

# Transculturalism and identity in cyberspace: A critical analysis of President Buhari's Facebook updates

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## Abstract

*The emergence of information and communication technology has overcome decades of restrictions in global communication. The social media in particular has resulted in hybridity of culture within the virtual sphere. While previous studies in the Nigerian virtual sphere have centered on identity construction, forms of social interaction and reproduction of resistance within the platform, this study within the framework of computer mediated discourse analysis and insights from Kraidy's model of critical transculturalism draws particular attention to transcultural practices within the digital sphere. It examines the discursive practices in Muhamadu Buhari's Facebook posts during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The Study adopted netnography to examine 100 updates posted within a four-month period. The social media is a strong platform for interplay of cultural practices. Communication within platform creates a hybrid identity that avails individuals the opportunity to see themselves and act in the light of other cultures. The virtual sphere, if properly harnessed, is a strong tool for transmission of political, educational and cultural contents.*

**Keywords:** Transculturalism, identity, hybridity, Facebook

## Introduction

The emergence of information and communication technologies has paved way for new trends toward achieving globalization. The world today is seen as a condensed entity with the convergence of commerce, education, entertainment amongst others. Technology is pervasive in our present society and its impacts especially in our daily interaction cannot be undermined.

Communication as a form of social interaction cannot be occluded from the social networks of human interaction and existence. Language whether verbal or non-verbal is the cohesive force that binds people together. The global network of computer provides a prevalent capacity for interactive communication without restrictions to time, space and culture. Within the sphere of global communication is culture, a notion that denotes a constellation of experiences, values, ideals, beliefs, judgment and attitudes that shape an individual (Cronin, 2015).

Earlier conceptions of culture were restricted to personal experiences and books. The advent of technology and computer mediated communication in particular, has broken the borders of cultural communication. Presently, it is easy for individuals to define and partake in other cultures. Radio, newspapers and the web especially the social media, has opened up new waves of intercultural communication which gradually transcends to a monolithic culture (Eigeataigh & Berg, 2010). Within the confines of computer mediated communication and social media in particular, the questions raised include:

1. What cultural values are manifest when individuals communicate?; and
2. How do these values interact with other values present in the system to reproduce new forms of identity?

This study, within the framework of critical transculturalism and computer mediated discourse analysis, draws particular attention to the virtual life of the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, in the Facebook community during his presidential campaign from 2014-2015. Nigeria as a nation, is a bundle of ethnic differences and culture emanating first from the various ethnic groups, and then the influence of western colonization. Its national identity therefore has to be discussed within the myriads of secular, religious, linguistic and political systems. The focus of this study concerns the discursive practices produced in Buhari's Facebook updates and comments and how they constitute a transcultural identity within a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria, and a global society like the social media.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With the continual explosion of information and communication technology, especially computer mediated communication, there is a shift from cultural practices within face-to-face communication to digital contexts. There is therefore a need to examine transcultural identities reproduced through discourse in social media platform. It is in this light that this paper is set to explore how technology helps to foster a monolithic identity in the face of complex cultures exhibited in the digital sphere.

### **Objectives**

The aim of this study is to examine the discursive practices of Buhari as product of transcultural identity. It is set to:

- Identify the discursive cultural practices in Facebook community;
- Examine how these practices help to create an identity for net speakers; and.
- Identify how social media especially Facebook help to foster transculturalism in a digital era.

### **Transculturalism and identity**

Identity can best be described as the set of beliefs and attitudes that make an individual or groups different from others. Classical studies of identity focused on issues of dominance and the clash produced in the mixture of cultures. On contemporary studies of identity Foucault wrote "the present epoch will above all be an epoch of space. We are in the epoch of juxtaposition" (1984, p.2). This led to a new conception of a new approach in examining identity in a contemporary society where one's identity is a product of the space through one travels rather than a product of one's cultural and natural values (Eigeataigh & Berg, 2010). The notion of identity is beyond the confines of ethnicity and individual culture but a blend of culture that transcends as a result of man's social interaction, and encounters with different cultures.

Eigeataigh and Berg (2010), contended that contemporary theories of culture in a bid to transcend the limitations of identity tend to focus on the present state as a multicultural rather than a monolithic society where multiple cultures cohabit in a single state. Although, the notion of multiculturalism and interculturalism were earlier used, Welsh (1999) advocated the use of a transculturalism as appropriate for the emerging forms of culture. Transculturalism is a contemporary conception of culture that examines the mutual intersection, penetration interweaving and overlap between cultures that cuts across various national and ethnic cultures (Rudi, 1994). While multiculturalism and interculturalism valued individual culture in a complex system (Epstein, 2009), transculturalism regards these cultures as a new inseparable system. transculturalism is characterized by hybridity and cultural fluidity; a situation where two or more cultures co-exist without forms of hegemony and dominance but merge to form a new identity that cannot be separated to their individual forms. This is the form of culture present in our society, a contemporary culture that disregards race, ethnicity as parameters of identification. One that is void of the 'us/them' disparity (Forysth, 2010).

### **Transculturalism in digital contexts**

Earlier modes of communication involved a physical presence. The emergence of digital communication especially computer mediated forms have paved way for a new form where communication involves virtual but a disembodied presence of the person visual or auditory (Barnajee & Germain, 2010). Technology is a material culture produced in a social process in a given institutional environment on the basis of the ideas, values, interests, and knowledge of their producers, both their early producers and their subsequent producers (Castels, 2013). It is suffice to say that in the virtual sphere,

individuals recreate borderless cultures and identity that is formed partly from their historical background and partly from the blend of cultures that are reproduced in virtual platforms.

Identity according to Goffman (1999) is a contextually related social front that is negotiated in face to face encounters with the aim of presenting a positive self-image. Although Goffman limits his description of identity to face to face encounter, the front also has a back which is one's private life where an individual is not bound by space, tradition, history and other cultural boundaries (Miller, 2011). Miller (2011) clearly defined identity in cyberspace as the exact opposite of face to face communication. Although individual cultures partly influence communication in this sphere, they are not overtly represented.

Digital sphere can be surmised as a cultural environment or context where the individual is constantly faced with a need to create his own social bonds. It is an expression of individualization, postnationalism and globalization (Deuze, 2006). Giddens (1991) cited in Miller (2011) described an individual in the virtual sphere as one who is free from such pre-determined life narratives such as class, religion, location and gender which were the determinants of an earlier culture. The individual in his daily interaction on the web with others is faced with the challenge of producing new narratives that can conform to the dynamics of the social media discourse. He is constantly in a transition where he continues to create and recreate himself in a bid to conform to his new way of life.

Olaniran (2001) described two forms of virtual space as those in groups where individual participants are in proximity and those where members interact from geographically dispersed locations. Facebook for instance occurs in dispersed locations and serves as a containment of culture. Communication in this context transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries. Olaniran (2001) further contended that with the presence of globalization a new identity which reflects a hybridization of existing cultures is gradually emerging.

In studying the virtual community, Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) examined identity construction on Facebook which suggested three modes of identity construction on Facebook: The self as a social actor, the cultural self which reveals the individual as a product of a particular culture and the explicit description of self in the above settings. The last description of identity is a representation of the self as a product of the networks of social contact and set of relations. It is only when an individual has embraced the flexibility that transcends cultural and national identity that they can be described as the transcultural self, a struggle between the individual and other culture (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008). The social media as a context allows individuals to participate in several frames that continue to brand and rebrand them as they come in contact with other cultures.

### **Critical transculturalism and computer mediated discourse analysis**

Critical transculturalism is a framework developed to examine cultural fusion as a social issue (Kraidy 2005). It conceives of a person's identity as a product of their ability to reproduce in the world they inhabit. If culture represents the meaning, ways of action and ways to evaluate actions in a society, critical transculturalism is thus the relationship that communication processes create between power and meaning in the context of cultural transformation. Kraidy (2005) defined transculturalism in terms of cultural hybridity. Critical transculturalism as a framework in its broad sense, examines how hybridity are imbalanced flows that excludes power and resistance and in a narrow sense, cultural practices of an individual and his attempt to refer to an original culture while trying to fit with other cultures (Cronin, 2015).

Herring (2007) identified two factors which influence computer mediated discourse as; medium and social factors. While the medium factors recognize the unique features of technological affordances, the social factors recognize the context which the social practice is instituted and includes information of participants and their relationship with other participants. Within Buhari's Facebook community, the role of the platform, the relationship between the platform, participants and other cultural factors is examined. Within the context of our study two levels of examining identity will be raised. At a micro level, national issues of identity such as religion, ethnicity and cultural norms raised within the platform will be discussed. At a macro level global issues such as economy, security as they constitute international issues.

## Methods

For the purpose of this study, the researcher used selected status updates from General Muhammadu Buhari's official Facebook, [www.facebook.com/muhammadubuhari](http://www.facebook.com/muhammadubuhari) page as its primary data. The choice of the data is influenced by the fact that Facebook is one of the most accessed forms of social media and is the most commonly used platform in Nigeria. The data involved Facebook updates collected in a 4 - month period from November 28, 2014 to March 13, 2015. Within this period, a total of 106 updates were posted and examined. The relevant data were collected through selective sampling and analysed. Only 10 of the updates are cited in this study. A total of 18295 comments were also sampled and 30 were selected purposefully based on their content. Only few were cited in this study. Updates from Buhari's Facebook page will be tagged P while comments will be tagged C.

### Data Analysis

Nigeria is a country with sociocultural differences emanating first from various ethnic groups and then from the influence of western colonization. Discursive practices in social media have to be discovered within and outside the myriads of secular, religious, linguistic and political systems.

## Findings

### Linguistic code

Language is not just a symbol of communication but a carrier of culture (Zue & Zuo, 2013). As a presidential aspirant, Buhari uses the English language as the medium of communication in the platform. Although a Nigerian of Hausa descent, he adopts a global language as a medium of communication. The Western culture through the dominance of the English language plays a major role in influencing cultural identities. In this context, aligning to the language of the cyberspace helps to build a transnational solidarity. Although English is the medium of communication in the platform, there are other cases where indigenous languages are used to connect the aspirant to his roots. Code switching to local language is helpful to form new strings of identity.

In P1 and P2, Buhari switches to an indigenous language to create an in-group affiliation. Other discourse participants also switch to local codes to conform to various ethnicities. The notion of cultural hybridity is thus manifest in this context to create a new form of identity for participants in the forum.

**P1:** Muhammadu Buhari January 09: Jookwa, (thank you) Ebonyi! Ndeewo, (well done) ndi Abia! The next President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria brings #Change to you today. (posted 09-01-15).

**P2:** Muhammadu Buhari January 16 · Achu'Benue a'wainya! Agba, Kogi! We bring the message of #Change to you today! #APCRally #GMB15 #ThingsMustChanges

**C1:** Lawal Usman Yan uwana yan nigeria muzabi shuga nagari a nigeria wato general muh.d buhari 2015 amatsayin shugaban kasar Nigeria. (posted 26-01 -14).

(My fellow Nigerians. Let's vote a leader of reputation in Nigeria. That is General Buhari in 2015 as president of our country Nigeria).

**C2:** Aliyu Musa: Zamu kasa kuma zamu tsare kuma zamu raka kuma zamu jira (posted 28-12-14). (We will vote and we will protect and we will wait)

**C3:** His name is Muhammadu Okechukwu Buhari (Ogbuagu 1 of Enyi in Aba, Abia State) Igbo kwenu! #FeBuhari14 ... Loading. (posted 09-01-15)

In Posts 1 and 2 above, the author aligns himself with different ethnic groups in the country. Greetings in the different languages above show a pre-existing knowledge of the cultural norms of the Nigerian people. As a political leader, it is necessary to be conversant with the people's culture, this is what is presented in the updates above. Using the linguistic codes of followers also creates an acceptance between the author and other members of the social media on one end and the society on the other end. C2 is a response to the ethnic representation portrayed by the updates above. Buhari is given an Igbo name by a netuser to confirm his alignment with the Igbo tribe.

## Religion

The cyberspace creates way for new ethnic and religious dimensions. However, the impact of the cyberspace on religious identity formation has received scarce attention. Within Buhari's communicative practice in the cyberspace, the genre of religion is represented as new means of identity construction both by Buhari and followers in the platform. Nigeria is characterized by the existence of different religious groups with cases of religious clashes between Christians and Muslims. Such strategies as intimate relationships and tolerance help to create a mutual ground for religious coexistence. In this regard, the discursive practices of Buhari as construed to cross boundaries and accommodate ideals and beliefs that help to create tolerant forms of identity.

P3: January 4 · Yesterday, with Governor Fashola and Pastor E.A. Adebayo at the Lagos State Annual Thanksgiving Service. [#GMB15](#)

P4: January 4 · I shared a few words at the Lagos Annual Thanksgiving Service: "All Nigerians must be free to worship God regardless of their beliefs. The job of government is security and peace not religion...."

P5: December 25, 2014 · Today is a time to remember that we are brothers & sisters, & we are stronger when we are together, when we reach out & care for each other

In the posts above, Buhari occludes himself from any form of religion. The importance of this practice lies in the need to present an affiliation that conforms to the rest of the world. In his new identity as a presidential aspirant, P6 is updated on December 25th, a special day for Christians while P3 is updated during a thanksgiving service. Buhari uses the medium to align with Christians in Nigeria and the rest of the world especially at a time when his country experiences cases of religious intolerance. His discursive practices serve as means of receiving global support for his ambition. The comment also shows an acceptance by members of the platform. C4 serves as a confirmation to his new identity; participants applaud his tolerance to the different religions in the country. While in the real society, Buhari is a Muslim, he maintains a neutral position in the virtual sphere; a position that helps him to blend completely with the different people in the web.

C4: Let be sincere with ourself <sup>[sic]</sup>, Buhari has <sup>[sic]</sup> an ardent Muslim has beaten all odd to attend a Christian gathering/ worship and service at many occasions in the Churches. But if I may ask how many time has Gej Worships with Muslim in any Mosque• I think this GMB deserves our commendations•[#GMB 2015 God willing•19](#) · January 4 at 10:45pm

## Humour

Humour is an integral part of the social media used for creating social relationships. Examples of humour include: teasing, dirty jokes, funny stories and hyperbolic expressions. These are used to negotiate attitudes, create inness as well as otherness (Zappavigna, 2012, p.151). For example, Buhari uses humour in the following post:

P6: Many thanks to my supporters for the [#BabaWhileYouWereGone](#) updates this weekend. They have made my day [#GladToBeBack](#) I am heartened to see that good humour and resolve rest deep in the hearts of those who seek Change. (posted 09-03-15)

C5: Buhari see what happened I told about 17 and they all slapped and scolded me. Plc <sup>[sic]</sup> help me with some money to visit the hospital. (posted 27-03-15)

Post 6 is a statement that elicits humour in the midst of hardship in the country. Buhari recognizes the role of humour in strengthening solidarity within the platform. Following his brief absence from the media scene earlier, he subtly restates the role of humour as part of their group norm. The use of humour also diverts the assumption that Buhari is stern especially with the fact that he was a military general. Humour here, serves as a ray of hope for the masses and portrays the aspirant as a flexible person who would interact with his followers on assumption of office.

C5 is a response to an update posted earlier. The comment is a sarcastic response to a '#tell your neighbour' directive that was earlier posted in the group. These forms of humour are used to strengthen communication within the group.

## Macro level

At the macro level, transnational issues are examined. The ability to form discursive identity in the presence of a global society is paramount in this context.

### **Gender equality**

Gender inequality is a global issue. Across the world, the issue of the girl child education and the role of the women in the society are extensively discussed. In Nigeria the problem of gender gap exists, with women occupying fewer positions at political, educational and economic sectors (Papa, 2016). As part of the millennium development goals, Buhari aligns with this global trend to publicly celebrate Nigerian women. This in turn helps to break the boundaries of gender inequality in the country and reiterates is commitment to pursuing issues of global interests.

**P7:** As we celebrate #IWD2015, I want to express my profound appreciation for all Nigerian women, especially my wife and daughters. They have been a constant of support for me, and I do my best every day to provide the same support for them. I also extend my gratitude to all the women who are taking our message of Change to all corners of the country.

**P8:** A nation where citizen's rights are not delivered as privileges and the cause to advance human life is paramount. Nigeria, it WILL happen. #ThingsWILLChange #GMB15 (Posted 18-03-15)

Social media is influential in tackling issues of gender (Loiseau & Nowacka, 2015) in P7, Buhari aligns with the global trend of the fight against gender disparity. The international women's day celebrates the social, economic, political and cultural achievements of women. Nigeria as a country is characterized with issues of gender disparity against women, as well as issues of human rights. Buhari through his discourse identifies with a transnational ideology of equal human rights.

**P9:** Today, our country faces three existential threats: insecurity disunity and corrupt leadership on all fronts... Nigeria is being attacked with vicious intensity....I am in politics to confront all these evils'. (Posted 28-11-14)

**P10:** The countless man hours that will be spent at petrol stations today will reduce our productivity as a nation. This should not be so...over the last several years our refineries have declined and we are at the mercy of imports. We must reject a system that has turned one of the one of the world's largest crude exporters into an importer of petrol. Things must change. GMB (posted 04-03-15).

Other global issues that were highlighted by Buhari's updates include; issues of insecurity, corruption and economy. In P9-10, Buhari stands with the nation and the world at large to battle these issues. Kraidy (2005) on the concept of corporate transculturalism explores global issues and hybrid cultural practices that are reproduced within these contexts which reiterate a commitment to improve the economy of the country.

## Conclusion

This paper concerned itself to transcultural practices in social media contexts. It examined particularly discursive practices of political actors in the virtual sphere. In a sense, it can be said that the social media plays an important role in fostering different forms of identity. The discursive practices of Muhammadu Buhari in our study, are governed by both cultural norms and those found in the media. In order to create a sense of identity, the aspirant carefully selects communicative practices that enable him to align with other members of the social community.

Unlike face to face contexts, social media allows the individual to align to different forms of cultures. The fact that the discourse in our study existed between a political actor and his followers, portray the role of social media in fostering political participation. Secondly, such transnational themes as economy, gender issues, security discussed in the study are global issues that show how the media is helping to realize a global society.

From our study, it is evident that cultural practices position the practices that are found in the social media. Also, within the social media is a new form of hybrid identity that tends to align with globalization. Regardless of the future development of information and technological affordances, it continues



to play a major role in providing a transcultural form of identity. This study is relevant to political actors as it helps to reveal the forms of social relationships found in the web. It also serves as insight to those who wish to use the platform for political mobilization. This study is also useful in intercultural studies as it helps to understand the dynamics of transcultural communications in digital contexts.

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