

# IMPOLITENESS STRATEGIES IN SELECTED POLITICAL FACEBOOK COMMENTS ON NIGERIA'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS

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**Olayemi Esther Ore**

Department of English, Ojo, Lagos  
oresther14@gmail.com/+2348032961378

**Lateef IyandaKugbayi**

Department of English Language  
Zamfara State University, TalataMafara, Zamfara State  
kugbayilateef@yahoo.com/+2347032985052

## **Abstract**

The pervasive and often aggressive nature of online political discourse, particularly in post-election environments, poses a significant challenge to Nigeria's democratic processes and social cohesion. Various important political events in the country are usually characterised by escalating tensions and divisive rhetoric, particularly in online interactions. The use of language in this manner to achieve a divisive end prompts an investigation into the processes by which impoliteness is exploited to oppose identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms and ideologies in selected political comments on Facebook following the announcement of the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria. Through a blend of Brown and Levinson's *Face Theory* and Culpepper's (2013) *Impoliteness Theory*, this paper examines the nature of impolite discourse in contentious online interactions. The methodology involves the qualitative analysis of a corpus of Facebook comments, focusing on identifying recurrent patterns of impolite language and their contextual deployment. The findings reveal a significant prevalence of impoliteness, which is characterised by contempt, name-calling, dismissal, cursing, sarcasm and insults. The paper also identifies the perceived anonymity of online platforms, the contentious nature of the election results, pre-existing political polarisation of Nigerian society and

widespread anger and frustration among the citizenry as major factors contributing to the strategic deployment of impoliteness, in the form of divisive rhetoric, attack to the face of others, expression of negative emotions and ridiculing of opposing personalities, by commentators on Facebook following the announcement of the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria. The study concludes that the exploitation of impoliteness by social media users in Nigeria has severe consequences – such as promoting an "us versus them" mentality, creating a hostile online environment and eroding civil discourse – on the unity and peaceful coexistence of Nigerians. The online commentators' impolite comments hinder meaningful political discussion and pose a threat to democratic processes and social cohesion in Nigeria. The research, therefore, underscores the urgent need for strategies to promote constructive and respectful online engagement to safeguard democratic ideals among Nigerians.

**Keywords:** *Impoliteness, Face Theory, Impoliteness Theory, Social Media, Facebook*

## **Introduction**

One of the rights that individuals, as citizens of Nigeria, enjoy is the right to speech. This right provides citizens with the opportunity to express their feelings, especially on political issues, using different platforms on social media. According to Hudson (1996), social media is a collection of websites and applications that enable quick and effective content-sharing interactions. Unlike newspapers, social media has prominent features. The features give room for interaction, uploading content, commenting on other users' posts and managing contacts. They have made social media a frequent site to visit and a much-preferred platform for sending messages and relating to loved ones at home and abroad. With the growth of social media, the use of language has undergone extensive evolution. Recent research has underscored the profound impact of social media on political communication, emphasising its role as a democratised space for citizens to engage in political conversations (Chadwick, 2017; Kashaka, 2025).

It has been an avenue for different discursive genres such as politics, sports, entertainment, economy and religion. Some use family-level platforms, religious platforms, radio, television, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Among the platforms,

Facebook is seen as one of the most popular network sites used as a social interaction medium. It is employed by people with different social backgrounds, ranging from middle-class society to elite groups, to relate their views about issues for discussion. Also, people from different cultures and countries share various information interests and activities that connect them to social life. The main reason why Facebook was created is to foster relationships and friendships. However, when we look at how people have been using the Facebook platform for political comments, the use seems to be at variance with the essence of establishing or creating a Facebook platform. Users' diction, instead of promoting or encouraging friendship, usually brings a fight, disagreement and all sorts of face-threatening acts.

Political discourse has undergone a radical upheaval in the era of digital and social networking platforms, with online spaces like Facebook becoming prominent arenas for political engagement and debate. It is a platform mainly for making friends and building relationships. With the approach to the 2023 presidential election, there were a lot of comments among Facebook users that were members of the four major political parties in Nigeria: APC, PDP, LP, and NNPC that led to serious arguments and the usage of vulgar words that resulted in the face-threatening of Facebook users against the main purpose of Facebook as a platform. This divisive use of language through Facebook undermines the need for peaceful coexistence among Nigerians. Linguistic choices of divisive tendencies should, therefore, be identified and analysed to expose their capacity to destroy us as a people. It is against this backdrop that this paper sets out to investigate the processes by which impoliteness is exploited to oppose identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms and ideologies in selected political comments on Facebook after the announcement of the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria. Its specific objectives are:

- i. to identify the features of impoliteness in selected political comments on Facebook about the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria;

- ii. to investigate the factors that led to impolite political comments on Facebook after the announcement of the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria;
- iii. to describe the extent to which impoliteness strategies adopted by Facebook commentators influence political comments on Nigeria's 2023 presidential election results on Facebook; and
- iv. to identify the consequences of impoliteness cited in the political comments on Facebook after the announcement of the Nigerian 2023 presidential election results.

Many scholars have researched political discourse and political comments both in Nigeria and in other parts of the world. They include Jones (2014), who investigates the political semiotics of nationwide campaign posters and pictorial representation in Thailand's 2011 general election. Kreis (2017) investigates how President Donald Trump employed Twitter as a strategic instrument of power politics to disseminate his right-wing populist discourse. Bamgbose (2018) studies politeness strategies in the Oyo State 2015 gubernatorial debate, while Aremu (2018) investigates the conceptual mappings in the inaugural speeches of Nigerian presidents between 1979 and 2015. The current study is a slight departure from the existing literature as it focuses on the processes by which impoliteness is exploited to oppose identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms, and ideologies in selected political comments on Facebook following the announcement of the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria.

### **Social Media as a Network of Communication**

Social media is very significant in any part of the world. Although individuals are not constitutionally mandated to engage in them, they have become an essential part of many individuals' daily activities and overall existence, even in Nigeria. This is so because they have completely changed the face of social interaction, business relationships, political participation, entertainment,

education, mass communication, and every other sector (Bossetta, 2018). Social media are websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or participate in social networking. Through several media platforms, the following things can be done: viewing comments, statuses, pictures and videos; shopping, doing bank transactions, checking and sending emails, chatting, and placing orders. According to Taiwo, Akinwotu and Kpolugbo (2021), social media is not a new concept; it has evolved from the beginning of human interaction. It is a networking mechanism used for communication and business. From a historical perspective, the year 2000 witnessed the emergence of many social networking sites accessible to share interests in different aspects of human lives. Meanwhile, Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, brought transformation. As one of the most popular network platforms, Facebook provides the opportunity for people of diverse social backgrounds to share their views. Many times, those views generate opposition to identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms and ideologies. These elements of impoliteness are danger signs of disintegration in a politically and diverse country like Nigeria. To expose the destructive nature of such comments to national unity and peaceful coexistence, this study considers it a worthwhile exercise to investigate the stated elements of impoliteness in selected political comments on Facebook during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

### **Facebook: A Political Mobilisation Tool**

Facebook allows political candidates, parties and activists to disseminate information about their platforms, policies, campaign events, and achievements. It provides a platform for spreading awareness about political issues, mobilizing support, and engaging with a wide audience. Facebook is increasingly shaping the political agenda, a role that was formerly dominated by television. Facebook is now followed by television, or at the very least, broadcast news (Luckscheiter, 2022). It serves as a medium for microblogging, and

its narrative and interactive design encourage user interaction. It is a social network distinguished for its ease of content generation. A message on Facebook can be funny or intelligent, but it cannot be sophisticated. On Facebook, hashtags are used to group conversations around particular themes. Campaign-specific hashtags can be developed and used by political campaigns to rally supporters, boost engagement, and magnify their messaging (Sanne, 2014).

Campaigns using hashtags may spark discussions online, boost exposure, and mobilize support for certain politicians or causes (Hadma & Anggoro, 2022). Political activists and supporters may connect, plan, and coordinate grassroots events via Facebook. It may be employed to organise volunteers, organise door-to-door campaigns, voter registration drives, or neighbourhood gatherings (Gambo, 2021). Facebook's networking features aid in forming groups of people with similar interests who may get together offline. In Nigeria, Political candidates can directly engage with their supporters and potential voters on Facebook. They can respond to queries, address concerns, and provide real-time updates (Chinedu-Okeke & Obi, 2016). Engaging with supporters helps build trust, foster loyalty, and create a sense of inclusivity, which can contribute to political mobilisations. Voters' rights, voter registration, and the election process may all be explained to them over Facebook. Election dates, polling places, and pertinent documentation requirements can all be shared by campaigns. It can help boost political engagement and voting turnout by improving voter education and awareness (Senne, 2014). Despite all those benefits that Facebook is claimed to offer humanity, the platform is a tool for achieving degenerating purposes. In Nigeria, for example, the approach to the 2023 presidential election is characterised by a lot of comments among Facebook users who were members of the four major political parties (APC, PDP, LP and NNPC) in the country. The comments led to serious arguments and the use of vulgar words that resulted in the face-threatening of Facebook users. Such comments are impolite. They do not mobilise; rather, they are

destructive. They portray divisive tendencies and should be identified and analysed to expose their capacity to destroy the Nigerian state.

### **Impoliteness and Its Strategies**

Culpepper (2005) states impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attack, or a combination of (1) and (2). Mullany (2008) focuses on the second part of this definition, whereby the role of the hearer and the intentionality of a speech act have been taken into consideration. In other words, a face attack might happen intentionally on the part of the speaker, but the hearer does not perceive it as a face attack, or, conversely, the speaker's intention is not to attack the hearer's face, but the hearer constructs an intention for a face attack. Therefore, impoliteness is constructed through interaction, like the ones on Facebook, and it requires the discourse and cues that are used in the interaction to be analysed by both the speaker and the addressee. Locher and Boufield state that impoliteness is behaviour that is "face-aggravating in a particular context" (2008:3). Impolite language users, especially on social media, rely on certain strategies to achieve undeserving ends on those they aim to undermine. Among the strategies, Culpepper (1996, 2003, 2005, 2013) identifies:

- i. *Bald on record impoliteness*: This is employed when there is much face at risk and when a speaker intends to damage the hearer's face, and thus the impolite utterance will be performed directly and clearly (Bousfield, 2008, p. 92). To foreground this strategy, Culpepper introduces the concept of Face-Attack Acts (FAA), in opposition to face-threatening acts, in order to identify the face attack where there is a deliberate intention on the part of the speaker.
- ii. *Positive Impoliteness*: This strategy is designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants, e.g., ignore, snub, or fail to acknowledge the other's presence. It includes excluding the

other from an activity, disassociating from the other, using inappropriate identity markers, using obscure or secretive language, seeking disagreement by selecting a sensitive topic, making others feel uncomfortable, using taboo words—swear—or use abusive or profane language and calling the others names through derogatory nominations.

- iii. *Negative Impoliteness*: This includes attacking the addressee's negative face wants. The addressees are deprived of the freedom from imposition and not being intruded upon. They are frightened, made to condescend, scorned/ridiculed or belittled.
- iv. *Sarcasm or Mock Impoliteness*: With this strategy, the speaker performs face-threatening acts using insincerity. It involved the use of one or more sub-strategies that are superficially suitable and accepted but, deeply, with opposite meanings (Bousfield, 2008, p.95).
- v. *Withhold Politeness*: This strategy occurs when the speaker refuses to perform politeness where it is expected, for instance, to keep silent when the speaker is supposed to appreciate or thank the hearer (Thielemann & Kosta, 2013, p. 239).

Considering the characteristics of these strategies, Culpepper (2011) affirms that impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires, and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. From a political comment standpoint, many Facebook commentators in Nigeria capitalise on the opportunity to air their views, which the Facebook platform provides, to undermine the personalities of other commentators who are of different/opposing political parties, through their comments during the 2023 presidential election in the country. The use of language in the public space this way usually heats the polity and widens the existing religious and ethnic gaps among the citizenry. Hence, the importance of studying the use of impoliteness strategies in selected political Facebook comments during the 2023

presidential election to discourage the abuse of language in this manner on social media cannot be underestimated.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopts an eclectic theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Face Theory* and Culpepper's (2013) *Impoliteness Theory*. The *Face Theory* contains three basic notions: face, face-threatening acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies. According to Brown and Levinson, face-threatening acts are only some speech acts that threaten the hearer's or speaker's face. A face is the public self-image of a person. Every participant in a discourse has a face, and an individual's role in a conversation is to maintain and protect their face within the interlocutors. Thus, the negative face is the desire of every competent adult member for their actions to be unimpeded by others. The positive face is the wish of every member for their desire to be desirable to at least some others. Brown and Levinson's model of politeness paved the way for linguists to explore the phenomenon of impoliteness. Describing impoliteness as a negative face, Culpepper (2005, p. 38) states that the concept "comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)." By integrating Brown and Levinson's *Face Theory* and Culpepper's (2013) *Impoliteness Theory*, this study theoretically evaluates negative attitudes of some Facebook subscribers vis-à-vis their comments on the results of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. It, therefore, evaluates how impolite comments on social media have been promoting divisive ideologies and endangering Nigeria's fragile democratic system and widening the existing socio-political gaps among the citizenry. This is necessary to highlight the linguistic choices that undermine the people's unity and peaceful coexistence.

## **Methodology**

The research design used for this study is a qualitative approach. Based on the observation that impoliteness is the core aspect that causes the tense flow of conversation between an addresser and an addressee, this research examines the features of impoliteness, factors that trigger impoliteness and impoliteness strategies employed by Facebook users in their selected political comments. There are several social media platforms that Nigerians engage in for expression of thoughts digitally. Facebook is chosen among them for this study owing to its flexibility for users to post and react to posts from both friends and public users. The population of the study is the commentators, with bias for either of the four major political parties – the All Progressives Congress (APC), the People's Democracy Party (PDP), the Labour Party (LP) and the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), on Facebook on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria and the presidential candidates of the parties in the election. A total of thirty (30) selected political comments from the four political commentators that cut across writing texts, emojis and pictures were selected purposively from Facebook posts. For this study, the samples involved both males and females between the ages of 18 and 65 to cover the age range of active Facebook subscribers. The study employs a primary source of data collection. The comments selected for the analysis were directly from Facebook accounts of the Nigerian political world platform and the Nigerian politics platform due to their inclination to Nigerian politics. The actual names of the platforms are made anonymous to protect the identities of the users whose comments were selected for analysis. To collect the data for this study, the researcher(s) visited the corpus of Facebook users to retrieve comments on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria within 12 months from the announcement of the election results. The comments were selected and screen-captured for analysis based on the framework of Jonathan Culpepper's model of impoliteness as an analytical procedure in order to theoretically evaluate negative attitudes of some Facebook subscribers vis-à-vis their comments on

the results. The analysis, therefore, focuses on how impolite comments on social media have been promoting divisive ideologies and endangering Nigeria's fragile democratic system and widening the existing socio-political gaps among the citizenry. The selected comments for analysis are tagged **Excerpts (E)** and presented as they were extracted from the corpus to maintain their originality.

### **Data Analysis**

For analysis, the data for the study were organised based on factors that cause impoliteness, clarified impoliteness strategies used in the selected political comments, justified the usage of the political comments and explained the features of the selected political comments to provide a clear picture of impoliteness. Therefore, the study identifies six major features of impoliteness from the data and four factors that led to impoliteness according to the data, as well as the impoliteness consequences noted in the data, with emphasis on the strategies employed to foreground impoliteness in the discourse.

#### **Linguistic Index of Contempt as a Form of Impoliteness in Political Comments on Facebook**

Contempt, as a feature that indexes impoliteness, is common in Facebook comments. Contempt, in the context of political discourse, refers to a feeling of scorn or disdain towards others' opinions or political affiliations. It is a form of negative evaluation and can be expressed through various linguistic elements such as words, phrases, or even non-verbal cues. Contempt can be manifested through derogatory language and offensive words to belittle opponents or their ideas. **E1**, **E2** and **E21** are instances in which contempt can be found.

**E1:** Tinubu cannot be the President of Nigeria; the entire world rejects him.

**E2:** How is Tinubu, the BAT, is a winner of the presidential election? Odikwaegwuooo (shocking news), this is a failed country indeed.

**E21:** Atiku, for where?

In **E1**, the Facebook commentator uses confrontation to say that Tinubu cannot be the president of Nigeria. Also, the language use of "the entire world rejects you" shows the high level of contempt the Facebook commentator has for the president-elect. The commentator does not see Tinubu becoming president in the comment; the hatred is so deep that he is not expecting anything reasonable from him. The comment is a face-attack act in a straightforward, clear, and concise manner, where the face is much at risk. The comment shows that the Facebook commentator employs bald-on-record to express anger and disappointment in the INEC's announcement of Tinubu as president-elect.

In **E2**, the commentator uses a question deliberately to ridicule Tinubu's personality. The second part of the extract shows the level of contempt the former has for the latter through the use of derogatory language: *Odikwaegwuooo*, meaning "(shocking news) this is indeed a failed country." Both bald-on-record and positive impoliteness strategies are adopted in this case to demonstrate content.

### **Name Calling as a Feature of Impoliteness in Political Comments on Facebook**

This simply means calling people offensive and rude names, using derogatory nominations. **E3**, **E6**, **E7**, **E10**, **E12** and **E20** are instances in which calling others names is found in the data.

**E3**: Trash! go to court. Though we have some judge there which you can buy over with dollars just like you bought INEC. But get ready, the revolution is here. You lost Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Nassarawa, Borno. So go to court and tell where you get the winning figure. Agberos

**E6**: Pray that Tinubu lives to rule Nigeria because if anything happens to him, remember that his vice is Boko

**E7**: Nobody sees that fact now; most Nigerians are shortsighted

**E10**: NdiAra! (mad people) see their mouth like amen.

**E12**: *Ewu* (goat)

**E20:** *Dem for even giving Atiku instead of that old fool*

In **E3**, the Facebook commentator uses *Agberos* in the concluding part of the extract. *Agbero* is a word in the Yoruba lexicon that means a person who calls passengers into a bus, any other vehicle or an enclosed space. It is a short form for *A Gba Ero*, meaning one who welcomes a group of passengers. Presently, *Agbero* is used informally to depict a person, usually a thug, who collects rates, fees, tools and other forms of tax around motor parks. In the excerpt, positive impoliteness is employed as an impoliteness strategy by which *Agberos* is used to ridicule the supporters of the president-elect for the 2023 presidential election, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and present them as thugs.

The second part of **E6**, "If anything happens to him, remember that his vice is Boko," also contains name-calling. In Nigeria, *Boko* is a short form of *Boko Haram*, meaning Western education is sacrilege. It is an Islamic sectarian movement, founded in 2002 by Muhammad Yusuf in north-eastern Nigeria. The group has been carrying out assassinations and large-scale acts of violence in Nigeria. The Facebook commentator, consequently, adopts a positive impoliteness strategy through the choice of *Boko* to refer to the Vice President, thereby ridiculing his tribe and personality as a northerner.

In **E10**, the commentator reacts to a post on 2nd March, 2023, in which a Facebook commentator prayed for Tinubu the moment he was announced the winner of the 2023 presidential election, and his supporters reacted by saying "Amen." The writer of **E10** employs positive impoliteness strategy when he refers to the supporters as *NdiAra* (mad people) for saying "Amen." It is very impolite to refer to one's fellow human beings as mad people.

**Dismissal as a Feature of Impoliteness**

Dismissal simply means shutting someone up. This is achieved in **E3**, **E14** and **E19** of the data.

**E3:** Trash, go to court. Though we have some judge there which you can buy over with dollars just like you bought INEC.

**E14:** keep quiet; call your mother for me...You lack wisdom and understanding over this topic....u go collect WOTOWOTO on behalf of your clan. I warn u ooo.

**E19:** Go to court



**Nwaonuma Ehuamdi Kenneth**

Go to court



46w Like Reply 7   

The **E3** is a reaction to a post on the Nigerian Political World Platform on Facebook on March 2, 2023.

APC Presidential Campaign Council Responds to Labour Party Candidate Mr. Peter Obi's Allegations of Fraudulent 2023 Presidential Elections

**WE WILL MEET MR. PETER OBI IN COURT**

The commentator, from the tone of his comment, sees going to court as the best option to solve the riddle behind the fraudulent allegations against the APC. To achieve dismissal, he adopts the impoliteness strategy of positive impoliteness, expressing anger and disappointment towards Obi, who had alleged fraud in the election in which INEC had declared Tinubu the winner. The subscriber who posts **E14** also uses dismissal as a feature of impoliteness by choosing “keep quiet” to show superiority over another Facebook commentator who is in support of Mr. Peter Obi. He adopts positive impoliteness strategy to ask the addressee to call his mother for him,

using the pronouns "you and I." **E19** is a picture of a referee raising a yellow card to warn the addressee should stop talking, but swing into action instead. This is a positive impoliteness strategy by which a football idea is employed to relate to an on-going discourse.

### **Cursing as a Feature of Impoliteness**

Cursing in this context means invoking or using a curse on someone. Cursing, or swearing, is the verbal expression of strong emotions or reactions and is often considered taboo or offensive in polite society. Socially, cursing can reinforce in-group solidarity or mark boundaries between different political groups on social media platforms.

**E24:** Fir will consume INEC chairman Mahmoud Yakub and his entire lineage.

**E25.:**



**E26:** Every Jagaban enemies will not have rest insahallah.

Precisely, **E24**, **E25** and **E26** are profane utterances.

In **E24**, the Facebook commentator curses the INEC Chairman, believing that he has a hand in the alleged electoral fraud. The picture in **E25** also depicts that the Facebook commentator does not mean well for the INEC Chairman. The picture shows an image that looks supernatural, with wings (probably an angel) setting an arrow towards a target. The picture can be interpreted as "the angel of destruction will fire you." **E26** invokes a curse on the opponents of the president-elect, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Use of curses, swearing words or wishing people evil, as demonstrated in **E24–E26**, is an extremely impolite way of expressing anger.

### **Sarcasm and Insults as Features of Impoliteness**

The inherent feature of mockery embedded in sarcasm renders it a potent tool for undermining others and their opinions. Sarcasm relies on the use of irony, which is employing words or phrases that carry opposite meanings to convey a message. Insults are a more straightforward manifestation of impoliteness. They involve explicit attacks on a person's character, appearance or actions. Insults leave little room for interpretation, directly targeting the recipient with derogatory remarks. **E4, E5, E8, E11, E16, E18, E23, E27, E28** and **E30** make up the categories of sarcasm and insults.

**E4:** I won't blame u, ur education is questionable. Pls call your nephew to have updates on Nigeria politicking. Don't let Okrika mentality (second-hand business) dominate your reasoning intellectually.

**E5:** You just proved that even wearing coat doesn't separate you from Okrika (second hand business) mentality. What a pity.

**E8:** What a country!!! How he was announced as president-elect when votes for some states scheduled for March 11 will always amuse me. INEC ....You do this one !!!!

How he was announced president elect when votes for some states where rescheduled to March11 will always amuse me.

INEC.... You do this one!!

Nemesis will catch up with y'all one day!!

Bravo!!

**E11:**Eyyah (What a pity) Sorry Wooh(see), Go And Take Ur Medication.

**E16:**excuse me Sir would u talk to ur sister in that manner please I just aired out my opinion u have no right to say this to me na (now) woman born respect how u talk instead of talking like an uncivilized fool.

**E18:**The highest number of people of people coming out to vote but, the total number of all the votes didn't even reach 20% of the population in Nigeria. what a shame.

**E23:** The reason why Atiku did not win is that if he wins INEC will miss importany customer.

**E27:** Nigeria once you have money omo you don do anything you want imagine how old man use money clear him road and win chait Nigeria

**E30:** I will Advise The Emilokan To Help And Release That Yeye Boy-MNK Make Him Not Rot in Jail

In **E4**, the commentator uses insult and sarcasm to deliver an impolite message to the hearer; he ridicules him, saying that his education is questionable. Using *positive impoliteness strategy*, he asks him to call his nephew to update him on Nigerian politics. Using the word "please" is a clue that the commentator explores sarcasm to tell the hearer to keep shut, since he has little knowledge about the debate topic. He indirectly tells him that the prominent business of people from his tribe, the Okrika mentality (selling second-hand products), may be the cause of his actions and reasoning. The author of **E5** uses negative impoliteness and sarcasm through a direct attack on the face of the commentator who posts **E4**. He uses insults to explicitly attack his appearance and actions, thus, "You just proved that even wearing a coat doesn't separate you from the Okrika mentality. What a pity!" **E23** is an example of sarcasm.

The Facebook commentators says the opposite of what he means. Irony is adopted in this case to mock Atiku over the several times he has come out to contest and failed as a presidential candidate. Specifically, commentators in this context demonstrate impoliteness through sarcasm and insults by choosing linguistic elements of concern and praise, such as **please**, **sorry** and **bravo**, to convey the opposite of their intentions.

### **Being Unsympathetic as a Feature of Impoliteness**

Being unsympathetic, as a feature of impoliteness, is the act of not feeling, showing or expressing pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune. This instance occurs in **E9**, in which the commentator uses a positive impoliteness strategy of being disinterested, unconcerned, and unsympathetic, and withholding strategies of impoliteness to express his intention.

**E9:** This is just the beginning. It has started already.



**Nsiong Jackson**

**Oluwadamilola Gracia Frederick** This is just the beginning... It has started already.



In the African socio-cultural milieu, it is common knowledge that appalling remarks are not used against the dead. Ideologically, it is inhumane to rejoice or gloat at the death of another person's child, irrespective of the ethnic, cultural, religious or political differences

that may exist between the addresser and the addressee. Hence, Africans show sympathy and concern for the dead. Any display or use of uncanny remarks about the dead is an indication of withholding politeness. For Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 5), politeness has to be communicated where it should be, and the absence of it is seen as an impolite attitude. In **E9**, the commentator deploys unpleasant remarks and accompanies the remarks with a picture of Wike's son, reportedly dead in the US, to mock the father instead of mourning with him. The Facebook commentator refers to the demise as a nemesis that caught up to his father, perhaps, as someone who has made some contributions to the emergence of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as the winner of the 2023 presidential election.

### **Threat as a Feature of Impoliteness in Political Comments on Facebook**

Threat, as a subset of impolite behaviour, is particularly impactful as it is usually employed to intimidate or coerce the addressed, thereby eroding the civility of discourse. Threats in political comments on Facebook often manifest in various forms, from personal attacks that threaten an individual's positive face to challenges that impose upon one's negative face by threatening actions or consequences as demonstrated in **E13**, “To speak your mind is simple but remember you are going to regret your action by denying the right of Nigerians youths,” and **E14**, “Keep quiet. Call your mother for me . . . you lack wisdom and understanding over this topic . . . u go collect WOTOWOTO on behalf of your clan. I warn u ooo” the Facebook commentators use threats to express their anger and dissatisfaction about the outcome of the election declared by the INEC.

### **Factors that Led to Impoliteness in the Data**

The factors that are evident in the analysed data that led to impoliteness are ethnicity bigotry, alleged electoral fraud, gender bias and an existing hatred.

#### *i. Ethnicity Bigotry as a Factor of Impoliteness*

Ethnicity bigotry, a form of discrimination where individuals are judged and maltreated based on their ethnic origins, racial identity or cultural affiliations, is a potent and troubling force that drives and exacerbates impoliteness even in online political discourse. This factor manifests impoliteness through a variety of communication acts, ranging from micro-aggressions to overly hostile verbal and non-verbal expressions. This can include using derogatory terms, making racist jokes or deliberately ignoring or excluding individuals based on their ethnicity, as evident in **E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E10, E11, E12, E14, E16, E17, E19, E20, E26 and E30**.

*ii. Alleged Electoral Fraud as a Factor of Impoliteness*

Electoral fraud is illegal interference with the process of an election that interferes with the mandate of the people. It can take different dimensions, such as increasing the number of voters for the preferred candidate, underage voting, mass voting by unregistered citizens and ballot-box snatching. It involves snatching of results before or after the election to favour the ruling party candidate, intimidation at the polls using militant gangs or even state security, scaring away genuine registered voters from exercising their votes in polling booths located in an opposition-favoured constituency, deliberate one-sided counting, improper counting of votes, and media manipulation to announce or publish the wrong results and declare the wrong candidate as a winner before the proper collection of results by the Electoral Commission. When elections are rigged, it undermines the fundamental principles of democracy, such as fairness, equality, and transparency. This factor plays a significant role in the impoliteness of the content of the selected political comments, as in **E3, E8, E10, E13, E17, E18, E19, E24, E25, E27, E28, and E29**. In **E3** and **E27**, Facebook commentators believe that INEC has been bribed by the ruling party. In **E18** and **E24**, the content of the comments shows that the results have been manipulated. Therefore, the election cannot be regarded as free and fair. Through **E8**, the Facebook commentator indirectly accuses INEC of announcing the winner when there are still some places where their votes have not been counted. In **E13**, the INEC

chairman is held responsible for denying the mandate of the people, especially the youth.

*iii. Gender Bias as a Factor of Impoliteness*

According to the Nigerian Constitution, there should be equality before the law. Also, individuals have to express their feelings about issues. But in some communities, ethnic groups, and even some families, they do not give women the same platform as men when talking. This is called gender disparity. Therefore, culture, social norms, family background, and individual personality determine if gender bias is a factor that could lead to impolite comments. This factor can be seen in **E15** and **E16**. In **E15**, the Facebook commentator insults another Facebook commentator who is a woman by exploring the denied association as a feature that led to impoliteness in the context. He denies her association on the same platform purposefully because she is a Nigerian woman. This is an indicator of the secondary status of women in the society in which he found himself. They believe men pay all the bills for women. In **E16**, the Facebook commentator reacts to the Facebook commentator's comment in **E15**. She makes him understand that a woman deserves respect, indirectly insulting him with the question, Honorific sir, sir, would you talk to your sister in that manner?

*iv. An Existing Hatred as a Factor of Impoliteness*

Hatred is an intense emotional response, often stemming from fear, perceived threats, or past grievances. When people are angry and dissatisfied, they tend to be impolite and use inappropriate words to voice their emotions. Hatred fuels a form of political expression that undermines civil discourse and encourages division, especially in online discourse on Facebook, where there is a cloak of anonymity and the absence of face-to-face interaction. It may also occur based on the person's record of past administration that has adverse effects on the present situation, as in **E1**, **E9**, **E21**, **E22** and **E23**.

## **Impoliteness Strategies Adopted by Facebook Commentators in the Data**

Impoliteness strategies adopted by Facebook users in the analysed excerpts include bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm and withholding politeness. They influenced political discourse on Facebook after the announcement of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

### *Bald- On-Record an Impoliteness Strategy*

Bald-on-record allows individuals to make direct, unambiguous statements without any mitigation. The extent of its influence is context-dependent, shaped by a myriad of factors that are common to the online environment and the psychological inclinations of users. Although it can sometimes serve to clarify and emphasise points, it often leads to increased polarisation, reduced quality of discourse, potential suppression of diverse viewpoints and hostility. This strategy is adopted in **E1**, **E2** and **E21**. In **E1**, direct statements are used, while direct questions are used in **E2** and **E21** to signal a threat to the target's face.

### *Positive Impoliteness as an Impoliteness Strategy*

Positive impoliteness strategy includes sarcasm, exaggeration and unwarranted familiarity. In the data, the commentators influence positive impoliteness in their political comments to the extent of using sarcasm (**E11**, **E16**, **E18**, **E22** and **E23**), name-calling (**E7** and **E12**), dismissal (**E14** and **E19**), cursing (**E24**, **E25** and **E26**) and inappropriate language use (**E30**). The strategy is used in the data to reinforce in-group identities while mocking opposing views (**E14**); it stifles constructive dialogue, increases divisiveness (**E26**) and alienates those with differing opinions (**E7**).

### *Negative Impoliteness as an Impoliteness Strategy*

Negative impoliteness is a term derived from Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which refers to the strategy used to intentionally belittle, confront or otherwise negatively affect the wants of another. In online fora, this strategy manifests as hostile language, sarcasm, insults or any form of communication intended

to address or create division, as can be seen in **E13**(where the Facebook commentator threatens the INEC Chairman for alleged electoral fraud), **E14** (in which the Facebook commentator threatens another Facebook commentator, "u go collect WOTOWOTO on behalf of your clan. I warn you ooo." "You will receive a thorough beating on behalf of your clan. I warn you" to signal polarisation) and **E17**, "If you are civilized enough as you claim, what concerns my tribe with my opinion? I laugh at your civilization because you can't be civilized and boast (boast) of a country white man called a shithole" which a commentator uses to express his anger and displeasure as a response to another commentator who has called him "an uncivilised fool" in **E16**. In essence, negative impoliteness among Facebook users significantly polarises constructive debate and fuels confrontational responses, which dampen the potential for genuine political engagement and understanding.

### **Sarcasm as an Impoliteness Strategy**

This strategy employs irony as a tool of ridicule. It allows users to challenge authority figures, ideologies and policies in a subversive manner. The use of sarcasm as an impoliteness strategy in the realm of Facebook political commentary wields notable influence on political discourse. Its adoption promotes divisiveness and contributes to the polarisation of opinions. Sarcasm influences the political comments in the data. It is used as an expressive tool for critique and resistance, while posing significant threats to the maintenance of a healthy democratic exchange of ideas, as evident in **E5** (what a pity), to ridicule another Facebook user; **E8** (what a country), to mock the country's electioneering process.

### *Withholding Politeness as an Impoliteness Strategy*

The concept of politeness plays a key role in shaping the nature and quality of interactions. By withholding politeness to create a communication strategy, language users can significantly influence political commentary on social media. This can be achieved through deliberate negation of politeness norms to exert power, show

disagreement or promote a specific group identity. The aggressive stance, typically associated with this strategy, can also discourage constructive dialogue, echo chambers and promote polarisation, as foregrounded in **E9** and **E23**.

### **Consequences of Impoliteness Cited in the Political Comments**

#### *i. Polarisation/Divisiveness as a Consequence of Impoliteness*

Polarisation and divisiveness are often the result of individual dispositions towards in-group favouritism and out-group derogation, especially in Nigerian politics where members of political parties see those outside their parties as political enemies. Divisiveness, closely related to polarisation, specifically highlights disagreement and discord, often manifesting in animosity between groups and the erosion of mutual dialogue. Severe polarisation makes democracy vulnerable. In healthy democracies, opposing sides are seen as political adversaries to compete against and, at times, to negotiate with, as demonstrated in **E2 – E7, E10 – E12, E14, E17, E26** and **E28**, where the impoliteness factor of ethnic bigotry dominates.

#### *ii. Erosion of Trust as a Consequence of Impoliteness*

The bedrock of a cohesive society and a functioning democracy is trust, an element that is increasingly eroding in contemporary politics. In democracies globally, the integrity of elections is crucial for maintaining trust in the political process. When people feel that their voices are not being heard and their votes are being disregarded, they resort to expressing their frustration and anger in some negative ways. The Facebook commentators who perceive that the vote no longer matters or that the electoral process is predetermined are likely to become disillusioned with the political system. They may be impolite in their utterances towards political opponents and government officials. In **E3, E8, E10, E13, E18, E19, E24, E25, E27** and **E29**, the commentators express disappointment that their trust has been betrayed. The writer of **E18** describes citizens' exercise of the right to vote as a waste of time and energy. Also, **E28** reveals the erosion of trust by saying that it is the power of money that is now the order of the day, not democracy. In

**E29**, the electioneering process is described as daylight robbery. These are ridiculous and embarrassing ways of describing an exercise that should be enjoyed and trusted by the citizenry.

### iii. *The Degradation of Social Etiquette as a Consequence of Impoliteness*

Etiquette refers to a set of customary codes of behaviour that governs interactions among members of a society or group. Impoliteness in political comments on Facebook leads to a significant erosion of social etiquette. The anonymity and distance offered by the internet embolden individuals to engage in behaviours they would ordinarily avoid in face-to-face encounters. This dynamic causes a breakdown of respect and civility, which are paramount to any constructive political conversation. It can set a precedent that discourages politeness as a standard, thereby creating an online culture where aggressive and disrespectful interactions are normalised. It is an ideal and social norm to respect individuals, another person's culture and tradition. However, as evident in **E5**, **E9**, **E22** and **E30**, people's personalities and traditions are rubbished in an environment where there is a degradation of social etiquette.

In **E30**, the Facebook commentator is referring to the former Central Bank of Nigeria president as "yeye boy," meaning useless boy, which shows that the Facebook commentator has no regard for him. Also, in **E9**, it is against traditional etiquette to show excitement over someone's death. It is also taboo or against social norms in **E22** to say someone is not destined for good fortune to become the president of Nigeria.

## Findings

This study investigates the use of impoliteness in Facebook comments following the 2023 Nigerian presidential election results, using a blend of Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Face Theory* and Culpepper's (2013) *Impoliteness Theory* as a theoretical framework. After analysing selected excerpts from the comments of Nigerian subscribers of Facebook to reveal how impoliteness is used to

oppose identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms and ideologies, and to identify its features, influencing factors, strategic impact and consequences, the study finds that:

- i. major features of impoliteness that are prevalent in the Facebook comments include contempt, name-calling, dismissal, cursing, sarcasm and insults.
- ii. perceived anonymity of online platforms, highly contentious nature of the election results, pre-existing political polarisation of the Nigerian society, anger, frustration and dissatisfaction are factors contributing to the prevalence of impoliteness among political commentators on social media.
- iii. diverse impoliteness strategies are employed by Facebook commentators on the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria to express anger and disappointment, to ridicule personalities and demonstrate contempt, to attack the faces of others, ridicule opponents and express strong negative emotions.
- iv. impoliteness in online political discourse contributes to an "us vs. them" mentality, solidifying in-group identity while demonising the out-group; to create a hostile environment and the escalation of conflict; the erosion of civil discourse, making meaningful political discussion difficult.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigates the processes by which impoliteness is exploited to oppose identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms and ideologies in selected political comments on Facebook following the announcement of the 2023 presidential election results in Nigeria. Through a blend of Brown and Levinson's *Face Theory* and Culpepper's (2013) *Impoliteness Theory*, the paper evaluates the nature of impolite discourse in contentious online interactions. It identifies detrimental consequences of using language in impolite manners online among Nigerians on the peaceful coexistence and maintenance of the nation's diversity. The consequences include a hostile online environment, escalation of

conflict and erosion of civil discourse. These have been frustrating stakeholders' peace-building efforts and constructive political dialogues in Nigeria. In essence, the exploitation of impoliteness in online political comments following the 2023 Nigerian presidential election results has far-reaching negative implications for democratic processes and social cohesion. It hinders the potential for peaceful deliberation and understanding in a critical national moment. There is, therefore, an urgent need for interventions from stakeholders to promote respectful and constructive forms of online political engagement to safeguard the integrity of democratic discourse in Nigeria.

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