

Discursive (De)construction of Identity in Ethno-Religious Crisis Discourses on Online Citizen Media in Nigeria

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Abstract

Ethno-religious (ER) crisis discourses in new (citizen) media spaces in Nigeria are known to implicate identities of groups that share religious, ethnic and regional affinities with crisis situations and perpetrators. This paper interrogated how actors position self-group in the identity construction discourse vis-à-vis ER crisis discourses orchestrated by online citizen media. This was done to accomplish two objectives: (i) to understand how groups construct/(re)negotiate their own identities and deconstruct others', and (ii), to uncover the discursivity and linguistic strategies that play out in the whole discourse process.

Nine reports were downloaded from six citizen media sources: *Legit*, *Nairaland*, *BellaNaija*, *Morning Star News*, *The Nigerian Lawyer* and *Worthy News*. The ER crises were published between 2014 and 2016—a period that was largely characterised by very rife ER crises in the country, particularly in the northern Nigeria. The study analysed the relevant headlines, main stories and readers' comments, by appropriating on the data, the Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis—a framework that theorises discourse as *text*, *discursive practice* and *social practice*.

The finding evinced that discourse actors deployed discursive practices of interest consciousness, identity reinforcement, identity association/support and identity defense to negotiate and construct self-group images, and utilised framing to deconstruct other-group's identities. It also uncovered various role that linguistic devices such as metaphor, interdiscourse reference, dysphemism, lexicalisation, collocation, transitivity, deixis and nominal elements, as well as the discourse strategies of verbal attack and vindication of self-group played in giving effect to discursive (de)construction of identity. The finding also underscored that identity (de)constructions in ER discourses drives ideological manifestation. This is because social actors participate in discourse within ideological divide by discursively establishing their identities in support of the ideology of the group to which they subscribe.

The study concludes that away from reiterating the obvious impact of citizen media on social advocacy and civil action, the paper evinced that crisis discourses on citizen media are vastly rich in language use, especially for identity representation, negotiation and or deconstruction. The cyber freedom which citizen actors also enjoy spurs their contribution to social conversations, and accommodates ideological languages with which they take sides in such conversations. However arguably, the language use arising from identity (de)construction in ER crisis discourses is a potential 'cold war' that proliferates prejudice, incitement, aggression and or hate speech, all of which further widen the social cohesion/integration gap.

Keywords: *identity, ideology, ethno-religious crises, crisis discourse, citizen journalism, citizen media, discursive practice, critical discourse analysis*

1. Introduction

For operational definition, *identity* is broadly considered in this study to cover how a person or group perceives itself, the *image* it projects to others and the *reputation* others make of the group (Fan, 2010) even though these constructs are somewhat different 'mental associations generated by knowledge and experience' (Adegoju, 2016: 2). From the light of self-perception, identity comprises the qualities associated with a person/group, which make them socially different from others, or the sense of belonging to a group as against another; hence, resulting in social stratification. It provides an explanation for who people are, what a group is or what it projects itself to be by virtue of its (in)actions and reactions in a given social situation. We all have our identity rooted in social structure and it is disclosed with our thought, action and speech. The

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identity we construct for ourselves is often informed by the expected social norms in every kind of discourse—inter-personal, inter-group or public sphere discourse (Norris, 2008). It is these norms that social actors or participants adhere to when constructing their personal identity. Furthermore, Wodak and Mayer (2008: 26) stress that identity constitutes what is called *social representation*. The notion, they note, was a coinage from Serge Moscovici (1981) to mean ‘a bulk of concepts, opinions, attitudes, evaluations, images and explanations which result from daily life and are sustained by communication’. Social representations are common ties shared by members of a social group. They are group-specific, and are not applicable to the whole society. The representations are a core element that constitutes individual’s social identity by virtue of identifying with the group whose members share these indications. This is what Durkheim, cited in Wodak and Mayer (2008: 26) means, by stating that ‘the ideas...are not personal and are not restricted to me; I share them, to a large degree, with all the [people] who belong to the same social group that I do. Because they are held in common, concepts are the supreme instrument of all intellectual exchange’.

With regard to a group’s reputation in the eyes of others, identity includes the description that others place on a particular group as a result of the ideology such group subscribes to. Indeed, both ideology and identity share a tiny boundary; ideology actually forms the basis of identity because when social actors are participating in discourse within the ideological divide, they do so by establishing (either subtly or unequivocally) their identities in support of the ideology they subscribe to. In other words, identity can be ideological. By this, we mean the representation of a certain group that subscribes to a socio-political ideology, school of thought or philosophy. Identity and or membership is clearly a reflection of ‘who belongs to the group and who does not, who is admitted to the group, and who is not...?’ (van Dijk, 1995: 249), and that this is what operates in the cases of racist or nationalist ideologies wherein the ideologists do not see others as equal to them. Also, in social issues, such as ethno-religious ones, there is always no middle ground - all participants are identified with one side or another other. More so, aside from age, class and gender, ethnicity and religion are some elements of social identity that can influence decisions. This plays out for instance, where people favour members of their religious group (i.e. social bias) when social needs arise, as a way of affiliating with them (Emmons & Paloutzian, cited in Emeka-Nwobia, 2015: 25).

There are different significations for the term *ethnicity* in literature, one of which defines it as a ‘community of people who share common cultural and linguistic characteristics including history, tradition, myth and origin’ (Ogunbunmi, 2013: 326). This definition is not at variance with Thomson’s (2000: 60) view of what basically constitute an ethnic group. Thomson notes that aside from upholding the same history (and maybe language), the people relating under the same ethnic roof have common conviction that they are sharing an identity that fate bestowed on them by virtue of their origin, kinship, ties, traditions and cultures. An ethnic group is a people that are ‘...different in every way, including religion, custom, language and aspirations’, ideology, and or geographical region—all of which are noticeable features of a group members’ identity (Porter, 2011). The second term, *religion*, gives a general description of the belief in the existence and worship of sacred things or supreme beings—idols, deities, God, gods or divinities—believed to operate with unfathomable powers that can orchestrate natural phenomenal or control human affairs, and to which man believe he has to pay obeisance and subservience if he must enjoy a peaceful earthly existence, live morally and perhaps get rewarded in the afterlife. In other words, religion poses a relationship that knots human beings to supernatural forces. This observation is also attested in Williams’ (2013: 2) definition that religion is ‘man’s relation to divine or super-human powers and the various organised systems of belief and worship in which these relations are expressed’.

The combination of both constructs, in terms of friction generated as a result of preserving creeds and protecting the interest of an ethnic group to the detriment of others, constitute *ethno-religious* (henceforth, ER) crisis. In Nigeria, ER crises are some of the varied shapes the trajectory of conflicting relations have taken. These crises are cracking down the ominous fragility of Nigeria’s social cohesion. Ethnic crisis is a quagmire so entangled in the web of religion, language and identity that only conscious efforts can forestall it. No ethnic group is menace-free; all ethnic groups are something of a problem for Nigeria’s achievement of national cohesion (Achebe, 1983:45). Thus, ER discourse, among other issues, comprises series of discussions on surges and actors involved, various opinions, reactions and counter-reactions to crisis development, and perspectives to resolutions from citizens and other stakeholders. The Nigerian citizen media whose reports are selected for this study deploy their online platforms to this discourse.

The term, *citizen media*, also called citizen journalism, is the participation of citizenry in the activities of collating and disseminating news not routinely as a paid /trained journalist would do, but intermittently or by happenstance, as a considered form of civic responsibility (Markham, 2009), to produce a society that is more socially and politically aware than in the past. It is the self-reporting of happenings in their localities – self-reporting because ‘individuals [or group] on their own create web pages where they publish news material [that were] collected’ using their personal ‘mobile phones and other recording materials which enable them to snap and cover events’ (Onyebuchi, 2010). The need for civic engagement in journalism is necessitated by the unprecedented growth of the modern world in all spheres, which has provided a massive

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terrain whose total exploration is highly impossible if left alone in the hands of the traditional media to uncover. Since the engagements of citizens in journalism are mere patriotic efforts that do not attract any compensation, citizen journalists are commonly fascinated by crisis situations. Thus most times, the reports are any kind of ‘crisis, social injustice and anomalies within their community’ (Adeyeye & Christian, 2017), including accidents and crimes, as well as outbreaks of other horrendous incidences. For instance, Dare (2011) relays how the social media outran the print media in revealing the news of plane crashes—the Bellevue and Dana airlines in 2012. Also, 2012 fuel subsidy protest *Occupy-Nigeria*, 2014 *Bring-Back-Our-Girls*, 2020 #EndSARS protests and Lekki Massacre, among other incidents were strengthened by the online continual updates of individual journalists who alongside their reports muster Nigerians to take part in the protests. 2016 *Stop-Xenophobia* in South Africa was another protest supported by the efforts of both diasporic and home-based citizen media in a bid to attract global attention to the discrimination and dehumanisation Nigerians face in the hands of their host, South Africans.

Civic engagement remains a laudable concept about the involvement of citizens in their very own matters, and the citizen journalism spaces among other new media platforms have, just as elsewhere in the world, undoubtedly engendered this reality in the Nigerian socio-political landscape. New (citizen) media is another term for social media or mediated platforms that “permit interactive participation of users who are no longer mere passive recipients of information, but active participants in the production and sharing of information” (Ayoola, 2018: 22). It encompassing digital avenues such as blogs, Twitter (X), Facebook, Nairaland and others, which are enabled by the Internet and technology-based communication gadgets. The information flow via new media has had unprecedented sway on civic engagements of the Nigerian public, especially in socio-political issues. Unlike in the pre-social media era, new citizen media have made possible increasing participation and interactions on public matters (Ifukor, 2010; Chilwa 2012); They have provided affordances for individuals to contribute to, discourses on crisis situations (such as ethno-religious conflicts, terrorism and crimes) among other discourses bordering on security, governance, and socio-economic and political life of the country, particularly those threatening the development and the existence of our common cohesion. This further advances the frontiers of public enlightenments and gradually obliterates the hitherto concern that the Nigerian citizenry, especially the youths, barely engaged in civic engagement and nursed apathy in the machineries of the government.

Imperative to this study however, is the observation that citizen contributions and engagements in crisis discourses via citizen media spaces has culminated in crisis discourse actors generalizing, associating and appropriating the image and identity of crisis perpetrators with communities, regions, tribes and individuals sharing religious, ethnic and regional affinities with perpetrators (Christian, 2018). This engenders narratives that impact untowardly on the humanity and perception of people associated with or implicated by crisis situations, especially ethno-religious crises and terrorism, particularly in terms of besmirching a group’s identity. In the same vain, an out-group also utilise such spaces to re-negotiate identity, redeem their image, pre-empt negative perceptions and counter attack the in-group.

2. Language Patterns and Identity Construction in the Discourse on Social Issues

Language use plays an invaluable role in identity construction. Pronouns are, for instance, obvious linguistic devices usually used as representations of two oppositions, and members align their identity with them (the groups). Members associate themselves with either *Us*-group or *Them*-group (van Dijk, 2004: 43). Norris (2008) uses the term *identity elements* to refer to pronouns. Pronominal elements have received attention in different theories of personal identity (cf. Mead, 1974, cited in Norris, 2008). As Norris (2008) observes, Mead, particularly, provides a clear scenario for the use of ‘I’ and ‘me’:

the ‘I’ gives a sense of freedom, of initiative. The situation is there for us to act – in a self-conscious fashion. We are aware of ourselves, and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action takes place. Such is the basis that the fact that the ‘I’ does not appear in the same sense in experience as does the ‘me’. The ‘me’ represents a definite organisation of the community there in our own attitudes, and calling for a response, but the response that takes place is something that just happens. There is no certainty in regard to it. There is a moral necessity but no mechanical necessity for it. When it does take place then we find what has been done. (Norris 2008:140)

There are other linguistic elements and structures that often give participants away in discourse. For instance, speakers in talk, especially political talk, use rhetorical strategies to market both their identity and that of the party they belong to. Also, Tenorio (2011:205) studies transitivity and underscores the way people use it to position themselves. He notes that it is a way

of knowing ‘how you see the world and how you perceive others’. In addition, lexical selection and syntactic patterns of language are also capable of disclosing the social background and identity of a speaker (Fairclough, 1992). Therefore, identity construction is widely covered, not only in critical discourse analysis but also in discourse studies generally. In fact, discourse studies are full of various perspectives to identity. Hamilton (1998), and De Fina, Bamberg and Schiffrin (2005) examine at different times, the individual side of personal identity, disclosing how individuals craftily deploy pronominals to register their identity and affiliate themselves with one group or another. Wodak et al. (2000) work on national identity construction using social and historical perspectives to analyse national identity while some other scholars bring in socio-psychological and sociocultural perspectives to analyse identity (see Hall & Bucholz, 1995).

With respect to the Nigerian experience, extant studies have, by using discourse analytic methods, underscored identity construction, negotiation and framing, relative to Nigerian socio-political and economic situations in discourse on digital civic engagement, among other research opportunities which the interaction and participation of online users provides (Adegoju, 2016; Odeunmi & Oloyede, 2016; Chilwa, 2014; Taiwo, 2012; Ugah, 2019). Some of these are the linguistic and discursive human behaviours which, as Taiwo (2010: 72) discovered, include but not limited to ‘identity construction, gender consciousness, enactment of power, building of trust, collaboration, aggressive behaviour, and so forth’. Although these studies centre on different national issues, they have a common ground that put discursive practices and language use at the centre of all kinds of identity issues—constructing identity for self or affiliate group, warding off negative image of self-group, negotiating identity or framing the identities of others, mostly for ideological advantage. Adegoju (2016) applied Norman Fairclough’s tripartite model of critical discourse analysis to investigate how the Nigerian public discursively resist the rebranding Nigeria campaign intended to acquire a positive national image for the country in the global eye, and redefine a national identity to mean domestic policies that are sensitive to citizenry plights and leadership needs, which the discourse actors projected as jettisoned/missing in the said rebranding campaign – thus projecting such national effort as a misplaced priority. The study highlighted how, in the negotiation process, the discourse producers – Nigerian public – remained passive about their own contribution to national development and only appeared as recipients of the role of others – the political class. Another study, Odeunmi and Oloyede (2016), used a multi-dimensional theoretical perspective, to explore the different ‘pragmatic strategies..., (multimodal) critical discourse inventories and systemic functional resources’ (Odeunmi & Oloyede, 2016: 286) and how the mainstream newspaper utilised them to frame the Boko Haram sect as manifesting multiple negative identities—as terrorists, political thugs, criminals and religious extremists—and project it as a distinct terrorism brand. The study concluded that an effective approach that would defeat the sect must take cognisance of the context of the sect’s varied identity manifestations which have long made every attempt to curb the sect’s activities abortive. Besides, using computer-mediated discourse analytic (CMDA) approach to study the data on weblogs and discussion forum in order to investigate ethnic identity, Chilwa’s (2014) finding showed that by deploying ‘code-switching, proverbs and ethnic labels to project their uniqueness’ in the discourse on socio-cultural issues, the members of the Igbo extraction are able to better negotiate their hitherto ‘perceived endangered identities’ (Chilwa, 2014: 81). Similarly, Taiwo (2012) also adopted CMDA to, among other observations, examine how diverse participants in online discussion forum, *The Nigerian Village Square*, used Nigerian Pidgin, code-switching, humour, idioms and coinages – which are strands of both Nigerian English and indigenous languages – to construct and consolidate their Nigerian socio-cultural identities.

However, the research gap left by these studies is that they are neither concerned with identity scramble in discourses of ethno-religious clash of interests, nor focused on crisis news reported by citizen journalists. To fill this gap, the present study is interested in how discourse producers position self-group in the identity construction discourse vis-à-vis ER crisis discourses orchestrated by online citizen media. Thus, it attempts to provide responses to the following posers: how do groups construct and redeem their identities as well as deconstruct others? What discursivity and linguistic strategies play out in the whole discourse processes?

3. Methodology

Data for the study are selected citizen media reports, opinions and articles on ethno-religious crises in Nigeria between 2014 and 2016. This period was largely characterised by very rife ethno-religious crises in the country, particularly in the northern Nigeria. Out of many citizen media that published news on ER crisis in Nigeria as Google search result revealed, the researcher selected six (6) sources: *Legit*, *Nairaland*, *BellaNaija*, *Morning Star News*, *The Nigerian Lawyer* and *Worthy News* (see appendix for the web links). The sources were selected for attracting considerable treads of comments from readers on their ER news, which thus indicates they well engaged the readers. Total sample size of nine (9) reports was downloaded from the six (6) citizen media sources. This was purposive as only the news of ER crises that struck between 2014 and 2016 were considered. The paper subjected the relevant headlines, main stories and readers’ comments to analysis. The analysis drew insights from Norman Fairclough’s *Discourse as Social Practice* method of doing a critical discourse analytic study.

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4. Theoretical Insight

The framework guiding the study is Fairclough's the tripartite model of CDA, which states that discourse can be analytically understood as text, discursive practice and social practice (Fairclough, 1992). As text, discourse underscores different linguistic features that have meaning potentials come into play. They include but not limited to vocabulary patterns, syntactic and grammatical arrangements, cohesive devices and text structural properties. This dimension, as Fairclough (1992:76) puts it, has meaning implication on the overall function of discourse. Discursive practice covers processes of producing and consuming text, as well as the nature of these processes, which vary according to social factors. By this, we mean the interpretation actors give a text, the meaning readers construe of text as well as the effect it has on them. A text that changes the attitudes, beliefs or practices of people is extra-discursive, while the ones with aesthetic, rhetoric and motivating effect are discursive. In analysis, it is expected that discursive practice connects the relationship between the other two dimensions. As social practice, discourse manifests ideological effects and other social enactments such as identity and power play, which are properties of the structure of discourse. Discourse features in the relations of ideology and power, and discursive practices are 'material forms of ideology' (Fairclough, 1992: 87) – that is, they are ideologies that materialise themselves as discursive practices. Construing discourse as social practice would also mean there holds a relationship between discourse and social structure, and this relationship is somewhat dialectical for two observable reasons. One, social structures (in whatever dimensions, e.g., social classes, ethnic group, religious blocs, gender groups, among others) inform the nature of discourse. Two, discourse also shapes social structures because of its being socially constitutive. Following this model, the analysis of the data entails 'a...description of the language of text, an interpretation of the relationship between the discursive processes...and the text, and an explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes' (Ayoola, 2008: 60).

5. Analysis of Findings

One observable discursive practice of identity construction is **group's interest consciousness**. This is the manifestation of identity/class consciousness (Taiwo, 2012) in a discourse, wherein a group of people, in protecting their common interests, aspiration, demands, expectations, agitations, needs and rights, justify themselves as people seeking a better course and discursively discriminating the other. It is an ideology of interest, which often surfaces whenever public discourse brings people with conflicting interests together. Clouded by their interests, discourse producers often attack one another, rather than tackle the very social issues for which the discourse was initiated. This is evident in the reactions of the participants in the excerpt below:

EX 1

- R1: "Every expired nation always has crisis until them separated [sic]. Nigeria is expire nation [sic], no tribe will repair it unless we separated."
- R2: "Our police are weak the riot started since last night and police fail to stop them [sic] army came here just under 1 hour everything die dawn."
- R3: "There is too much ethnic sentiment here. Please, can't we talk reasonably like people who value human lives? Remember we have no other place we can call our country. Let us not glorify those causing this senseless killing."
- R4: "Do you people think that divisions could stop this? No, first you guys said once Buhari comes back bombs will stop. Now the stupid guys who know and right [sic] thinking about how to divide the country as a nation. Just note this. These are the signs of end time. Let pray and let Nigeria remain still [sic] God comes."
- R5: "Yoruba and Hausa clash! Yoruba are slave in their own land. Hausa's are taking over."
- R6: "One love one nation, if you don't like go to lagoon and sink."
- R7: "Waooo president and vice president are fighting. God help Nigeria."
- R8: "Osibanjo boys vs Buhari boys."

R9: “Let’s talk reality right now... From the beginning there was nothing like one Nigeria and there is still nothing like one Nigeria, it is just a concept that the white man formulated, the truth is that we are Africans and “ethnicity” is inborn in African man. So let’s stop the pretense and deceiving ourselves, there is nothing like “one Nigeria.” (*Legit*, 2016)

The excerpt contains the reactions to the Hausa-Yoruba clash in Mile 12, Lagos. It is observed that the reactionists’ comments (labelled R1-R9) are laden with the **consciousness of interest and polarisation**. Hence, where their interests differ, they pose verbal attack against one another. The actors are clearly skeptical of the unity of Nigeria, and in the way they describe the country; readers easily deduce they are instigating separatism. R2’s description of the Nigerian Police obviously lampoons its failure as being incapable of discharging its duties in the face of insecurity and chaos. This further impresses the general insinuations that Nigerians have lost trust in the security system because police officers will never show up when it really matters most. While Rs 3 and 4 agitate the unity of Nigeria, R3 further poses a humanitarian ideology that victims of the clash deserve sympathy, even if Nigerians do not agree under the same political/leadership umbrella. The Yoruba ethnic group is the target of R5. S/he seems to brew ethnicism with his/her description of the group as ‘slave’. This metaphorical insulting nominal element implies the weakness of the ethnic group, which the actor projects as the reason the group is subjugated by Hausa migrants, whom it (the Yorubas) accommodated in its ancestral land. R6 appears a direct reaction to R5’s comment as a counter-insult on the Igbos with inter-discourse reference to Oba of Lagos’ heavy incautious threats on the Igbo residents that they would ‘die in the lagoon’ on their failure to vote for the then 2015 Lagos gubernatorial aspirant, Ambode. Rs 7 and 8 see the clash more as a division between the two ethnic groups (Hausa and Yoruba, as represented by the then President Buhari and his Vice, Osinbajo) that were in incumbently in power, who were expected to be at least united owing to their common political bond. More obvious in the excerpt are the attempts by discourse actors to use the crisis to advance varied interests such as separatism and politicking, rather than shed handy insights on the crisis.

Similar to interest consciousness in the data is **the use of identity reinforcement**. By this we mean ‘how identities are produced and...imposed on individuals and groups through dominant discourse practices and ideologies’ (De Fina, Schiffri & Bamberg, 2006, cited in Chiluwa, 2014: 91). This is the case of excerpt 2 where discourse actors renounce a national identity, and do not only establish their own sectional identity, but also discursively reinforce it:

EX 2

R1: Incredible! Onitsha is as quiet as a grave yard, deserted. Biafrans are mean.

R2: At Onitsha here no movement, all the markets was shut down including the biggest market in West Africa main market, both schools, banks, in fact no movement. Biafra is too much.

R3: Omagba z like a deserted area, no vehicle even kekenapepe to carry those saboutouers [sic] to their different areas. Everybody z at home, shops shut, schools both public and private are on hardlock. I am reporting from Omagba in Onitsha north Anambra state Biafra land.

R4: Everywhere is shut down, everybody is indoor listening [to]
RADIOBIAFRA. (*Legit*, 2015)

In the text wherein a sit-at-home demonstration is reported, the ideological stance of the Igbos manifest in the way the group reinforces its identity. The reactionists (R1-R3) in excerpt 2 seemingly support the group in redefining and establishing a new identity; they deliberately negotiate, by means of language, a new national identity for the Eastern Nigerians. They also establish a geo-political identity for the group by referring to Anambra State, one of the Nigerian states, as ‘Biafra land’. Citizenship identity is also negotiated for the Eastern Nigerians with the way one of the discourse producers call them *Biafrans* as in ‘Biafrans are mean’, rather than call them Nigerians. This negotiation is a deliberate attempt to renounce the original identity of the Easterners as Nigerians, accentuate an existence of the defunct Biafra State, and instantiate regional power over Nigerian territory. In this excerpt, there is the use of dysphemism, as the group attempts to magnify the actions of

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its members using emotive adjectival element ‘incredible!’, positively hyped statement ‘Biafra is too much’, and exaggerated similes ‘Onitsha is as quiet as a grave yard’ and ‘Omagba z like a deserted area...’ The exaggeration is not in the sense of the words but in the sense of the actions which the words have been used to describe. Similarly, the expressions ‘everywhere is shut down’ and ‘everybody is indoor listening [to] RADIOBIAFRA’ are sweeping statements that generalise situations and actions as though they were applicable in all cases or to everyone. For instance, rather than use ‘majority of the people’, the discourse actor favours the use of indefinite pronoun ‘everybody’ as active agent in the statement ‘everybody is indoor listening [to] RADIOBIAFRA’. This usage makes the expression appear fallacious as it is practically impossible for all residents to have been listening to radio programmes, let alone the one(s) anchored on the station, Radiobiafra. The expression gives an impression that all residents of the state delight in listening to the programmes aired by the IPOB group. The highlighted expressions in this extract swell up the demonstration carried out by the Easterners more than it actually appears. More significantly, they are used to dominate the discourse, project the group’s enactment of control over social activities, and thus consolidate their identity. This way of reinforcing identity underscores that identities are not necessarily ‘fixed properties or finished products; rather they are constructed or deconstructed’ (Georgakopoulou, 2002, cited in Chilwa, 2014: 91).

The discursive (de)construction of group identity is equally played out through **image framing**. Framing, in media studies, is considered a tool for significant media effect (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007: 10; Scheufele, 1999: 105). It is how, in discourse, certain aspects of a situation are favoured and given salience while others are repressed (Entman, 1993: 55) or how discourse actors select, emphasise, and exclude certain ideas in communication (Gitlin 1980, cited in Molek-Kozakowska, 2016: 49) in order to slant the interpretation of social issues to favour their interest. In the excerpts below, discourse participants frame the image of their group/affiliate as good and situate oppositions as evil, through indicting frames, in such a way that the public can utilise ‘them [the frames] as representative of the identit(ies)’ of the opposition groups (Odebunmi & Oloyede, 2016: 286).

EX 3

We have further listened to defenseless and watery public clarifications concerning the massacre by the Anambra State Police Commissioner and his Public Relations Officer. In all these, we saw panics, contradictions, presidential and gubernatorial indictments, wickedness, callousness, parasitism, despotism, animalism, crookedness, cowardice, cannibalism, jihadism, ethnic cleansing, hate violence, and rabid falsehood in the said statements and roles of the [referenced] authorities into the massacre. ...Mr. Solomon Arase who retires on 21st of June 2016 as Nigeria’s worst IGP since 1999, with bucket-loads of blood of murdered innocent citizens on his head, is the principal architect of the ongoing massacre of the defenseless and unarmed Igbo Nationality activists via his riotous and murderous order of 1st of December 2015...

Labeling clearly non-violent and unarmed indigenous rights activists as armed without any concrete evidence till date, is murderous and genocidal. The effects of this can bestly be interpreted by killer police officers and uniform jihadists to mean license to kill or order from above to kill. All the State murders and proxy murders in Nigeria since December 2015 are expressly linked to President Muhammadu Buhari’s reckless use of confrontational and combative words and issuance of war-like and genocidal orders to Nigeria’s security forces against unarmed and nonviolent citizens (*The Nigerian Lawyer*, 2016).

EX 4

“The jihadists, in their quest to eliminate Christians in Plateau state and their thirst for blood, have succeeded in killing Christians and burning their houses,” wrote Gyang... “They are right now attacking Rim, Bangai, Gwon, Wereng” (*Morning Star News*, 2015)

EX 5

Inhabited almost entirely by ethnic Idoma farmers, the Fulani herdsmen from Nasarawa state, with mercenaries from Chad and Niger, razed several villages, destroying homes and church buildings in the predominantly Roman Catholic Agatu Local Government Area and forcing hundreds of Christians to flee (*Morning Star News*, 2014)

In excerpt 3, the discourse representative of the several coalition groups supporting the pro-Biafra activities is highly self-assertive of the role s/he claims the FGN, State governments and the Nigerian security operatives played in the killings of the demonstrators on May 30, 2016. The many negative lexicalisations such as ‘contradictions’, ‘wickedness’, ‘callousness’, ‘despotism’, ‘animalism’, ‘crookedness’, ‘cannibalism’, ‘jihadism’; and negative collocations such as ‘ethnic cleansing’, ‘hate violence’, ‘rabid falsehood’, ‘genocidal orders’, ‘killer police officers’, ‘uniform jihadists’, ‘State murders’ and ‘proxy murders’ are an outright labelling of the Nigerian security operatives and the government as highly evil and malicious, while the positive collocations such as ‘innocent citizens’, ‘defenseless...unarmed Igbo’, ‘clearly non-violent’ and ‘unarmed...rights activists’ are a deliberate choice to project the identity of coalition of pro-Biafra groups as good. The pro-Biafra representative’s report does not only label the security operatives as evil but also paints the identity for the then President Buhari and the Governor as evil leaders, claiming particularly that the President gave ‘genocidal orders’ to the security operatives to carry out ‘ethnic cleansing’ on the Igbo ethnic group.

In excerpts 4 and 5, by calling them ‘jihadists’ who are ‘thirst[y] for blood’ and who in ‘their quest to eliminate Christians’ have ‘razed several villages’ where the Christians reside, the actor frames the oppressing Muslim Fulani herdsmen as evil serial killers. In a bid to maintain a good identity for itself, it is also common for a group to present matters in ways that exonerate the parts it played in the crisis. As observed in the excerpts, such a group does so by being silent about its own action, and expected to be perceived as an easygoing and law-abiding group that is vulnerable to the attacks of the ‘evil group’. This observation accentuates van Dijk’s (2004: 41) assertion that where there is in-group versus out-group polarization, in-group, in favour of its image, emphasises positive light about itself and represses any negative light, while emphasising negative things about the out-group and repressing positive things about it.

In a few instances, discourse actors further deploy transitivity in framing evil identity for oppositions and victim identity for self-group. Systemic Functional Grammar recognises transitivity as an ideational system of the clause that works out the types of process, the participants in the process and the circumstances associated with the process. The process is the verb of the clause that typifies the social action(s) in an event, and it is categorised into three: *material action process*, *mental action process* and *verbalised process* (Bloor & Bloor, 2004). In the next excerpts, however, we observe the material action processes and the circumstances surrounding them, which discourse participants extensively deploy for discursive purposes. The action process involves concrete, physical and dynamic actions that involve two agents of social actions: the Actor (the action performer) and the Recipient (i.e, Beneficiary or Affected Participants) unlike the mental and verbalised processes that respectively indicate the cognitive/sensual actions (e.g, ‘like’, ‘look’) and communicated actions as in ‘talk’ and ‘chat’ (Bloor & Bloor, *ibid*).

EX 6

Muslim Fulani herdsmen:

burn homes, church buildings.

killed a church pastor and more than 70 other Christians in Plateau state in the past month, sources said.

launched attacks on Monday (May 11) in Plateau state’s Riyom LGA, a source told *Morning Star News* in a text message

“have succeeded in killing Christians and burning their houses,” wrote Gyang...

“are right now attacking Rim, Bangai, Gwon, Wereng, Ringya and Sopp.”

“...came to attack the village,” he said.

“have continued with their invasion of Christian communities here,” he said in a text message.

have long attacked settled Christian farmers in Plateau, Bauchi, Kaduna, Taraba and Adamawa states...

...attacked three villages in Nigeria's Plateau state in September, burning down a church building and killing at least 10 Christians.

EX 7

The Christians (in Riyom and Barkin Ladi LGAs):

have just been killed

were killed in Vat village, and 13 other Christians were slain in Zakupang, sources said.

have faced increasing attacks from Muslim militants and Muslim Fulani herdsmen in the past decade.

(*Morning Star News*, 2015)

EX 8

Kaduna and Plateau states have had to endure attacks from Muslim Fulani herdsmen...but recently Islamic groups have been arming and accompanying the herdsmen to incite conflicts with Christian farmers whose land the herdsmen covet to graze their cattle.

(*Worthy News*, 2016)

The above excerpts reflect the clausal choices of the discourse producers. In excerpt 6, the herdsmen and Islamic groups are the Actors while the Christians, churches and Christian communities in Kaduna and Plateau States are the Affected Participants. In the examples given in excerpt 7, Christians are also the Affected Participants while the implied actors are (Muslim) Fulani herdsmen and gunmen. In the first example in excerpt 8, Kaduna and Plateau states are the Affected Participants, while the herdsmen are the (Implied) Actors, while in the second example of the same excerpt, Islamic groups are the Actors, the herdsmen Beneficiaries of the Islamic groups' action and Christian farmers, the Goal. The material processes found in the 3 excerpts are all violent options: 'burn', 'killed', 'launched attacks', 'have succeeded in killing', 'are (right now) attacking...', '...came to attack', 'have long attacked...', '...attacked three villages in Nigeria's Plateau state in September, burning down a church building and killing at least 10 Christians', 'have just been killed', 'were killed', 'have faced increasing attacks...', 'Kaduna and Plateau states have had to endure attacks...' and '...have been arming and accompanying (the herdsmen to incite conflicts)...'. The fact that they occur in clauses where the 'Muslim Fulani gunmen/herdsmen' appeared all as Actors (and not once are they featured as Affected Participants) encodes the identity of the Fulani gunmen/herdsmen as a cruel, serial, determined, intolerant and belligerent group. Also, by not placing the Christian group as Actors of the violent material processes in the discourse, the discourse participants portray the group as peace-loving, non-violent but vulnerable and defenseless. The choice of exclusive use of violent material processes in the excerpts on the one hand, and selective inclusion of the two conflicting religious groups as agents of the processes on the other, show where the discourse actors belong in the ideological divide. Thus, discourse actors deploy transitivity to not only frame one group negatively and the other positively, but also to tilt the public towards believing that one side of the conflict deserves sympathies and the other, condemnation. It is a further indication that discourse actors employ the powerful role of the media to legitimise their own identities and to create that of the 'other' in ways that are particularly subjective (Chiluwa, 2011, cited in Chiluwa, 2014: 86).

Identity association/support is another discursive practice observed in identity construction discourse. It is the positioning, affinity or affiliation that actors discursively display or the 'interactionally relevant social relations [that speakers signal] through their participation in discourse' (Adegoju, 2016: 4). They deploy affective ways to play this associative role. One way of doing this is through the use of deictic reference or indexicals. Deixis is the system of pointing with linguistic indicators which are largely, all categories of pronouns, demonstrative adjectives, specific place/spatial and time adverbs (although not restricted to only these as there are other grammatical features that perform deictic functions as dictated largely by the context of the utterance in which they are found). They are features of language tied to the context of an utterance in such that decoding them would need the understanding of aspects of circumstances surrounding the utterance/discourse wherein they occur. In other words, they disclose important information (sometimes outside the text) that can aid the interpretation of the text.

EX 9

Many Nigerians have been killed, wounded or mutilated, kidnapped and deprived of everything: **their** loved ones, **their** land, **their** means of subsistence, **their** dignity and **their** rights. Many have not been able to return to **their** homes...

EX 10

I would like to assure **you** and all who suffer of **my closeness**. **Every day, I remember you in my prayers** and I repeat **here**, for your encouragement and comfort, the consoling words of the Lord Jesus, which must always resound in **our hearts**: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (Jn14:27)...And so I wish here to express **my heartfelt thanks** to you, because in the midst of so many trials and sufferings the Church in Nigeria does not cease to witness to hospitality, mercy and forgiveness. How can **we** fail to remember the priests, religious men and women, missionaries and catechists who, despite untold sacrifices, never abandoned their flock, but remained at their service as good and faithful heralds of the Gospel? To them, most particularly, **I** would like to express **my solidarity**, and to say: do not grow tired of doing what is right!

EX 11

How can we fail to remember the priests, religious men and women, missionaries and catechists who, despite untold sacrifices, never abandoned their flock, but remained at their service as good and faithful heralds of the Gospel? To them, most particularly, I would like to express my solidarity, and to say: do not grow tired of doing what is right!

(BellaNaija, 2015)

Excerpts 9, 10 and 11 are from the news article written by Pope Francis condemning the Boko Haram’s attacks in Nigeria. Though the several instances of possessive pronoun ‘their’ in excerpt 9 refer to the antecedent ‘many Nigerians’, they perform other discourse functions than just substituting the noun phrase ‘many Nigerians’. The possessive pronoun ‘their’ provides a clear spatial and distant indication that the speaker (the Vatican) is not a Nigerian. Also, the repeated use of the pronoun in the text suggests that by closely keeping in touch with the situation in Nigeria, the Pope not only weighs ‘everything’ that is lost by ‘many Nigerians’ but also understands the gravity of their plight, and hence, largely sympathises with them.

In excerpt 10, there are clearly two different contexts of the use of person deixis, particularly, the ‘I’ and ‘you’ (written in bold). While the ‘I’ refers to the Pope, the ‘you’ represents the Nigerian Bishops/Christian communities, not the entire Nigerians even though he (the Pope) barely said this in the address. Furthermore, the repeated use of ‘I’ does not only refer to the Pope but is also reassuring his unflinching personal commitment (as shown with the time deixis, ‘every day’) to praying for Christian communities who are victims of Boko Haram attack in the Northern Nigeria. Hence, he personalises the concerns of his writing with the use of nominal phrases, ‘my closeness’, ‘my prayers’, ‘my heartfelt thanks’ and ‘my solidarity’ for Nigerian Christians. Personalisation like this seems to make Nigerian Christian readers feel more emotionally involved in the subject the Pope is addressing. However, unlike the boldened signifiers ‘I’ and ‘you’, the underlined signifiers I and you in ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you’ have different signifieds: the I rather refers to Jesus believing to be addressing the biblical Christians (not the Nigerian Christians) whom the you refers to in John14:27 (a section of the book of Christian religion). But the Pope appropriates these different significations into the context of Nigerian situation that he (the Pope) addresses, so that the you now specifically in the context of the text means only the Nigerian bishops or Christians and the I, the Pope who has borrowed the Jesus’ statement to address them. Also, the context suggests that the spatial deixis ‘here’ does not refer to the place where the Pope was (i.e., the Vatican City) when writing the letter; rather it refers to the letter itself. In addition, the nominal phrase ‘our hearts’ and the first person ‘we’ signify a way by which the Pope (representing the entire catholic-hood) associates himself with Nigerian Christians having earlier in the text offered his sympathies to them in the event of their suffering at the hands of the religious extremist/terrorist, Boko Haram. In extract 11, the Vatican mainly ‘express [his] solidarity’ to ‘the priests, religious men and women, missionaries and catechists’ who are enduring attack from the insurgent group, Boko Haram in the Northern Nigeria. Though some parts of the letter subtly acknowledge that there were non-Christian victims too, this extract shows that the Vatican’s sympathy is mainly with the Christians victims. He discursively associates more with Nigerian Christians, than with the country as a whole; his address is *American University of Nigeria, 2nd International Conference Proceeding, November 6-9, 2024, e-ISSN: 3027-0650*

not generalised to include many other Nigerian citizens who, notwithstanding their faiths, equally suffered from the untoward attacks.

In sensitive ER crisis situations, social actors or group usually strive to also defend their identity, protect their reputation and prevent others from construing their actions as being oppressive, even if they actually are. This discursive practice of identity defense is mainly carried out with the self-group vindication strategy. With this, actors attempt to tender reasons that could justify that their actions are right. They do this to exonerate themselves from public blame, especially where such actions can be perceived as outright victimisation of another group.

EX 12

“Instructively, troops of 82 Division Nigerian Army as the lead agency of the security agencies had to invoke the extant Rules of Engagement (ROE) to resort to self defence, protection of the strategic Niger Bridge, prevent re-enforcement of the pro-Biafra members apparently surging ahead from the far side of the strategic Niger Bridge at Onitsha. All these efforts were in order to de-escalate the palpable tension as well as ward off the apparent threats to lives and property in the general area...” [said in a statement signed by Colonel HA Gambo, Deputy Director of Army Public Relations, 82 Division of the Nigerian Army in Enugu].

(Nairaland, 2016)

EX 13

Why We Attacked Zakzaky, Other Shiite Members – Nigerian Army

The Nigerian Army on Saturday stated its reason for attacking members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria. The Army had on Saturday said the group blocked the road and attempted to kill the Chief of Army Staff, Tukur Buratai, in Kaduna State.

In a statement on Sunday by its spokesperson, Sani Usman, the Army described the incident as ‘most unfortunate’ but blamed the sect for blocking roads meant for the public. “Yesterday’s incident involving clashes between detachments of the Nigerian Army, accompanying the Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General TY Buratai and followers of Sheikh Ibrahim El Zak-Zaky, suspected to be members of the Shiite Sect in Zaria, leading to loss of lives as a result of the Shiite group members’ blocking roads and not allowing other passers-by to go about their lawful businesses and activities, was most unfortunate,” Mr. Usman, a Colonel, said.

“...It is important to note that over the years this group has subjected ordinary citizens using public roads to untold hardship, delays, threats and disruption simply because they insist on using public space irrespective of inconvenience and hardship on other law abiding citizens and motorists. This cannot be tolerated and must stop!”

(Nairaland, 2015)

In excerpt 12, Nigerian Army personnel at different times absolved the military of any wrongdoing, particularly vindicating the Army’s gruesome killings of members of pro-Biafra groups. They try to justify its murder action by claiming that their actions are attempts to ‘intervene’ and secure the populace’s lives and property. Their claim is that the military ‘had at all-time adhered to rules of engagement in all of its operation’. Colonel H.A Gambo in his statement defends that the Army’s actions were necessary to ‘resort to self defence’, ‘protect...the strategic Niger Bridge’, ‘prevent re-enforcement of the pro-Biafra members’ and prevent ‘threats to lives and property’. In excerpt 13, after killing members of the Islamic Movement, Shiite, the Nigerian Army wards off the blame with the defence that the group ‘blocked the road’ and ‘attempted to kill the Chief of Army Staff’. The spokesman of the Army equally vindicates his group by claiming that his group actions were done to protect the constitutional rights of ‘other law-abiding citizens and motorists’ ‘using public roads’ and save the people from the hands of the Shiite who ‘subjected ordinary citizens...to untold hardship, delays, threats and disruption’ by hijacking the roads.

6. Conclusion

The chapter has explored how actors discursively construct or deconstruct identity during ethno-religious matters. The study appropriated the three-dimensional model of CDA as theorised by Fairclough (1992), in understanding the construction of identity in the discourses of ethno-religious issues. There are discursive practices of interest consciousness, identity reinforcement, identity association/support and identity defense, which the discourse participants used to negotiate and construct self-group images, while they used framing to deconstruct other-group's identities. The analysis underscores the various role that linguistic devices such as metaphor, interdiscourse reference, dysphemism, lexicalisation, collocation, transitivity, deixis and nominal elements, as well as the discourse strategies of verbal attack and vindication of self-group played in giving effect to discursive construction and deconstruction of identity within the ambience of ER crisis discourses. Identity (de)constructions in ethno-religious discourses are also discovered to ideologically manifest. In other words, ideology is the basis of identity because social actors participate in discourse within the ideological divide; they do so by discursively establishing their identities in support of the ideology of the group to which they subscribe. This therefore is in tandem with Adegojus's (2016: 6) position that identity construction discourse is a base for the respective construction of knowledge formations and contestation of ideologies in the interests of group.

Away from reiterating the obvious impact of citizen media on social advocacy and civil action, the chapter has contributed to this domain by showing that crisis discourses on citizen media such as ethno-religious concerns, is vastly rich in language use, especially for identity representation, negotiation and or deconstruction as examined in the analysis. It is thus convincing that the avalanche of virtual freedom which citizen participants enjoy does not only spur their contribution to social interactions and civic engagement, but also accommodates ideological languages with which they take side in such conversations. Arguably however, altercations arising from identity construction/(re)negotiation and deconstruction divert attentions from the need to cohere towards tackling social crises, to goading disintegration through the language of prejudice, incitement, aggression and or hate speech, all of which could spell implication on Nigerian social and political co-existence.

Given the delimitation that this study only focused on ethno-religious concerns, future research could further investigate how group/individuals construct identities in discourses of other social concerns such as terrorism, domestic violence among other instances of security challenges. Imperatively, future studies might beam research lights on how crisis perpetrators/groups (such as Boko Haram, Indigenous People of Biafra, Hezbollah, among others)'s pre-and-post crisis deployment of language of threats and legitimation on online media spaces in consolidating their perpetrations.

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Appendix

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