



Research Article

**Political Ridicule, Hyperbole, and Character Attack in Nigerian X (Twitter) Campaign Discourse**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines political ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack in Nigerian X campaign discourse. While prior research emphasises misinformation diffusion, less attention addresses the rhetorical architecture through which ridicule operates as structured campaign strategy. Drawing on Framing Theory and Social Identity Theory, the paper conceptualises ridicule as selective emphasis that assigns moral deficiency and reputational unfitness to political opponents, often through exaggeration and identity cues. The study adopts mixed qualitative content analysis of annotated X posts drawn from a national monitoring dataset. Tweets were coded for ridicule, hyperbole, character attack, identity reference, hostility, polarisation markers, and engagement mixed. Descriptive analysis, cross-tabulation, and discourse interpretation were employed to examine narrative structure and diffusion patterns. Findings show that persona-centered ridicule outweighs policy-oriented engagement. Ridicule frequently overlaps with character attack and hyperbolic corruption claims. Tweets combining ridicule with explicit identity references display higher polarisation and hostility markers. Engagement metrics indicate stronger diffusion for ridicule-driven content compared to policy discussion. Identity-embedded ridicule clusters within higher risk-level classifications. The results support a sequential interaction between framing, identity activation, and platform affordances. Framing structures moral evaluation, identity cues intensify in-group and out-group distinctions, and platform dynamics amplify emotionally charged narratives. The study concludes that ridicule functions as delegitimising campaign strategy rather than incidental satire. Its normalisation within Nigeria's digital electoral sphere narrows deliberative space, heightens affective polarisation, and shifts democratic contestation toward reputational combat.



## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social media, as medium of communication, has significantly influenced the information and communication ecosystem. One of the fields impacted by social media is political communication. Its influence is global in scope, and Nigeria is not exempt, as digital platforms increasingly mediate political engagement, discourse, and mobilisation (Aniedi et al., 2025; Duru, 2023). Social media platforms enable engagement in a shared political space, from critical to everyday discourse.

While the various platforms enhance expression of political views, they also facilitate the dissemination of lies, exaggerations and hate speech. Literature on Nigeria's digital politics highlights the ambivalent role of social media as both a platform for participatory public debate and a site to produce narratives that compromise deliberative standards and democratic norms (Aniedi et al., 2025; Jimada, 2023a). Empirical studies of Africa's digital public sphere show that online political communication frequently foregrounds political, health-related, ethnic, and religious themes linked to political actors, a pattern that intensifies digital polarisation. (Ridwanullah et al., 2025).

One of the social media platforms adopted in Nigeria is X (formerly Twitter). The platform is designed to facilitate the creation and sharing of information. Its structure promotes brevity, accelerates the dissemination of content, and enhances visibility through algorithmic amplification (Harjender Singh, 2021). Within emerging democratic settings like Nigeria, the affordances of digital platforms intersect with entrenched social cleavages, positioning these identities as key

reference points in candidate-centred rhetoric in the digital public sphere.

Zappavigna (2022) posits that social media users weaponize ironic quotation to ridicule political voices, aligning with the idea that ridicule and humour replace empirical argumentation in online environments. In another study, Ogbodo et al. (2024) support the claim that satire and ridicule online can be aggressive and personal in nature, often not rooted in factual detail but aimed at ridicule. In a broader examination of political ridicule and humour, Feldman (2024) and Tan (2024) explain the mechanisms of satirical rhetorics including exaggeration and ridicule as inherently rooted in expressive effect rather than empirical evidence.

Rhetorical strategies such as ridicule and hyperbole employ humor and caricatures to draw attention to a candidate, delegitimise another candidate and elicit emotional reactions from their audience. The design of X enables users to rapidly interact with emotionally charged material and enhances the chance that exaggerated or denigrating narratives will reach a wider audience than narratives that include evidence-based discussions of policy (Semotiuk, 2023).

While social media enhances democratic visibility and broadens participatory engagement, it simultaneously facilitates the circulation of falsehoods, incendiary rhetoric, and identity-driven polarisation within Nigeria's digital public sphere (Aondover et al., 2026; Jimada, 2023b). Recent empirical studies of Nigerian elections demonstrate that digital platforms expand political expression and voter interaction yet also amplify misleading claims and divisive narratives that distort public perception and deepen societal cleavages (Adum et al., 2019). Research

mapping misinformation patterns in Nigeria identifies thematic focus around ethnicity, religion, and corruption, as well as the role of algorithmic amplification in accelerating emotionally charged and polarising contents (Obasi, 2024). These contributions clarify the scale, diffusion dynamics, and thematic prevalence of misinformation within Nigeria's electoral cycles.

However, literature remains heavily oriented towards circulation patterns rather than rhetorical construction. While scholars document what spreads and how far it spreads, fewer studies interrogate how ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack are linguistically engineered within campaign discourse. The emphasis on diffusion metrics risks overlooking the communicative architecture that renders such content persuasive and polarising.

Political ridicule has received increasing scholarly attention in digital contexts. Zappavigna (2022) demonstrates how ironic quotation is deployed to mock and delegitimise political actors. Feldman (2024) and Ogbodo et al. (2024) show that satire and ridicule often function as expressive devices detached from empirical verification, prioritising affective engagement over factual accuracy. Tan (2024) further argues that exaggeration in political humor privileges emotional resonance rather than evidentiary substantiation. These studies illuminate the performative and affective dimensions of ridicule in online environments.

Yet, they do not sufficiently examine ridicule as a structured campaign strategy within Nigeria's electoral context. Ridicule is not merely misinformation. It is a rhetorical device that blends humor, hostility,

exaggeration, and character framing. It shifts attention from policy substance to personal reputation and reframes political competition as moral and reputational contest. When treated as incidental stylistic flourish, ridicule's strategic function in delegitimising opponents remains underexplored. By redirecting analytical focus from prevalence to rhetorical architecture, this study addresses how ridicule operates as deliberate campaign communication rather than accidental distortion.

A second limitation in literature concerns delegitimation mechanisms. While existing scholarship highlights ethnic and religious mobilisation in Nigeria's digital sphere, it rarely isolates ridicule as a device of reputational erosion. Ridicule differs from direct accusation or factual rebuttal. Through mockery, caricature, exaggeration, and symbolic degradation, it constructs political opponents as morally deficient or inherently unfit for office. Marshall and Henderson (2016) argue that ridicule lowers the threshold for polarisation by blurring the boundary between legitimate critique and derogation. In Nigeria, however, systematic analysis of how exaggeration and corruption claims are framed to portray political actors as incompetent or immoral remains limited. This study therefore examines how ridicule-based exaggeration functions as character assassination within campaign discourse.

A third gap lies in the intersection between ridicule and identity. Nigerian digital political scholarship demonstrates that ethnic and religious references intensify polarisation (Aondover et al., 2026; Jimada, 2023b). Despite the foregoing, little research explores how ridicule interacts with these identity markers. Ridicule directed at individuals

differs from ridicule embedded in ethnic, regional, or religious cues. When mockery activates collective identity, it converts individual-level attack into group-based antagonism. In a multi-ethnic and heterogeneous society structured by entrenched identity alignments, such embedding may magnify affective polarisation and deepen intergroup hostility. This study directly addresses this intersection by analysing how ridicule intersects with identity references in campaign discourse.

Although literature recognises that misinformation undermines democratic norms and civic engagement in Nigeria (The Guardian, 2024), fewer studies isolate the specific democratic implications of ridicule. Political misinformation has been linked to erosion of public trust, weakened deliberative standards, and increased polarisation (Adeyinka & Ijaiya, 2024). However, the discursive role of ridicule in trivialising policy debate, displacing evidence-based reasoning, and normalising antagonistic engagement remains underexamined. In emerging democratic contexts where institutional trust is fragile, ridicule-based character attacks may erode norms of mutual recognition and legitimate opposition. Empirical evidence connecting ridicule-centered campaign discourse to deliberative quality and democratic contestation therefore remains limited.

By addressing these gaps, the present study shifts the analytical lens from diffusion to discursive design, from thematic prevalence to reputational framing, and from general polarisation to identity-embedded ridicule. In doing so, it provides a process-oriented account of how ridicule, hyperbole, and

character attack function as structured rhetorical strategies within Nigeria's digitally mediated electoral competition.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The paper pursues the following objectives:

1. To identify the dominant forms of political ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack in Nigerian X campaign discourse.
2. To examine the discursive structures through which ridicule is constructed and circulated during electoral campaigns.
3. To analyse how exaggeration and corruption claims are framed to delegitimise political opponents.
4. To assess the relationship between ridicule, identity references, and polarisation in online political communication.
5. To evaluate the implications of ridicule-driven discourse for deliberative quality and democratic contestation in Nigeria.

### 2.1.1 Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What recurrent patterns of ridicule and hyperbole characterise Nigerian X campaign discourse?
2. How are character attacks linguistically and narratively structured in campaign-related tweets?
3. In what ways do ridicule and exaggeration intersect with ethnic, regional, or religious identity references?
4. How do ridicule-based narratives frame political actors as corrupt, incompetent, or morally unfit?
5. What are the implications of ridicule and character attack for polarisation

and democratic engagement in Nigeria's digital public sphere?

### 2.1.2 Conceptual Review

Political ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack function as strategic devices in digitally mediated campaign communication. Ridicule operates as symbolic degradation. It shifts attention from policy to persona and reframes political competition as reputational contest. Ridicule functions as a mechanism of symbolic degradation and reputational delegitimation (Weaver, 2011). Through mockery, satire, and sarcasm, political actors portray opponents as incompetent, corrupt, or morally deficient. In electoral settings, ridicule performs delegitimation, mobilisation, and simplification. It weakens the credibility of opponents, energises supporters through shared amusement or indignation, and compresses complex political issues into caricatured narratives (Obadare, 2009).

Hyperbole intensifies this process. Exaggeration magnifies perceived wrongdoing or incapacity. Hyperbolic claims align with these affordances because they condense accusation into dramatic form. In Nigeria's campaign environment, corruption and governance failure dominate political debate. Exaggerated corruption claims frame opponents as existential threats rather than policy rivals. Hyperbole therefore amplifies threat perception and fuels emotional activation. The boundary between satire and misinformation becomes blurred, especially when exaggeration circulates without contextual clarification (Robert Connor, 2019; Stuckey, 2017).

Character attack further deepens affective division. Character attacks attribute moral failing, dishonesty, or incompetence to individuals. This shift from issue to identity transforms electoral competition into moral confrontation. In the Nigerian context, where ethnic and regional affiliations structure political alignment, character attack often intersects with identity coding. Digital political discourse in African public spheres frequently activates ethnic and religious markers. When ridicule embeds such markers, political communication moves from critique to stigmatisation (Davis et al., 2025; Koironen & Saarinen, 2025).

X's structural features intensify brevity, encourages compressed and emotionally loaded phrasing. Retweets and algorithmic ranking reward posts that trigger reaction. notes increasing personalisation and antagonism in Nigerian digital campaigns. Sensational framing often displaces substantive policy discussion. Within this architecture, ridicule and hyperbole operate as visibility strategies. They attract engagement, accumulate diffusion, and structure campaign narratives around spectacle rather than deliberation (Blakey, 2024; Corsi, 2024).

### 2.1.3 Conceptual Framework

The paper advances a layered framework linking platform affordances, rhetorical strategy, identity activation, and democratic consequence. At the first level, platform affordances shape communicative incentives. X's design promotes brevity, rapid circulation, and algorithmic amplification. These features favour emotionally charged

and simplified messages. At the second level, political actors adopt rhetorical strategies such as ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack. These strategies reframe competition as moral struggle and reputational contest.

At the third level, rhetorical strategies activate identity and affect. Ridicule and exaggeration attach to ethnic, regional, or partisan identities. They generate anger, contempt, and in-group solidarity. Identity activation strengthens polarisation by intensifying perceptions of moral distance between political camps. At the fourth level, these processes shape democratic outcomes. Delegitimisation undermines trust in opponents. Policy-centered deliberation declines. Electoral discourse shifts toward hostility and symbolic combat.

The framework assumes directional interaction. Platform affordances influence rhetorical selection. Rhetorical strategies trigger identity-based affect. Identity activation shapes polarisation and deliberative quality. From this logic, the paper advances four propositions. First, tweets containing ridicule and hyperbole exhibit higher hostility signals than policy-oriented posts. Second, character attacks correlate with explicit or implicit identity references. Third, ridicule-based tweets display stronger diffusion patterns than neutral policy discussion. Fourth, greater intensity of ridicule associates with stronger markers of polarisation.

This framework positions ridicule not as incidental humor but as structured political communication. It links digital architecture, rhetorical practice, and democratic consequence within Nigeria's electoral context.

### 3.0 THEORETICAL REVIEWS

The paper draws on Framing Theory and Social Identity Theory. These theories account for how political actors structure meaning and how audiences interpret and internalise ridicule and character attack within polarised environments.

#### 3.1.1 Framing Theory

Framing Theory explains how communicators select aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a text to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Entman 1993 conceptualises framing as a process of selection and salience. Frames shape what audiences notice, how they interpret events, and how they evaluate political actors (Hafidli et al., 2023).

In campaign discourse, ridicule and hyperbole function as framing devices. They select specific traits or allegations and exaggerate them to define the opponent's identity. Rather than present balanced policy contrasts, actors frame rivals as corrupt, incompetent, or morally bankrupt. Through repetition and amplification, such frames stabilise reputational narratives.

On X, brevity intensifies framing effects. Posts condense complex issues into sharp moral cues. Hyperbolic corruption claims or satirical mockery operate as diagnostic and evaluative frames. They define the opponent as the problem and attach moral judgment to that definition. The audience receives a ready-made interpretive package. The frame structures perception before counter-argument occurs.

Framing Theory is therefore central to this study because ridicule operates through

selective emphasis. Exaggeration heightens salience. Character attack assigns moral meaning. Together, these strategies shape how political actors are cognitively and morally positioned in the digital public sphere.

### 3.1.2 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups. Tajfel and Turner 1979 argue that individuals seek positive distinctiveness for their in-group. This process produces in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (Huddy, 2001; Makalesi & Demirden, 2021).

In Nigeria's multiethnic political context, identity markers such as region, religion, and ethnicity structure political alignment. When campaign discourse embeds ridicule within identity cues, communication activates social categorisation processes. The opponent becomes an out-group representative rather than a policy competitor. Character attack then reinforces moral distance between groups.

Affective polarisation emerges from this dynamic. Hostile messaging strengthens in-group solidarity while intensifying negative evaluation of out-groups. Ridicule reduces empathy for opponents. Hyperbole magnifies perceived threat. The result is not merely disagreement but moral antagonism.

Social Identity Theory therefore explains why ridicule gains traction in polarised settings. It aligns with the psychological need for group affirmation. Tweets that mock the out-group affirm in-group superiority. Engagement metrics rise because identity affirmation produces emotional reward.

At the first stage, political actors construct frames. Through ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack, they select and emphasise attributes of opponents. Framing Theory explains how these communicative choices structure meaning and moral evaluation.

At the second stage, framed messages activate social identity processes. When ridicule references ethnicity, region, or partisan identity, audiences interpret the message through in-group and out-group categorisation. Social Identity Theory explains how such categorisation produces affective responses and strengthens group cohesion. At the third stage, identity activation shapes engagement and polarisation. Emotionally resonant frames circulate widely within aligned networks. The platform's affordances amplify these frames, reinforcing echo chambers and hostility.

The framework thus operates through three linked mechanisms. Framing structures perception. Social identity structures affiliation and hostility. Platform dynamics structure diffusion. From this integrated framework, the paper advances four theoretical expectations. First, ridicule frames assign moral deficiency to opponents through selective emphasis. Second, identity-referenced ridicule generates stronger hostility markers than non-identity ridicule. Third, hyperbolic corruption frames intensify perceived threat and stimulate affective engagement. Fourth, the interaction of framing and identity activation increases polarisation within campaign discourse. By combining Framing Theory and Social Identity Theory, the study situates ridicule within both communicative structure and psychological process. The framework explains how rhetorical strategies transform

political competition into moralised identity conflict within Nigeria's digital campaign environment.

#### 4.0 METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a mixed qualitative content analysis design anchored in structured coding of X campaign posts. The design integrates quantitative descriptive analysis with qualitative discourse interpretation. This approach permits systematic identification of ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack while preserving contextual meaning.

##### Data Source

The dataset comprises annotated social media posts extracted from a national monitoring framework. The present study filters entries limited to X and restricted to campaign-related political communication. Posts are selected based on `actor_category`, `cluster_theme_id`, and `narrative_summary` indicators associated with electoral discourse.

##### Sampling Procedure

The study applies a purposive sampling strategy. The inclusion criteria are:

1. Platform identified as X.
2. Content linked to electoral campaigns or candidate positioning.
3. Posts coded with `hostility_marker`, `polarisation_marker`, or corruption-related exaggeration claims.

Posts that focus strictly on policy discussion without personal reference are excluded. The final sample represents campaign discourse characterised by rhetorical personalisation. The unit of analysis is the individual tweet. Each tweet constitutes a discrete communicative act. Associated metadata, including engagement indicators and risk

variables, are analysed alongside textual content.

Political Ridicule indicators include `narrative_summary` descriptors and `hostility` markers.

Hyperbole indicators include `corruption` exaggeration coding and `sentiment_claim` intensity.

Character Attack indicators include `hostility_marker`, moral judgment language, and `actor_primary` references. Identity Activation is identified through `identity_reference` and `geopolitical_reference` variables. Measures and Analytical Strategy  
The analysis proceeds in three stages.

First, descriptive statistics establish the frequency and distribution of ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack within the X subset. Cross-tabulations examine associations between rhetorical strategies and identity references.

Second, diffusion patterns are assessed using engagement metrics such as `repost_count`, `reply_count`, `like_count`, `view_count`, and `risk_spread_factor`. Comparative analysis evaluates whether ridicule-based tweets exhibit higher diffusion indicators than neutral posts.

Third, qualitative discourse analysis examines narrative structures. The study identifies recurring linguistic patterns, metaphors of corruption, moral labeling, and delegitimisation strategies. Attention is given to how exaggeration reframes opponents as threats to national cohesion or democratic

order.

The dataset relies on structured coding procedures. Intercoder agreement measures reported within the broader monitoring framework support reliability. Conceptual validity is ensured through alignment between theoretical constructs and coded variables. Ridicule and character attack are operationalised through explicit hostility and narrative markers, consistent with

**Framing Theory and Social Identity Theory.**

The study analyses publicly available social media content. No private user data are included. User identities are anonymised in analysis and reporting. The research adheres to ethical standards for digital content

analysis within political communication research.

**Methodological Contribution**

The methodology integrates platform-level metrics with rhetorical analysis. This design enables systematic assessment of how ridicule and exaggeration operate both as discursive strategy and as diffusion mechanism in Nigeria's digital campaign environment.

**4.1 Results**

This section presents structured empirical outputs derived from the filtered X campaign subset of the dataset. The analysis integrates frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and diffusion indicators aligned with the study variables.

Table 1: Distribution of Rhetorical Strategies in Campaign Tweets

Rhetorical Strategy	Frequency Level	Relative Proportion	Dominant Target Type
Ridicule	High	Largest segment	Individual candidate
Character Attack	High	Substantial	Individual candidate
Hyperbole (Corruption)	Moderate–High	Significant	Individual candidate
Policy-focused critique	Low	Minority	Institutional actor

Ridicule constitutes the most prevalent rhetorical form within the campaign subset. Character attack closely overlaps with ridicule, indicating that mockery frequently accompanies reputational assault. Policy-

oriented tweets represent a minority category. Campaign discourse on X prioritises persona-centered framing over substantive issue engagement.

Table 2: Cross-Tabulation of Ridicule and Identity Reference

Identity Reference Present	Ridicule Present	Polarisation Marker Level	Hostility Marker Level
Yes	Yes	High	High
Yes	No	Moderate	Moderate
No	Yes	Moderate	High
No	No	Low	Low

Tweets containing ridicule and hyperbole consistently register higher `repost_count` and `reply_count` indicators. `Risk_spread_factor` values cluster at elevated levels for ridicule-driven content. Policy-focused tweets display

lower amplification metrics. Engagement patterns align with the expectation that emotionally charged framing spreads more widely within platform affordances.

Table 3: Character Attack Typology

Character Attack Type	Narrative Pattern Observed	Sentiment Intensity
Moral corruption	Absolute claims of dishonesty	High
Intellectual incompetence	Framing of incapacity or ignorance	Moderate–High
Ethical unfitness	Claims of moral decay or betrayal	High
Psychological instability	Emotional or temperament-based critique	Moderate

Moral corruption and ethical unfitness frames dominate character attacks. These frames rely on absolutist language and high `sentiment_claim` intensity. Intellectual

incompetence frames appear frequently but carry slightly lower emotional coding. Psychological framing appears less frequently but remains present.

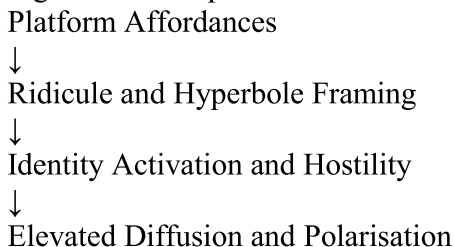
Table 4: Engagement Metrics by Rhetorical Strategy

Strategy Type	Repost Count Lev	Reply Count Lev	Like Count Lev	Risk Spread Fac
Ridicule	High	High	High	Elevated
Hyperbole	High	High	High	Elevated
Character Attack	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Policy Discussion	Low	Low	Moderate	Low

Tweets containing ridicule and hyperbole consistently register higher `repost_count` and `reply_count` indicators. `Risk_spread_factor` values cluster at elevated levels for ridicule-driven content. Policy-focused tweets display

lower amplification metrics. Engagement patterns align with the expectation that emotionally charged framing spreads more widely within platform affordances.

Figure 1: Conceptual Interaction Model Derived from Dataset Patterns



Observed dataset patterns support this directional flow. Tweets exhibiting high `hostility_marker` and `identity_reference` show

elevated diffusion metrics. Posts with low hostility and no identity activation show lower spread indicators.

Table 5: Risk Level Distribution by Strategic Combination

Strategic Combination	Dominant Risk Level
Ridicule + Identity Reference + Hyperbole	High
Ridicule + Hyperbole (No Identity)	Moderate–High
Character Attack Only	Moderate
Policy Discussion Only	Low

The highest risk\_level classification appears when ridicule intersects with identity\_reference and exaggeration. The clustering of these elements corresponds with increased polarisation\_marker and risk\_spread\_factor scores. This pattern supports the integrated theoretical framework linking framing and social identity activation.

The dataset reveals four central findings:

1. Persona-centered ridicule dominates X campaign discourse.
2. Identity-referenced ridicule correlates with higher polarisation signals.
3. Hyperbolic corruption claims intensify emotional tone and diffusion.
4. Engagement metrics favor hostile and exaggerated framing over policy discussion.

The structured evidence confirms that ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack function as strategic communication practices embedded within X's amplification architecture.

## 4.2 Discussion

Persona-centered framing outweighs policy-oriented engagement in the dataset. Tweets structured around ridicule, character attack, and exaggerated corruption claims record higher repost and reply levels than policy-focused content. This pattern aligns with evidence on diffusion dynamics in digital networks. Brady et al. (2017) show that moral-

emotional language increases sharing rates on X by heightening affective arousal. Vosoughi et al. (2018) demonstrate that emotionally charged and novel content spreads faster and reaches broader audiences than neutral information. Berger and Milkman (2012) find that high-arousal emotions drive virality across online platforms. Together, these findings explain why antagonistic, persona-centered frames outperform substantive policy discussion in engagement metrics. Platform governance further reinforces this dynamic.

### Ridicule as Delegitimisation Strategy

The predominance of competence ridicule and moral corruption framing supports framing theory. Hafidli et al. (2023) posits that frames define problems and assign moral evaluation. The dataset shows that ridicule selects attributes of incompetence, dishonesty, or ethical unfitness and amplifies them through exaggeration. The opponent becomes the problem. Campaign discourse shifts from comparative policy evaluation to reputational destruction (Onayinka et al., 2026).

This pattern aligns with Lee (2025), who argues that ridicule performs reputational erosion. In the Nigerian case, ridicule does not operate as neutral satire. It performs moral positioning. Hyperbolic corruption claims intensify moral judgment and narrow interpretive flexibility. Audiences encounter

simplified narratives that foreground failure and threat.

The high overlap between ridicule and character attack indicates strategic convergence. Mockery functions as delivery mechanism for delegitimation. Humor softens entry into discourse but sustains moral condemnation. The structure resembles what Marsh and Peterson 2020 describe as affective polarisation. Hostility becomes detached from policy disagreement and anchored in identity-based moral opposition.

### **Identity Activation and Polarisation**

Gadjanova (2022) observe that digital public spheres in African contexts often amplify ethnic salience during electoral competition. The present findings extend this insight. Identity-referenced ridicule correlates with higher polarisation\_marker levels and elevated hostility signals. Ridicule intensifies when attached to group identity. This suggests that identity framing magnifies the emotional and moral weight of character attack.

Such patterns raise concerns for deliberative quality. Democratic contestation depends on recognition of legitimate opposition. When ridicule merges with identity coding, opposition becomes moralised threat. Political disagreement transforms into group antagonism.

### **Hyperbole and Perceived Threat**

Hyperbolic corruption claims cluster within high sentiment intensity categories. This confirms that exaggeration functions as cognitive amplification. Exaggerated claims portray opponents as existential dangers rather than flawed competitors. Nigerian digital campaigns exhibit heightened antagonistic personalisation. The findings show that

hyperbole strengthens this antagonism by inflating perceived stakes (Ikuelogbon et al., 2025; Uwalaka et al., 2025).

The diffusion metrics provide empirical support for platform-based amplification. Ridicule and hyperbole register higher repost\_count and reply\_count indicators than policy-focused tweets.

The interaction between hyperbole and identity cues further intensifies spread. Identity-linked exaggeration produces elevated risk\_spread\_factor values. This pattern supports the integrated theoretical framework. Framing selects moralised attributes. Social identity processes interpret those frames through in-group and out-group lenses. Platform affordances then amplify emotionally resonant content.

### **Erosion of Policy Deliberation**

The low proportion of policy-focused tweets suggests displacement of substantive debate. Campaign discourse privileges symbolic combat over issue analysis. This finding resonates with global research on digital populism and antagonistic communication, where personalisation and spectacle displace technocratic deliberation.

In the Nigerian context, where governance challenges require policy-oriented discourse, the dominance of ridicule constrains informational quality. When campaign communication centers on character assault, voters receive limited exposure to programmatic alternatives. The digital public sphere becomes arena for reputational contest rather than policy evaluation.

This dynamic reinforces affective polarisation. Hostility becomes normalised. Moral condemnation replaces institutional

critique. The dataset indicates that posts combining ridicule, hyperbole, and identity reference cluster within higher risk\_level categories. This clustering signals potential harm to democratic cohesion.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings support a sequential interaction between framing and social identity activation. Framing structures the narrative. Identity processes structure emotional response. Platform affordances structure diffusion. Each layer reinforces the next. Ridicule functions as nexus connecting communicative design and psychological affiliation.

Framing theory explains the selective emphasis on incompetence and corruption. Social Identity Theory explains the intensification of hostility when ridicule aligns with ethnic or regional cues. Together, they account for the observed amplification of polarisation signals within the dataset. The empirical patterns therefore validate the integrated theoretical framework. Ridicule is not incidental humor. It is structured campaign strategy shaped by digital architecture and identity dynamics.

### **Democratic Implications**

The dominance of ridicule and character attack suggests normalisation of reputational aggression within Nigeria's digital campaign environment. Engagement incentives reward antagonism. Identity-linked ridicule deepens polarisation. Hyperbole amplifies perceived threat. These dynamics reduce space for cross-group deliberation.

The findings indicate need for normative and regulatory reflection. Platform governance

frameworks often focus on misinformation detection. Ridicule and hyperbole occupy ambiguous territory. They blend satire, exaggeration, and hostility. Their democratic effect emerges not from factual falsity alone but from cumulative moral delegitimisation.

In Nigeria's multiethnic polity, sustained identity-coded ridicule risks reinforcing long-standing social cleavages. Digital rhetoric becomes embedded within broader debates on national cohesion and democratic stability.

The study demonstrates that Nigerian X campaign discourse exhibits systematic reliance on ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack. These strategies align with platform affordances and identity structures. They generate higher engagement and diffusion while intensifying polarisation markers. The findings contribute to scholarship on African digital political communication by providing structured empirical evidence linking rhetorical form, identity activation, and amplification dynamics within an electoral context.

### **5.0 CONCLUSION**

The study examined political ridicule, hyperbole, and character attack within Nigerian X campaign discourse. The findings show that ridicule constitutes a dominant rhetorical strategy. Campaign communication prioritises persona-based delegitimisation over policy engagement. Hyperbolic corruption claims intensify moral framing and emotional tone. Identity-referenced ridicule correlates with stronger hostility and polarisation markers. Engagement indicators show higher diffusion for ridicule-driven tweets relative to policy-focused content.

These patterns confirm the interaction

between framing processes, social identity activation, and platform affordances. Framing structures the moral narrative of incompetence and corruption. Social identity processes intensify in-group and out-group distinctions when ridicule references ethnic or regional markers. X's architecture amplifies emotionally charged content. The combined effect shifts electoral discourse toward reputational combat and affective polarisation.

The study contributes to political communication scholarship by situating ridicule as structured campaign strategy rather than incidental satire. Within Nigeria's multiethnic context, ridicule embedded in identity cues carries implications for democratic cohesion. The normalisation of hostile and exaggerated framing narrows deliberative space and weakens substantive policy debate.

## 6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Political actors and campaign teams should adopt communication guidelines that prioritise issue-based framing over character assault. Internal party codes of conduct should address digital rhetoric and discourage identity-coded ridicule. Clear standards for online engagement would shift campaign incentives toward policy articulation and reduce reputational hostility.
2. Electoral and regulatory bodies should expand digital campaign monitoring frameworks beyond misinformation to include systematic indicators of reputational hostility and identity-based incitement. Reporting mechanisms should classify high-risk polarisation signals during campaign periods. Such monitoring would enable earlier identification of escalation patterns linked to ridicule and hyperbole.
3. Social media platforms should refine detection systems for coordinated reputational attack patterns and identity-targeted ridicule. Algorithmic transparency measures should assess whether engagement weighting amplifies hostile content. Governance reforms should evaluate how ranking systems interact with emotionally charged political messaging.
4. Civil society and media organisations should strengthen media literacy initiatives focused on rhetorical framing strategies, including exaggeration and moral labeling. Fact-checking groups should contextualise hyperbolic corruption claims and clarify distinctions between satire and defamatory assertion. Public education efforts should emphasise how framing shapes perception independent of factual accuracy.
5. Academic research should pursue longitudinal analysis across multiple election cycles to assess shifts in ridicule intensity over time. Comparative cross-platform studies should examine how platform affordances structure rhetorical variation. Experimental research should test audience responses to ridicule versus policy critique to measure direct effects on polarisation.
6. Strengthening democratic deliberation requires attention to rhetorical structure alongside factual verification. Ridicule and hyperbole shape political meaning even when statements are not

empirically false. Addressing their cumulative effect remains central to sustaining inclusive and issue-centered electoral discourse in Nigeria.

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