimate dissent

(Mhajne, 2025: 145). Others caution that while regulation is needed to prevent speech that incites violence or religious extremism, there is also a real danger that vague laws may be weaponised by those in power to suppress criticism of government policies (Lowe, 2022: 1447). The ethical tension, therefore, lies in drawing a clear line between acceptable regulation and political censorship.

For Nigeria, the dilemma is not simply legal but deeply ethical and cultural. A plural society requires safeguards to ensure that the right to free expression is balanced with the collective responsibility to preserve peace and religious harmony. The evidence suggests that any sustainable approach must rest on several principles: the development of precise legal definitions of hate speech to prevent arbitrary enforcement; the establishment of independent regulatory bodies with genuine oversight powers; the promotion of digital literacy to equip citizens to recognise and reject extremist content; and the encouragement of counter-speech initiatives to build a culture of constructive dialogue. Without these measures, free speech—though central to democracy—may continue to serve as a vehicle for division and instability rather than a tool for participation and unity.

**The Threat of Hate Speech to Religious Harmony**

Hate speech represents one of the most significant threats to religious harmony in Nigeria. Defined as any form of communication that disparages individuals or groups based on attributes such as religion, ethnicity, or political affiliation, hate speech has become increasingly prevalent in the country's digital spaces (Chekol, Moges, & Nigatu, 2023: 223). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have amplified the reach and impact of hate speech, often with devastating consequences for intergroup relations. For instance, during election cycles, inflammatory posts targeting rival ethnic or religious groups often escalate tensions, leading to real-world violence. Similarly, hate speech targeting religious minorities—such as Christians in predominantly Muslim northern states or Muslims in predominantly Christian southern states—has contributed to targeted attacks on places of worship and deepened societal divisions (Michalski, 2024: 115). These incidents underscore the urgent need for measures to counter hate speech while respecting constitutional guarantees of free expression.

**Ethical Challenges in Regulating Hate Speech**

Regulating hate speech in Nigeria raises serious ethical concerns, especially when weighing the defence of vulnerable groups against the protection of free expression. One major worry is the risk of excess, where laws intended to address hate speech are instead used to silence critics or pursue political opponents. The Nigerian government, for example, has been faulted for relying on vague clauses in the Cybercrime Act (2015) to restrict journalists and activists (Ilori, 2024: 294). In the same way, efforts such as the Social Media Bill have stirred disputes about possible censorship. Supporters insist that such measures are needed to confront false information and extremist content, while opponents warn that they could restrict open dialogue and weaken democratic practice (Tenove, 2020: 525).

This challenge shows the need for rules that are precise, transparent, and adapted to Nigeria's circumstances in handling hate speech. A fair approach should involve civil society groups, religious leaders, technology companies, and citizens in drafting regulations that protect both public safety and personal rights. To ensure accountability, independent oversight bodies could be set up to examine allegations of hate speech, so that outcomes are based on evidence, guided by fairness, and shielded from political control.

**Promoting Religious Harmony Through Dialogue and Education**

Promoting religious harmony in Nigeria goes beyond regulating hate speech; it requires building a culture of respect and mutual understanding. A key approach is encouraging interfaith dialogue, where leaders and members of different religious groups meet to discuss shared principles and work together on common challenges. Religious leaders hold a particularly important position in rejecting divisive rhetoric and advocating for peace (Johnson, 2021: 236). Education and public awareness campaigns are equally vital in strengthening religious harmony. By equipping citizens to question online material and resist manipulation by extremist groups, governments, and civil society organisations can reduce the risk of radicalisation. For example, programmes that focus on media literacy, conflict management, and the value of tolerance can prepare individuals to contribute positively in digital spaces (Dharma, Y., Seneru, & Obi, 2025: 17).

Technology companies also share a duty to promote harmony by improving the quality of content moderation and ensuring openness in their policies. For instance, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter could work with local fact-checking bodies to

confirm the accuracy of widely shared content and limit the circulation of false information. Likewise, encrypted services such as WhatsApp could design systems that allow users to report suspicious activity without infringing on privacy.

**Case Studies: Lessons from Nigeria's Experience**

Nigeria's experience provides important insights into how a country can navigate the complex relationship between freedom of expression and the need to maintain religious harmony. A notable example of this tension was seen during the EndSARS protests in 2020, where social media emerged as both a powerful tool for civic engagement and a source of significant concern. On one hand, platforms such as Twitter were instrumental in bringing national and international attention to widespread issues of police brutality. Activists and ordinary citizens were able to share real-time updates, organise peaceful protests, and demand accountability from state institutions. However, the same platforms also became breeding grounds for the rapid spread of misinformation, rumours, and provocative content. In some cases, false narratives and unverified claims circulating online contributed to confusion, panic, and even outbreaks of violence in certain areas (Gradoń, 2020: 143).

A similar dynamic has been observed in the context of recurring clashes between farmers and herders in central Nigeria. Here, social media has sometimes played a divisive role, with certain individuals or groups using online platforms to frame local land disputes in religious or ethnic terms. Such inflammatory rhetoric has deepened mistrust between communities and made it more difficult to resolve conflicts peacefully. Despite this, there have also been encouraging examples of how digital platforms can be used to promote dialogue and reconciliation. In particular, some religious leaders have taken an active role in countering hate speech and calming tensions. By using their influence and reach on social media, they have helped to mediate disputes and encourage more constructive approaches to conflict resolution (Melnychuk, Opolska, Ostapenko, Lapshyn, & Ishchuk, 2024: 32).

**Conclusion**

The intersection of religious extremism, hate speech, and digital ethics in Nigeria presents a complex and evolving challenge that requires urgent attention from all stakeholders. The proliferation of social media platforms has amplified the reach and impact of extremist ideologies, hate speech, and divisive narratives, undermining efforts to

promote religious harmony, social cohesion, and national security. While digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for communication, education, and civic engagement, they have also become tools for manipulation, radicalisation, and incitement to violence. This underscores the need for a balanced approach that safeguards free speech while addressing the harms caused by hate speech, religious extremism, and algorithmically amplified disinformation, ensuring that digital spaces remain conducive to democratic deliberation, intercommunal respect, and ethical responsibility without descending into instruments of division or violence.

**Recommendations**

To effectively address the challenges posed by religious extremism, hate speech, and digital ethics in Nigeria, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Governments and Policymakers should develop precise hate speech laws, establish independent oversight, promote digital literacy, and avoid censorship overreach.
ii. Technology Companies should enhance content moderation with localised AI tools, ensure transparency, collaborate with stakeholders, and protect user privacy.
iii. Religious Leaders should promote peace and tolerance, engage in interfaith dialogue, counter extremist ideologies, and support media literacy initiatives.
iv. Civil Society Organisations should monitor harmful content, advocate for ethical practices, build community resilience, and foster intercommunal dialogue.
v. Individual Users should evaluate online content critically, report harmful posts, spread positive messages, and participate in media literacy programs.

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