Media Representations of Verbal Aggression as Fill-in-the-argumentativeness-gap Strategy in Political Communication

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Abstract

This work examines the concept of verbal aggressiveness as a discursive feature of interactional practice in political communication. Drawing from the discursive traditions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and General Aggression Model the paper engages qualitative-descriptive approach and content analysis method as analytic framework. The data is elicited from specific political contexts produced in Nigeria within a specific period leading up to 2023 general elections. The data analysis establish a number of empirical facts, notably: (i) discursive constructions of verbal aggressiveness as fill-in-the-argumentative-gap strategy in political communication underscore the dynamics of social power abuse, and dominance that characterise differential power relations; (ii) the identified socio-psychological triggers for destructive trait of aggressive communication are intended to attack self-concepts of real or imagined political adversaries; (iii) the multiple social functions of verbal aggressiveness suffice to define the discursive construction and maintenance of intra and intergroup relations.

Keywords: *Aggressiveness, Argumentativeness, Campaign, CDA, Communication, Discursive Constructions, GAM, Nigeria, Social Psychology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper engages integrative cross-disciplinary approach in accounting for verbal aggressiveness (language aggression or derogatory language) within the broader framework of aggressive communication as conceptualised by Infante & Rancer (1982) and Infante & Wigley (1986) and how this form of aggressive communication suffices as a discursive strategy for filling the argumentativeness gap in political communication. Drawing from the discursive traditions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and some social psychological theories, it seeks to examine the discursive forms of language aggression, the psychological motivations for verbal aggressiveness, and the social functions they serve.

Verbal aggressiveness as a discursive practice has been implicated in a number of contexts, including but not limited to relational and family, organizational, instructional, small-group relationships, mass communication, intercultural and intracultural, political relationships, the spatial contexts of which cut across different media genres, from weblogs, online fora, to mainstream media (newspaper, radio, television). This study focuses on political relationships with a view to investigating mediated representations of verbal aggression as negative campaign strategy presaging Nigeria's 2023 general elections. In specific terms, dataset is drawn from public statements credited to the presidential candidates of the mainstream political parties, that is, All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), Labour Party (LP) and New Nigerian Peoples' Party (NNPP), their media aides and supporters.

Given that a number of researches and theory-building in the area of aggressive communication have problematized verbal aggressiveness (e.gs., Infante & Rancer, 1982; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Infante, 1987; Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992; Infante, Rancer, & Andrew, 1996; Infante, Rancer, & Wigley, 2011), the primary objective is to address the issue of striking a balance between the communication traits of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, mediated representations of verbal aggression as fill-in-the-argumentative-gap strategy in political communication, and how argumentativeness and assertiveness as constructive traits of aggressive communication can be deployed as a discursive practice to deescalate verbal aggression and assist in productive conflict management. In the course of investigating mediated representations of verbal aggressiveness as an instance of discursive practice of a sample of Nigerian politicians, we take Sam Omatseye's 'Obi-tuary' article and its concomitant rebuttals it elicited as well as the verbal fisticuffs between Tinubu and Atiku's political camps as the roiling and vitriolic pivot around which negative campaigning revolves. To address this research problem, we follow qualitative methodological approach (content analysis) in analysing the data corpus elicited from online editions of newspapers. The results provide the basis for drawing conclusions on the extent to which public statements of politicians across the political parties, manifest verbal aggressiveness as negative campaign strategy.

Verbal aggressiveness as negative campaign strategy is not peculiar to the Nigerian political class. According to Cervone, Augoustinos, & Maass (2020), the use of explicit derogatory language (e.g., hate speech, social slurs, micro-insults) and other numerous phenomena that have been studied under more specific labels (e.g., ethnophaulisms, ethnic or racial slurs, sexist language, homophobic epithets, verbal bullying, etc.) has risen in many countries over the last decades. Subtle forms of language discrimination have featured prominently in social psychology and language research for over 50 years (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Maass et al., 2014); derogatory labels on minority (immigrants/refugees, religious) groups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Mullen et al., 2001; Mullen & Smyth, 2004; Mudde, 2007; Wood & Finlay, 2008; Verkuyten, 2013; Sakki & Patterson, 2016; Patterson, 2019; Morales et al., 2019). Also, Cervone, Augoustinos, & Maass relied on Walters et al., (2016) to underscore the psychological antecedents of disparaging language and hate speech, which include (i) personality variables such as right-wing authoritarian personality, social dominance, motivation to express prejudice (Forscher et al., 2015); (ii) affective or emotional states specifically directed at the target such as hate, contempt, disgust, and feelings of intergroup threat (Gerstenfeld, 2002); and (iii) more general (target-unspecific) motivations, such as thrill-seeking (McDevitt et al., 2002) and self-esteem maintenance (Golec de Zavala et al., 2020).

In the present study, we seek to explore data drawn from the Nigerian political environment and determine the extent to which the results conform to or differ from the established trend in literature.

2. OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Communication, as a term, has been variously conceived. The UK Violence Intervention and Prevention Centre recognises four basic styles of communication – passive communication (an individual's pattern of avoiding expressing their opinions or feelings, protecting their rights, and identifying and meeting their needs); aggressive communication (a communication style in which individuals express their feelings and opinions freely and advocate for their

needs in ways that violate the rights of others); passive-aggressive communication (a form of communication in which an individual appears passive on the surface but is really acting out anger in a subtle, indirect, of behind-the-scene way); assertive communication (a style of communication in which an individual clearly states their opinions and feelings, and firmly advocate for their rights and needs without violating the rights of others). Aggressive communication framework developed by Ifante, Rancer, & Wigley (1986) recognises four predispositions (classified as either constructive or destructive), which interact with environmental factors to influence an individual's approach to conflict resolution. The constructive predispositions of aggressive communication are assertiveness and argumentativeness. Assertiveness includes characteristics of personal dominance, firmness, forcefulness and use of assertive behaviour to achieve personal goals. Argumentativeness is a subset of assertiveness, which involves the use of reasoning to defend personal position on issues while attacking the positions of the adversaries.

On the flipside is the destructive form of aggressive communication, which comprises hostility and verbal aggressiveness; the former is characterised by expression of negativity, resentment, and suspicion; the latter is characterised by deliberate assault on the self-concept, personality or competence attack rather than the position of the adversary on issues, the ultimate intention of which is to inflict psychological pain, such as humiliation, embarrassment, and other negative feelings about the self. According to Culpeper (2011), the term *verbal aggression* is most commonly associated with the academic discipline of social psychology wherein a distinction is made between *hostile* and *instrumental* verbal aggression. For Jay (2000), the difference between the two in relation to cursing is that the goal of cursing in hostile verbal aggression is to harm a person who has hurt the speaker or inflict damage on their self-esteem; in instrumental verbal aggression, the goal of cursing is to obtain some reward such as gaining the admiration of peers for the speaker or, when used to bully or threaten, might result in extortion from the target of the cursing.

According to Infante's (1987) Aggressive Model of Interpersonal Communication, hostility and verbal aggressiveness both lie on the destructive side of the constructive-destructive continuum. Verbal aggressiveness differs from argumentativeness in that rather than attacking a point, one attacks the self-concept of the other person. Verbal aggressiveness is considered negative because it aims to hurt the other psychologically and or emotionally; whereas argumentativeness is content-focused and not person-focused. It is a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-concepts of other people instead of, or in addition to their positions on the topics of communication.

It has been attested in extant literature as evident in research findings that in all variety of contexts (*family* - Beatty, Zelley, Dobos, and Rudd, 1994; Chandler-Sabourin, Rudd, and Shannon, 1990; *organisation* - Infante and Gorden, 1985; *group* - Anderson and Martin, 1999), argumentativeness as a constructive predisposition of aggressive communication is a positive communication skill in relationships while verbal aggressiveness is a determent to relationships (cf. Infante & Rancer, 1996); there is a negative relationship between verbal aggressiveness and concerns about relational goals during conflicts (cf. Rogan & La France, 2003); there is a negative relationship between verbal aggressiveness and the communication satisfaction and consensus amongst group members (cf. Anderson and Martin (1999). For Ifante, Rancer, & Wigley (1986), aggressive behaviour in interpersonal communication is a joint product of the person's individual's aggressive traits and the way the person perceives the aggressive inhibitors and disinhibitors in the given situation. According to Mattina (2008:3),

communicative behaviour is aggressive if it "applies force... symbolically in order, minimally, to dominate and perhaps damage or maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy the locus of attack," (Infante & Gorden (1987:74). Glauser (1984) cited in Mattina (2008:4) "found that individuals high in verbal dominance provided more direction, asked for fewer opinions, added more facts to facts, attempted more interruptions, exhibited fewer and shorter pauses, and displayed longer utterances than individuals low in verbal dominance." Also, Martin & Anderson (1996:547) contend that verbal aggressives "communicate more for control."

Kinney (1994) cited in Mattina (p.5) suggested three broad domains of self-concept attack: group membership, personal failings, and relational failings. For Schrodt & Wheeless (2001:55) cited in Mattina (2008), verbally aggressive messages involve "character, competence, and physical appearance attacks, as well as ridicule, threats, profanity, maledictions, nonverbal emblems, and teasing." Wigley (1998:192) included "blame, personality attacks, commands, global rejection, disconfirmation, negative comparison, sexual harassment, and attacking target's significant others," as other varieties of verbally aggressive messages. Infante (989:159) listed "unpleasant feeling during communication such as embarrassment, relationship deterioration and interpersonal distrust," as some of the destructive consequences for the target of verbal aggressiveness. In terms of locus of attack, research findings in this regard suggest that verbal aggressors' attention are usually directed at the target's self-concept which may emerge from emotional clashes over personal issues or grow out of relevant issues; hence the position of Fischer (1971) that verbal aggressors attack 'procedures, selfishness, and role deviation'. Infante and Wigley (1986) corroborate this point by observing that verbally aggressive messages are meant to attack an individual's self-concept and can be seen as character attacks, competence attacks, ridicule, profanity, and nonverbal messages. Citing Costa and McCrae's (1980) three-factor model of personality, Rancer (2004) contends that verbal aggressives are in the neuroticism dimension of personality, and six dimensions of 'self-esteem (defensive self-enhancement, moral self-approval, lovability, likeability, self-control, and identity integration) were significantly related to trait verbal aggressiveness,' as reported by Rancer, Kosberg, & Sylvestri (1992:30). As a corollary, aggressive communication is an interpersonal trait, which implies that the verbal aggression is sent by one person and is received by the target and/or their allies. This explains Infante's (1987) position that the receiver must view the message as an attack on his or her own self-concept in order for a verbally aggressive message to be classified as verbal aggression.

Over the years, social psychology has witnessed a boom in theoretical constructs applied to the study of all shades and hues of aggression, violence, and conflict, including intimate partner violence, interpersonal violence, cyberbullying, violence exposure, dehumanization, desensitization, childhood maltreatment, stereotyping, political flaming. Prominent among these theories include Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), General Aggression Model (GAM) (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011), Barlett & Gentile's (2012) Cyberbullying Model (BGCM) derived from learning-based social psychology theories (Anderson & Bushman's GAM and Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory), theories of self-regulation and aggression – Gottfredson & Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime, Finkel's 1^3 Metatheory (2004), cascade effects models – Dynamic Systems Theory (Sameroff, 2000), Social-Ecology Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Of all these theories, Anderson & Bushman's GAM (2002) has been most effective in organizing theoretical insights gleaned from several key theoretical perspectives to account for aggression and violence.

Although Ferguson & Dyck (2012) had in futuristic sense predicted a paradigm shift in aggression research when it might be necessary to retire Allen & Bushman's (2012) model for positing aggression as an automatic and mechanistic learning process over which the individual has little control, Robertson & Daffern (2020) see GAM as a prevalent, well-researched framework for understanding aggression generally that integrates several domain-specific theories and is applicable across many contexts. Prot & Gentile's (2014) work on the cascade effects of media violence on development observed *inter alia* that crossover effects can be understood within the framework of the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011). Wiedeman & Coker (2015) aver that GAM explains aggression through developmental, socio-cognitive, and social learning theories by considering the influence of situational, individual, and biological variables (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a, b; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011). Major theories of self-regulation and aggression, especially Gottfredson & Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime, according to DeWall & Chester (2016), motivated the extension of GAM as a dynamic, socio-cognitive, developmental framework for domain-specific aggression theories.

In probing further into the nitty-gritties of GAM, Allen & Bushman (2018) posit that proximate processes of GAM "detail how person and situation factors influence aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and arousal levels, which in turn affect appraisal and decision, which in turn influence aggressive and non-aggressive behaviour. Each cycle of the proximate processes serves as a learning trial that can create aggressive knowledge structures after many repetitions, contributing to an aggressive personality…the processes detail how biological and environmental factors can influence personality through changes in knowledge structures…" Also, Chester & DeWall (2018) explain GAM as a temporal sequence of processes that explain whether an individual will act aggressively or not at any given moment. In this model, person (e.g., genotype) and situation (e.g., alcohol) factors act as inputs, which can affect the individual's internal state (i.e., their affect, arousal, cognition), and which by extension provides the bottom-up motivation for aggressive acts. This present state then feeds into top-down, self-regulatory processes that determine whether an individual's subsequent behaviour is impulsively aggressive or thoughtfully non-aggressive. Barlett (2019) explored the extensions of social psychological theories and how Ajzen's (1991) and Anderson & Bushman's (2002) GAM remain the two dominant theories in social psychology applied to the study of cyberbullying perpetration intended to explain the intervening variables and processes engaged in this form of antisocial behaviour. To this effect, Barlett & Seyfert's (2021) account of theory-based interventions in cyberbullying literature make reference to Barlett & Gentile's (2012) Barlett Gentile Cyberbullying Model (BGCM) derived from Anderson & Bushman's (2012) General Aggression Model (GAM) and Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. BGCM is a theory aimed at elucidating the underlying psychological mechanisms that predict cyberbullying perpetuation as well as addressing the key differences between traditional and cyberbullying perpetration, which similar theories had glossed over.

Several other scholars have equally broached the theorisation of verbal aggressiveness (cf. Infante & Wigley, 1986; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Beatty et al., 1999; Levine et al., 2004; Infante, Rancer, & Wigley, 2011). For instance, Infante & Wigley (1986) developed an interpersonal model of verbal aggressiveness that specifies the types of verbally aggressive messages in interpersonal relations, their effects, and their causes; Infante & Rancer (1996) conceived personality trait model to underscore the constructive (argumentativeness) and destructive (verbal aggressiveness) predispositions of aggressive communication. Beatty et al. (1999) used exploratory factor analyses, inter-factor correlations, and reliability analyses as

theoretical and empirical grounds to question Infante & Wigley's (1986) unidimensional interpretation of the VAS. Also, Levine et al. (2004) revisited Infante and Wigley's (1986) Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS) by adopting two-factor model (N = 194 and 177) to prove that the VAS is bidimensional and that two-factor solution reflects selfish individualism and prosocial cooperation, which offers an alternative conceptual model. Infante, Rancer, & Wigley (2011) reinforce their argument for Argumentativeness (ARG) and Verbal Aggressiveness Scales on the basis of which they dismissed critics' claims of *no correlation* between scale scores and observable behaviours as unscientific.

Theoretical opinions on the cause(s) of verbal aggression have not been lacking in literature. Infante & Rancer (1996) list four basic motivations for verbal aggression: social learning, psychopathology, disdain, and argumentative skill deficiencies. Social learning is when the individual is "conditioned by sources in society to be aggressive, to express anger, or to ventilate frustrations." Psychopathology indicates a kind of "repressed hostility expressed by verbal attacks;" and disdain presupposes "extreme dislike for a person which is conveyed verbally." Argumentative Skill Deficiency (ADS) refers to the destructive trait of aggressive communication, which underpins an individual's lack of verbal skills to deal with an issue that requires some reasoning. The explanation of Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seeds, (1984) in this regard suggests that individuals use verbal aggression because they are not skilled in the act of argumentation. Infante (1987) has demonstrated that frustration can equally lead to verbal aggressiveness especially in a political debate context. In this regard, a political aspirant, who comes to a debating session with debilitating baggage of deficient argumentative skills is most often likely to attack their opponent's self-concept as opposed to attacking the opponent's stance on issues.

Also, a UB (University of Buffalo) study as reported by Donovan (2013) has shown that verbal aggression may have biological foundation as attested to by the 2D:4D ratio, which measured the ratio of length of a person's ring finger (second digit) and the length of the index finger (fourth digit). The findings have implications for our understanding of the proximal and distal causes of verbal aggression as verbally aggressive behaviour may be provoked by biologically based differences in people's attention to potentially threatening stimuli, their appraisal of the stimuli as threatening and the resulting decision to respond and produce messages that are verbally aggressive. In the same vein, Beatty & McCroskey (1997) argue that verbal aggressive behaviour is genetically determined just as Schrodt & Carr (2012) contend verbal aggressiveness as a communication trait is a function of family communication patterns (i.e., conversation and conformity orientations). Rancer (2004) provided additional reasons for verbal aggressive behaviour, which included disdain for the target, desire to be mean, be eager to appear tough, and seek involvement in discussions that degenerate into verbal fights.

Extant literature has witnessed a great deal of empirical studies of verbal aggressiveness, violence, hateful and derogatory language, and other forms of conflictual interactions, (cf. Infante, 1987; Infante et al., 1992; Sabourin, et al., 2006; Rancer and Avtgis, 2006; Stockdale et al., 2013; Onukufor, 2013; Matsumoto and Hwang, 2013; Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank, 2013; Hardaker, 2013; Mateo & Yus, 2013; Bou-Franch and Blitvich, 2014; Bova and Arcidiacono, 2015; Love and Baker, 2015; Musolff, 2015; Alexander, 2016; Terkourafi, et al., 2018; Jaki et al., 2019; Kádár, Parvaresh, and Ning; 2019; Dynel and Poppi, 2020; Hatzidaki, 2020; Rasulo, 2021; Pérez-Arredondo and Graells-Garrido, 2021; Kuperberg, 2021; Monika, 2021; Esposito and Zollo, 2021; Alam, 2021; Ilie, 2021; Underwood and Angouri, 2021; Bou-

Franch, 2021; Culpeper and Haugh, 2021; Patterson, 2022; Palomino-Manjón, 2022; Marco, 2022; Mattielo, 2022; Etaywe and Zappavigna, 2022). The present study draws inspiration from the findings of the previous researches with a view to providing further insights into the theoretical and methodological dynamics of verbal aggressiveness discourses.

3. METHODOLOGY

Here, we seek to operationalise Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and General Aggression Model (GAM) as analytical framework for investigating verbal aggressiveness as fill-in-the-argumentativeness-gap strategy in political communication. This research examines how verbal aggression as negative campaign strategy is linguistically generated in mediated political discourses. The focus is on the statements credited to presidential candidates and their media aides elicited from the online media platforms, to determine how such mediated representations are discursively constructed, the social-psychological motivations of verbal aggression and their social functions. We appropriated verbal aggressiveness as a conceptual framework that encapsulates all forms of politically-motivated derogatory language - insult, defamation, provocation, incitement – and their concomitant social effects. The criteria set by Wodak & Meyer (2009:98) were followed in the light of the criticism of representativeness of the selected texts and the pitfall of cherry-picking data, which arises from the 'randomness' of data selection as pointed out by Widdowson (1998). Wodak & Meyer's criteria include specific political units (region, nation state, international union), specific periods of time relating to important discursive events, which are connected with the issue in question), special social and political actors, specific discourse, specific fields of action, specific semiotic media and genre).

Given that our study examines how verbal aggressiveness in Nigerian politics is represented in media political discourse, the 'specific political units' are narrowed down to media sources produced in Nigeria but extend beyond its immediate local frontiers to global audiences. The 'specific period of time relating to important discursive events' in this context is the period leading up to 2023 general elections; the timeframe selected for the data collection was January - September 2022. The 'specific social and political actors' for investigation include the presidential candidates of APC, Labour Party, PDP, and NNPP, their spokespersons and media aides. The specific discourse is political communication; specific fields of political action is political campaign; and specific semiotic media is online media platforms of mainstream newspapers – *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, *Sun*, *Daily Trust* and online media – *thenicheng.com*, *saharareporters.com*, *thecable.ng.com*, *dailypost.ng.com*, *gazzette.ng.com*. The data so elicited would be included in the Appendix from which the excerpts for analysis are extracted. By using qualitative-descriptive approach and content analysis method, we examine the typology of verbal aggressiveness, its social-psychological and political motivations and social functions.

4.1. Discursive constructions of verbal aggressiveness in political communication

In this sub-section, we enlist the theoretical and methodological resources of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in accounting for discursive constructions of verbal aggressiveness as negative political campaign and how it suffices as a fill-in-the-argumentativeness-gap strategy in political communication. CDA, notes van Dijk (2004: 352), "is a type of discourse analysis research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts." It is a line of inquiry that seeks to show how ideological presuppositions are hidden underneath the surface structures of language choices in text, (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For instance, Wodak

(2001) posits that CDA looks into institutional, political, gender, and media discourses and how certain social groups may be either ill-represented or misrepresented in different types of discourse. Far from being a homogenous theory or conceptual framework, CDA, as severally stated by scholars (cf. van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), is a broad spectrum of several approaches, which engages in the social analysis of discourse. In essence, CDA represent multifarious methodological trajectory open to scholars interested in interrogating diverse issues that border on language as a socially-constructed practice.

Nonetheless, different theorists seem to enjoy consensus on the *criticality* notion as the most central tenet of CDA, which seeks to reveal concealed relations and causes between discourse and society most of which are not evident to the people in the discourse. Specifically, Fairclough (1992) avers that scholars working under the umbrella of CDA are bound by a concern for the investigation of the reproduction of ideology in language even though they may be working with diverse theories and various foci. To this extent, CDA is generally about explaining the complex relationship between the structure of texts and their social functions especially in the crucial areas of creation and maintenance of differential power relations and structures. However, of all the general principles of CDA, we shall be concerned with the following two considered as most relevant to this work: (i) CDA focuses on power, dominance and inequality and how these are reproduced or resisted by various social groups in their discourses (determined by class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc.); (ii) CDA seeks to reveal implied or hidden social structures of dominance of one social group upon another, their underlying ideologies, and strategies of manipulation, legitimation and manufacture of consent utilised by such powerful elite groups.

Some researchers, notably van Dijk (1987, 1993), Fowler (1991), have paid particular attention to the role of language in the construction of social consensus regarding the in-group 'us' as against the out-group 'them'. Later, van Dijk (2004) re-formulated his approach, which consists of two main discursive strategies of 'positive self-representation' (semantic macro-strategy of in-group favouritism) and 'negative other-representation,' (semantic macro-strategy of derogation of out-group). The analysis of what van Dijk (2007:78) refers to as 'ideological square,' is an aspect of what he sees as the need "to relate properties of discourse with these underlying, socially shared, representations, which group members use as a resource to talk about (members) of other groups" (van Dijk, 2016). In what follows shortly, it shall be seen how mediated representations of verbal aggressiveness as discursive practice of selected political actors reflect the ideological strategies of positive self- and negative other-presentations as well as such argumentative moves as *argumentum ad hominem* and *argumentum ad baculum*.

In Excerpt (i), the references to 'Biafran blabbers,' *Obidients,* 'sound of the east,' 'ethno-religious tent,' 'northerners,' 'southeasterner,' in Excerpt (iv); 'it is the turn of Yoruba,' in Excerpt (viii); 'political slaves of Hausa/Fulani Northern Oligarchy' in Excerpt (xii), 'a die-hard Biafran' in Excerpt (xvi), and "political party of termites" in Excerpt (xvii) underscore discursive construction of ideological discourse strategies, which thrive as dominant recurrent themes in conflict talk and political communication in Nigeria. In order to fully appreciate the semantic import of Sam Omatseye's message implicit in his 'Obi-tuary' article (Excerpt i), it becomes imperative to consider it as a text production process, which implies the expression of a mental process that produces a meaning. Notable text theorists such as Kinstsch and Van Dijk have posited that a text reader normally develops a comprehension process trajectory, which they habitually follow through in order to have a clear understanding of the text. This

process in theoretic terms, flowers into three basic tributaries – 'verbatim understanding,' 'semantic representation, which captures vividly the meaning of the text,' 'a situational representation of the situation to which the text refers'. In this regard, the compression process invokes the situational representation of the situation being referred to in the text, the intention of which is to galvanise public opinion against the real or perceived political adversaries of the writer's benefactor.

A clearer understanding of such text in whatever form – oral, written, signed – presupposes transcending the peripheral boundaries of simple grammatical analysis to the realm of social analysis of language in order to underscore the environmental, social, political, economic factors that precipitated its production. A number of scholars, notably, Teun van Dijk (1993; 2008; 2009) and Norman Fairclough (1995; 1997; 2003) have in their various individual, collaborative, and editorial works, developed and propagated this social approach to the analysis of language to provide a more intelligible perspective of the social implications of the text. It is clear from the tone and tenor of the text produced by Mr. Omatseye that it represents the vested interests of the forces behind the text. Given that language most often suffices as an effective tool for acquiring, sustaining, and solidifying political control, the power to exercise and perpetuate political hegemony is explicitly expressed through text production such as Omatseye's newspaper piece. To that extent, Omatseye's intention was to invoke 'stereotypes' or what Fowler (1991:17) refers to as "socially constructed mental pigeon-hole" against Peter Obi and the entire Igbo race. Stereotyping is a subtle way of categorising people by sorting them into different categories of good, bad, ugly, or evil; a kind of discursive strategy deployed to demonise an individual or group of people and in the process mobilise public revulsion against them to the extent that such innocent victims would hardly elicit any iota of sympathy in the event of hate-denominated racial aggression against them.

In Excerpt (iv), ethnic politics resonates in the speech of Rabiu Kwankwaso, whose racial profiling of Peter Obi and his Labour Party reinvents Tunde Bakare's hate-laced 'socially-constructed mental pigeon-hole' invoked against the Igbo, who claimed that Igbos were cursed by Tafawa Balewa for killing him and would never be President of Nigeria until he (Bakare) removed the curse. (www.9newsng.com/igbos-cannot-rule-nigeria-yet-because-they-were-cursed-by-tafawa-balewa-pastor-tunde-bakare/). Senator Adamu Bulkachuwa re-enacted Bakare's racial stereotype against Ndigbo when he reportedly opposed Igbo's quest for the office of the president in 2023, arguing instead that they should be eliminated from Nigeria. "Rather than the Igbo getting the Presidency being agitated for by their people, what they deserve is elimination from Nigeria. Southeast is home to criminals, rebels. They're just rebels, arsonists and criminals in short and deserve to be eliminated from Nigeria," Bulkachuwa declared.

The same politics of ethnicity sired 'sense of entitlement' that provided an inspirational hinge for Bola Tinubu to latch on to and arrogate to himself the inalienable right of APC's presidential candidacy – *emi lo kan* ('it is my turn'). In his words, "this time, it's Yoruba turn and in Yorubaland, it's my tenure…" (www.punchng.com/presidency-its-yorubas-turn-says-tinubu/). Former President Obasanjo seized Tinubu's infamous catch-phrase to satirize entitlement and ethnic politics when he told Tinubu as his guest, "You have introduced new vocabularies into the Yoruba political dictionary, 'Emi lo kan, Eleyii, Olule'. I don't know if these new vocabularies are good or not good, but they are new and we will continue to use them…" (www.thecable.ng/extra-tinubu-has-added-emilokan-olule-to-yoruba-political-dictionary-says-obasanjo/) Despite the moniker of national unifier, who claims to have built

bridges across the ethno-religious, regional and linguistic divides of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar in Excerpt (xviii) could hardly resist the allurements of ethnic bigotry when he openly appealed to the sensibilities of his fellow northerners to accept him as 'a pan-Nigerian of northern origin' and reject Yoruba and Igbo presidential candidates. Beyond the ethnic, social, and regional stereotypes as implicated in the discursive constructions of verbal aggressiveness as instantiations of social power abuse, dominance, social inequality reenactment and resistance, argumentative moves such as argumentum ad hominem and argumentum ad baculum are gleaned from Excerpts (ii), (v) - (xi), (xiii) – (xv). In Excerpt (ii) for instance, the writer in his response to Omatseye's diatribe, chose to engage the argumentation moves of *argumentum ad hominem* to attack the self-concept of Tinubu for his perceived endorsement of the 'Obi-tuary' article against Peter Obi instead of attacking the person's opinion or position on issues.

The social functions, which verbal aggressiveness is intended to serve have been identified by researchers to include (a) prejudice perpetuation (Bianchi et al., 2019; Fasoli, Maass et al., 2015; Bilewicz & Soral., 2020), (b) maintenance of status hierarchies (Rosette et al., 2013; Henry et al., 2014; Fasoli, Maass et al., 2015; O'Dea, 2019), (c) legitimization of violence against outgroups (Simon & Greenberg, 1996; Haslam, 2006; Goff et al., 2008; Reicher et al., 2008); Leader et al., 2009; Volpato et al., 2010; Fischer et al., 2018; Dussich, 2018; Pettersson, 2019; Jacobs & Spanger, 2020). These social functions, which discriminatory language and verbal aggressiveness serve (perpetuation of prejudice, maintenance of social hierarchies, and legitimization of hostile actions), all involve the outgroup as the primary target. Conversely, traits of language aggression that characterise ingroup discursive practice equally serve the ingroup goals of establishing and maintaining ingroup norms (Plummer, 2001; Canarghei et al., 2011), as well as fostering ingroup cohesion, (Douglas, 2007). Altogether, these multiple functions suffice to define the discursive construction and maintenance of intra and intergroup relations.

In the case of the present work, the observed verbal aggression in the data goes beyond serving the ingroup's sectarian interests listed above to connect the broader confines of *ideological square* that defines the dictates of consummating respective group's *social power*, and which van Dijk (1993) defines in terms of *control*. The ensuing inter-group contestation for power is oxygenated by social power dynamics, which dictates that groups have (more or less) power if they are capable of controlling the acts and minds of members of other groups. This capacity presupposes a power base of privileged access to scarce social resources, especially access or control over public discourse. This aligns with van Dijk's (1996) position that among many other resources (including force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information) that define the power base of a group or institution, access to or control over public discourse and communication is an important 'symbolic' resource. In essence, the statements credited to the political actors and members of their camps re-enact basic issues of discursive power relationship, which border on how access to specific forms of discourse, especially those of politics, is itself a power resource; how more powerful groups control public discourses, how such discourses control the minds and actions of less powerful groups, as well as the social consequences of such control. The struggle for social power appears so acrimonious such that the actors tend to overreach themselves, which explains the incidences of verbal aggressiveness that characterise political communication as instantiated in the data.

The verbal fisticuffs between the Tinubu and Atiku camps for instance, underscores seeming absence of reason and decorum in their interactional exchanges. It is the light of the brick-backs, accusations, denials, and counter-accusations that Okonkwo (2022) undertook to

"bring these gentlemen in the court of evidence before us to ascertain the veracity of their claims before reaching a forensic conclusion on the integrity quotient of both on the basis of balance of probability". His 'forensic conclusion' is that "…the two major political parties have chosen men that, in their words, lack character and integrity. The two major political parties have stumbled in their choices of these old, untrustworthy and untruthful elders and Nigeria may tumble if Nigerians vote any of them…" This harks back to the discursive strategies of van Dijk's (2004) 'ideological square,' that is, 'semantic macro-strategy of in-group favouritism semantic macro-strategy of derogation of out-group'.

4.2. Social-psychological motivations for verbal aggressiveness

In this sub-section, we account for the socio-psychological motivations for verbal aggressiveness rather than argumentativeness as an option for engaging in interactional exchanges. Cervone, Augoustinos, and Maass (2020) summarised a number of researchers that identified the socio-psychological *antecedents* of verbal aggressiveness, derogatory language, and hateful speech (McDavitt et al., 2002; Gerstenfeld, 2022; Forscher et al., 2015; Walters et al., 2016; Golec de Zavala et al., 2020). These psychological triggers for the destructive trait of aggressive communication are categorized into three groups: (i) personality variables - right-wing authoritarian personality, social dominance orientation, and the motivation to express prejudice; (ii) affective or emotional states directed at the target including hate, contempt, disgust, feelings of intergroup threat; (iii) general (target-unspecific) motivations - thrill seeking, self-esteem maintenance. Also included are the four basic motivations for verbal aggression as listed by Infante & Rancer (1996): social learning, psychopathology, disdain, and argumentative skill deficiencies. Kinney (1994) suggested three broad domains of self-concept attack: group membership, personal failings, and relational failings. The trait of verbal aggression, as Infante & Wigley (1986) observed, involves attacking the self-concepts of others in order to inflict pain through humiliation, embarrassment, depression, and other negative feelings about the self. This is evident in Excerpts (v) – (ix) and (xiii) – (xv) where expletives and invectives ('pathological liar'), labelling and name-calling ('Yahoo-Yahoo Governors,' 'ice-cream' / 'tomato seller,' 'stingy,' 'veteran loser,' 'unknown quantity,' 'children') seem to dictate the rule of engagement in interactional exchanges of some political actors.

The foregoing corroborates the position of Schrodt & Wheeless (2001: 55) that verbally aggressive messages involve "character, competence, and physical appearance attacks, as well as ridicule, threats, profanity, maledictions, nonverbal emblems, and teasing." As earlier observed, Argumentative Skill Deficiency (ADS) refers to the destructive trait of aggressive communication, which underpins an individual's lack of verbal skills to deal with an issue that requires some reasoning. It would take either vile habits picked up during social learning period, strong inclination to Freudian pleasure principle of the id, natural disdain for outgroup, and obvious lack of argumentative skills or a combination of all this for a language user to opt for verbal aggressiveness as fill in the argumentative gap strategy in political communication as evident in the data. In the context of the present study, we agree that the socio-psychological antecedents of verbal aggressiveness listed in the literature apply to incidences of language aggression typified by the political statements reflected in the data. To conclude this sub-section from the theoretical prisms of social psychology, it takes an interplay of personality variables, different affective states, and argumentative skill deficiency for a speaker or writer to ignore the strong appeal, which argumentative predisposition of aggressive communication model holds and resort to authoritarian personality, proclivity for social dominance, instinctual knack for primordial prejudices and biases and crude indulgences to attack the self-concepts of

their real or perceived political adversaries. In this regard, argumentative skill deficiency stands out as the main driver of such aggression-laced interactional practices of the selected political actors and their media aides and supporters.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This work appropriated verbal aggressiveness as an analytic framework to account for an aspect of interpersonal communication that lies on the destructive side of the aggressive communication continuum. It investigated the discursive constructions of and socio-psychological motivations for verbal aggressiveness as defining characteristic of political communication in Nigeria. The outcome of the data analysis and discussions sheds more light on diverse issues that border on language as a socially-constructed practice, notably how Critical Discourse Analysis represents multifarious methodological trajectory open to scholars interested in interrogating "…the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts," (van Dijk, 2004: 352). Also, the research findings reveal the socio-psychological *antecedents* (personality variables, affective or emotional states, general (target-unspecific) and social functions (prejudice perpetuation, maintenance of status hierarchies, legitimisation of violence against outgroups) of verbal aggressiveness and by extension predispose us to draw conclusions on the socio-cognitive and social psychological dynamics of interactional exchanges in the context of political relationships.

While such conclusions hardly translate into a definitive and one-fit-all solution to the problem of verbal aggressiveness, they may suffice to strike a resonating chord of fresh trajectory along which future research could evolve. First, they may provide justification for extending the frontiers of derogatory linguistic practices beyond the political relationship context and broaden the scope to include such small, low-status or vulnerable groups as internally-displaced persons (IDPs), migrant communities, women, youths, religious minority groups, people living with disability, correctional facility inmates. Also, it may point to the need to further interrogate the incidence of verbal aggression and how it proliferates into such mutants as sexist objectifying slurs, profanities, character/personality/competence attacks, insults, maledictions, disconfirmation, threats, teasing, ridicule among these minority groups that hang on to the fringes of the multi-dimensional social scale and how the targeted groups and the society as a whole respond to the challenge.

APPENDIX

Excerpt (i) "…The Biafran babblers are alive and well… They call themselves *Obidients* but they obey only one call: the sound of the east… Before he [Peter Obi] peters out and hurtles towards an electoral *Obi-tuary*…" (Omatseye, Sam. (2022, August 1). "Obi-tuary." www.thenationonlineng.net/obituary-sam-omatseye/)

Excerpt (ii) "…Sam, you must be seen to be frantically propagating a character of disputed age, of unknown pedigree, unascertained genealogy, unsubstantiated name, uncorroborated curriculum vitae, and unverified academic diplomas…a specimen of incontinence, tremulous lower extremities, slurred speech, unsteady gait and memory lapses…" (Iloegbunam, Chuks. (2022, August 03). "Sam Omatseye, everyone's obituary is inevitable." www.thenicheng.com/sam-omatseye-everyones-obituary-is-inevitable/)

Excerpt (iii) "…Don't mind PDP and other mushrooms parties – parties like Labour; they will labour till they die. God will not make you labourers…" "Tinubu mocks Labour Party members: They'll labour till they die." (www.vanguardngr.com/tinubu-mocks-labour-party-members-they'll-labour-till-they-die/07/13/2022/)

Excerpt (iv) "Northerners won't vote for Peter obi or any south-easterner in 2023." – Kwankwaso. Uthman Samad (2022, July 4). "Kwankwaso: Northerners won't vote for Peter obi or any south-easterner in 2023" www.thecable.ng/kwankwaso-northerners-wont-vote-for-peter-obi-or-any-south-easterner-in-2023/

Excerpt (v) "Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) is pathological about lies. We are saddened to see such a man become unhinged from the truth…" Okonoboh, Rita. (2022, July 23). 'Atiku is a pathological liar – he offered me Action Congress VP ticket in 2007, says Tinubu.' (www.thecable/breaking-news/atiku-is-a-pathological-liar/23/07/2022)

Excerpt (vi) "We would not say that Bola Tinubu has lied…In any case, if Bola Tinubu can forget the name of his own political party, why would he not also forget what transpired in 2007 and 2015?" Ndujihe, Clifford and Alechenu, John. (2022, July 25). "Muslim-Muslim ticket: Again, Atiku, Tinubu in verbal war." (https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/07/muslim-muslim-ticket-again-atiku-tinubu-in-verbal-war/)

Excerpt (vii) "…Mr. Tinubu has not sat down to do any prolonged interview for obvious reasons…" Atiku Abubakar www.sunnewsonline.com/you-cant-sit-down-for-long-interview-atiku-fires-back-at-tinubu/

Excerpt (viii) "…If not for me that stood behind Buhari, he wouldn't have become the president…It is the turn of Yoruba; it is my turn…This one [Abiodun] that's sitting down here; could he have become governor without me? – Tinubu." Moses Peter. (2022, June 03). "Without Me, Buhari Wouldn't Have Become President – Tinubu" (www.dailytrust.com/without-me-buhari-wouldnt-have-become-president-tinubu/)

Excerpt (ix) "We, the governors are for the party except for the few 'Yahoo, Yahoo' governors who were hand in glove with Buni to circumvent the will of majority of our Party (APC) members…– Governor Akeredolu." (https://www.thecable.ng/akeredolu-yahoo-yahoo-governors-backed-buni-to-circumvent-will-of-apc-members)

Excerpt (x) "Osinbajo is a good man; he's a nice man. But nice men do not make good leaders, because nice men tend to be nasty. Nice men should be selling popcorn, ice cream…– Kashim Shettima." Ochogwu, Sunday. (2022, June 03) "Nice men like Osinbajo should be selling ice cream – Senator Shettima." (www.dailypost.ng.com/nice-men-like-osinbajo-should-be-seeling-ice-cream/)

Excerpt (xi) "…Go to Ohafia or Arochukwu and ask for Ahmed Lawan; the first thing that will come to their mind is that of a tomato dealer who is bringing tomatoes from Maiduguri." – Kashim Shettima." Ogbu, Samuel. (2022, June 03). "Senate President Lawan is inconsequential, unknown, says Shettima." (www.gazzettengr.com/senate-president-lawan-is-inconsequential-unknown-says-shettima/)

Excerpt (xii) "…It's very unfortunate that learned men like Ike Ekweremadu and Jim Nwobodo will be used against their own people to say that South-East will not vote for Mr. Peter Obi. They are political slaves of Hausa/Fulani Northern Oligarchy…" Onyejiuwa, George. (2022, June 18). "MASSOB blasts Ekweremadu, Nwobodo over utterances against

Peter Obi." (www.sunnewsonline.com/massob-blasts-ekweremadu-nwobodo-over-utterances-against-peter-obi/)

Excerpt (xiii) "…It is better to have a president who is a gifted old man than a young man with 'gum' hands…Peter obi is a stingy man and cannot be Nigeria's president…" Adeuyi, Seun. (2022, June 16). "A Stingy Man Can't Be Nigeria's President, Mbaka Blasts Peter Obi." (www.dailytrust.com/a-stingy-man-cant-be-nigerias-president-mbaka-blasts-peter-obi/)

Excerpt (xiv) "Peter Obi does not have experience to lead Nigeria." Adeuyi, Seun. (2022, August 01). "Okowa: Peter Obi Does Not Have Experience to Lead Nigeria." (www.dailytrust.com/okowa-peter-obi-does-have-experience-to-lead-nigeria/)

Excerpt (xv) Excerpt (xv) "…When we started PDP, these children were not around. They are children who do not know why we formed the party…" (https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/09/01/ayu-those-calling-for-my-sacking-are-children/)

Excerpt (xvi) "… Christians of northern extraction…have no business voting for a southern candidate based on Christianity. If you pick Obi; he is a die-hard Biafran. If you vote Obi, you are voting for a Biafra…" - Shehu Mahdi. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/09/2023-northern-elders-flay-alleged-inciting-statement-against-peter-obi-by-katsina-based-activist/

Excerpt (xvii) "They are a political party of termites. They are in the village of lunacy…16 years of nothingness, rudderlessness, digging the hole of indebtedness. Never again shall they come back…" – Bola Tinubu (https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/10/pdp-is-party-of-termites-ll-ever-come-back-to-power-tinubu/)

Excerpt (xviii) "This is what the northerner needs. He (northerner) doesn't need a Yoruba candidate, or an Igbo candidate. This is what the northerner needs. I stand before you as a pan-Nigerian of northern origin." – Atiku Abubakar (https://www.thecable.ng/atiku-northerners-need-someone-from-north-as-president-not-yoruba-igbo)

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