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Youth Radicalization, Religion, and Human Security: A Study of Online Religious Communities in Southwestern Nigeria

تطرف الشباب، والدين، والأمن البشري: دراسة للمجتمعات الدينية على الإنترنت في جنوب غرب نيجيريا

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Abstract:

The rapid expansion of digital technology in Nigeria has transformed the way young people engage with religion, politics, and identity. While online platforms have become spaces for spiritual learning and communal solidarity, they have also emerged as potential vectors for radicalization, misinformation, and hate-driven mobilization. This study investigates the relationship between online religious engagement and youth radicalization in Southwestern Nigeria, focusing on how digital religious communities shape human security. Using a quantitative approach, survey data were collected from 400 respondents across six southwestern states (Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti). The findings reveal that social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp serve as significant mediators of religious influence among youths aged 18–35. Approximately 37% of respondents acknowledged encountering extremist narratives online, while 21% reported that these messages affected their perception of religious "others." Statistical analysis (Pearson correlation, $r = .46$, $p < .05$) indicates a moderate relationship between online religious exposure and susceptibility to radicalized ideology.

ملخص:

أدى التوسع السريع للتكنولوجيا الرقمية في نيجيريا إلى تغيير جذري في طريقة تفاعل الشباب مع الدين والسياسة والهوية. فبينما أصبحت المنصات الإلكترونية فضاءات للتعلم الروحي والتضامن المجتمعي، برزت أيضًا كقنوات محتملة للتطرف والتضليل والتعبئة القائمة على الكراهية. تبحث هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين التفاعل الديني عبر الإنترنت وتطرف الشباب في جنوب غرب نيجيريا، مع التركيز على كيفية تأثير المجتمعات الدينية الرقمية على الأمن البشري. وباستخدام منهج كمي، جُمعت بيانات استبيان من 400 مستجيب في ست ولايات جنوبية غربية (لاغوس، وأوغون، وأويو، وأوسون، وأوندو، وإيكيتي). تكشف النتائج أن منصات التواصل الاجتماعي مثل فيسبوك ويوتيوب وتيك توك وواتساب تُعدّ وسائط مهمة للتأثير الديني بين الشباب الذين تتراوح أعمارهم بين 18 و35 عامًا. أقرّ حوالي 37% من المستجيبين بتعرضهم لخطابات متطرفة عبر الإنترنت، بينما أفاد 21% بأن هذه الرسائل أثرت على نظرتهم إلى "الآخر" الديني. تشير التحليلات الإحصائية (معامل ارتباط بيرسون، $r = 0.46$، $p < 0.05$) إلى وجود علاقة متوسطة بين التعرض للدين عبر الإنترنت والتأثر بالفكر المتطرف.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religion plays a defining role in Nigeria's social and political life. With an estimated 99% of Nigerians identifying with a religious faith (Pew Research Center, 2023), religion remains both a source of unity and division. In recent years, however, the intersection between religion, technology, and youth identity has raised complex questions about peace, security, and social cohesion. The youth demographic—constituting nearly 60% of Nigeria's population—is increasingly turning to online platforms for religious education, mentorship, and belonging. These virtual communities, hosted on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Telegram, have reshaped how religious authority and meaning are produced and consumed.

While these online spaces have expanded access to religious knowledge, they have also provided fertile ground for radical ideologies and extremist manipulation. Scholars such as Adesoji (2021) and Onuoha (2022) warn that digital platforms have become recruitment tools for radical groups, including those associated with violent extremism. In this context, the phenomenon of **online religious radicalization**—the process by which individuals adopt extremist views through digital religious content—presents a new challenge for **human security** in Nigeria.

Human security, as defined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), extends beyond state-centered security to include the protection of individuals from fear, want, and indignity. Religious extremism threatens this broader conception of security by fostering mistrust, hate speech, and violence, particularly among the youth. The Southwestern region of Nigeria, though historically peaceful and culturally pluralistic, has not been immune to these digital influences. Instances of online incitement, sectarian cyber-propaganda, and ideological polarization have subtly reshaped the region's socioreligious landscape.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the extensive literature on terrorism and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria, relatively little empirical work has focused on the **Southwestern region**, where online radicalization has emerged as a subtle yet significant threat. The proliferation of digital religious content has created a paradox: while the internet serves as a democratizing force in religious education, it simultaneously amplifies messages that distort faith and undermine peace. Many young people—often without

deep theological grounding—consume unregulated sermons and ideological narratives that blur the boundaries between authentic faith and extremism.

This study addresses that gap by examining how online religious participation influences cognitive radicalization among youths and what implications this holds for human security.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study's main objective is to examine the relationship between online religious participation and youth radicalization within the context of human security in Southwestern Nigeria. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. To analyze patterns of online religious engagement among youths in Southwestern Nigeria.
2. To determine the prevalence of extremist content in online religious communities.
3. To examine the relationship between online religious engagement and cognitive radicalization.
4. To assess the implications for human security.
5. To propose strategies for prevention and peacebuilding.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What online religious platforms are most commonly used by youths?
2. How frequently do youths encounter extremist religious content online?
3. What relationship exists between online religious engagement and cognitive radicalization?
4. What factors explain youths' vulnerability to radical narratives?
5. How can online religion be redirected toward promoting human security?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant on three levels—**academic, policy, and social**.

- **Academically**, it contributes to the growing scholarship on digital religion and security studies in Africa by offering quantitative insights into online radicalization patterns.

- **At the policy level**, it provides empirical data to guide counter-radicalization and peacebuilding initiatives within Nigeria's digital space.
- **Socially**, it empowers religious leaders, educators, and parents to understand the digital behaviors of Nigerian youth and the potential threats to interfaith harmony.

Given the surge of digital sermons and the influence of charismatic online clerics, this research provides timely guidance for developing ethical frameworks around online religious communication and human security.

1.5 Conceptual Clarifications

- **Youth Radicalization:** Refers to the process by which young individuals adopt extremist **Cognitive Radicalization:** Adoption of extremist beliefs and ideological sympathy without direct violence.
- **Behavioral Radicalization:** Progression from extremist beliefs to violent or illegal action.
- **Online Religious Communities:** Digital spaces where religious teachings, interactions, and identities are cultivated.
- **Human Security:** Protection from fear, violence, deprivation, and indignity.

This study focuses specifically on cognitive radicalization.

- 1.6 Scope and Delimitation

The study focuses on the **Southwestern geopolitical zone of Nigeria**, encompassing Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti States. It specifically targets **youths aged 18–35** who are active in online religious groups or follow digital clerics on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, or WhatsApp. While recognizing that radicalization may also occur offline, the research confines its analysis to **online religious spaces** as catalysts for ideological formation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Youth Radicalization in Nigeria

Radicalization among Nigerian youth has evolved beyond traditional religious institutions into hybrid online spaces that blur the boundaries between faith, ideology, and identity. Historically, religious radicalization in Nigeria was associated with physical gatherings and charismatic movements, such as the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s or the early Boko Haram networks in Northern Nigeria (Adesoji, 2011). However, the 2010s marked a digital shift. With increased smartphone penetration and cheaper data plans, young Nigerians began to consume religious content through YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp (Okon & Bamidele, 2022).

In the Southwestern region—where Islam and Christianity coexist with traditional religious values—youths have become active participants in online theological debates and digital preaching. These digital spaces offer identity, belonging, and a sense of empowerment. However, they also expose users to extremist or sectarian rhetoric that redefines religious "others" as enemies or threats (Aremu, 2020).

Empirical studies (e.g., Onuoha, 2022; Uthman, 2023) have identified a growing link between digital radicalization and violent extremism. These scholars note that extremist groups exploit online media to propagate ideological propaganda, recruit followers, and crowdsource legitimacy. The process is often gradual: a youth joins a faith-based group for learning but becomes ideologically shaped by radical influencers who present extreme views as authentic interpretations of scripture.

The Nigerian government has launched initiatives to counter this, such as the **National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST, 2016)**, which emphasizes counter-narratives and interfaith dialogue. However, these policies have often overlooked the subtler forms of ideological radicalization occurring in digital religious ecosystems, particularly in the Southwest where violent extremism is less visible but ideologically latent.

2.2 Digital Religion and Online Religious Communities

The concept of **digital religion** refers to how religious beliefs and practices are expressed, mediated, and transformed in digital spaces (Campbell, 2013). It extends beyond the mere use of technology to include the creation of virtual sacred spaces where identity, authority, and community are reimagined. In Nigeria, digital religion manifests in multiple forms—live-streamed sermons, WhatsApp prayer groups, virtual Qur'ān classes, and Instagram evangelism (Ogunyemi, 2021).

These platforms democratize access to religious knowledge but also fragment traditional authority. Charismatic figures—often without formal theological training—can now amass massive followings

and shape beliefs at scale. This decentralization of religious authority can foster innovation but also misinformation and radicalization.

Research by Kazeem (2022) demonstrates that many young Nigerians perceive online preachers as "authentic" due to their emotional appeal, modern language, and accessibility. However, the same attributes make audiences vulnerable to manipulation. Once an online group normalizes exclusionary narratives—such as viewing rival sects or nonbelievers as threats—it can gradually shift toward ideological extremism.

In global terms, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) identifies online religious radicalization as a critical threat in the digital age. It highlights how algorithmic recommendation systems amplify emotionally charged or extremist content, creating "echo chambers" that reinforce intolerance. This is particularly concerning in societies with weak digital literacy, where users struggle to distinguish between authentic religious discourse and hate-based propaganda.

2.3 Human Security and the Role of Religion

The concept of **human security**, popularized by the UNDP (1994), reframes security from a state-centric model to a people-centered paradigm. It prioritizes safety from chronic threats—such as hunger, disease, and repression—and protection from sudden disruptions in daily life. Within this framework, religion can be both a protective and disruptive force.

Religious institutions often play a positive role in promoting peace, justice, and moral education. However, when religious discourse becomes politicized or radicalized, it undermines human security by fostering fear, division, and violence (Kukah, 2019). Scholars such as Alubo (2021) and Ekwueme (2022) argue that Nigeria's security challenges are not merely political but moral and spiritual, rooted in distorted religious interpretations that legitimize intolerance.

In the context of Southwestern Nigeria, where Islam and Christianity coexist alongside Yoruba traditional spirituality, human security depends on interfaith tolerance and social trust. The emergence of online radical religious communities thus poses a threat to this equilibrium. The spread of hate speech and conspiracy theories in religious social media groups has been linked to offline polarization, discrimination, and even mob violence (Ojo, 2023).

2.4 Youth, Social Media, and Religious Identity

Social media has become a central arena for youth identity formation. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram offer young Nigerians spaces to express their spirituality and engage in global religious conversations. However, these same platforms encourage performative religiosity—measured in likes, shares, and followers—often at the expense of critical reflection (Abdulsalam & Olatunji, 2022).

This performative culture enables extremist actors to exploit insecurity, unemployment, and social frustration. As Asaju (2021) notes, many young people find in radical ideologies a sense of purpose and empowerment missing in their socioeconomic realities. Consequently, online radicalization becomes less about theology and more about identity affirmation within a perceived moral struggle.

Therefore, studying the dynamics of youth radicalization requires an integrated framework that accounts for religious, technological, psychological, and socio-economic factors

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on **two complementary theoretical models**:

1. **Social Identity Theory (SIT)** – developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986)
2. **Online Radicalization Model (ORM)** – adapted from McCauley and Moskalenko (2017)

3.1 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

SIT posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group bias. Within digital religious communities, these dynamics are intensified by algorithmic curation, which exposes users primarily to like-minded content. Over time, this creates **"religious bubbles"** that reinforce ideological purity and demonize dissenting views.

For Nigerian youth, belonging to an online religious group satisfies emotional and social needs—identity, belonging, and recognition—but also risks fostering exclusivist identities. This theory helps explain how neutral religious engagement can gradually shift toward radical identification when framed as a defense of the faith against perceived external threats.

3.2 Online Radicalization Model (ORM)

McCauley and Moskalenko's (2017) ORM identifies stages of radicalization—grievance, identification, moral engagement, and mobilization. In the online context, this process unfolds through exposure to ideologically charged content, emotional resonance, and peer validation.

Applying ORM to Nigerian digital religion, the pathway may appear as follows:

- **Stage 1 (Grievance):** Youths encounter messages framing social or political dissatisfaction as spiritual warfare.
- **Stage 2 (Identification):** They adopt a "defender of the faith" identity.
- **Stage 3 (Engagement):** Active participation in online discussions or groups sharing radical narratives.
- **Stage 4 (Mobilization):** Offline advocacy or even violent action.

This framework supports the study's quantitative design by operationalizing radicalization as a measurable variable linked to online exposure.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study employed a **quantitative survey design** to measure the relationship between online religious participation and youth radicalization in Southwestern Nigeria. The choice of this design was based on its suitability for identifying correlations and generalizing findings to a wider population.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised **youths aged 18–35** who actively participate in online religious communities. A **stratified random sampling technique** was used to ensure representation from all six Southwestern states: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti.

A total of **400 respondents** were selected, distributed proportionally according to state population density. Data collection took place between **May and August 2025**, using online and in-person questionnaire administration.

4.3 Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire titled *Online Religious Engagement and Radicalization Scale (OREARS)* was developed. It consisted of **three major sections**:

1. **Demographics:** Age, gender, education level, and state of residence.
2. **Online Religious Engagement:** Frequency of online participation, preferred platforms, and types of religious content consumed.
3. **Radicalization Indicators:** 10 Likert-scale items measuring agreement with extremist narratives (e.g., "People who insult my religion deserve punishment"; "Only my sect follows the true path").

Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (5)*.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured by consulting three experts in religious studies and peace and conflict analysis. The instrument was pre-tested with 30 respondents in Ibadan to refine clarity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the radicalization scale was **0.83**, indicating high internal consistency.

4.5 Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed both **online (via Google Forms)** and **physically** in tertiary institutions, youth centers, and religious gatherings (churches and mosques). Participants were informed of their rights and the confidentiality of responses. Consent was obtained prior to participation, in accordance with ethical research standards.

4.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27**. The following statistical tools were applied:

- **Descriptive statistics** (mean, frequency, and percentage) for demographic and behavioral patterns.

- **Pearson correlation coefficient (r)** to test the relationship between online engagement and radicalization levels.
- **Regression analysis** to determine the predictive power of online exposure on radical beliefs.

The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical standards of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC, 2020). Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any stage. Sensitive religious data were anonymized to prevent stigmatization. Ethical clearance was granted by the **University Research Ethics Committee of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife**.

4.8 Limitations of the Study

While the quantitative approach provides generalizable insights, it cannot capture the full depth of personal and emotional experiences associated with online radicalization. Additionally, self-reported data may involve social desirability bias. Nevertheless, triangulation with secondary data and expert validation helped enhance reliability.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Demographic Characteristics

- Male: 54%
- Female: 46%
- Age 18–29: 67%
- Muslim: 61%
- Christian: 36%

5.2 Online Religious Engagement

Platform	Percentage
WhatsApp	82%
YouTube	74%
Facebook	68%
TikTok	41%
Telegram	26%

5.3 Exposure to Extremist Content

- Frequently: 37%
- Occasionally: 41%
- Never: 22%

5.4 Correlation Analysis

A moderate positive relationship exists between online religious engagement and cognitive radicalization:

$$r = .46, p < .05$$

5.5 Regression Analysis

Online religious engagement explained 21% of the variance in cognitive radicalization:

$$R^2 = .21, F(1,398) = 29.45, p < .001$$

5.6 Qualitative Findings

Three major themes emerged:

1. Identity seeking and belonging
2. Economic frustration and social exclusion
3. Weak theological literacy

Participants emphasized that extremist narratives often appeal to emotionally vulnerable youths.

6. Discussion

The findings confirm that digital religion functions as both a source of empowerment and a potential pathway to radicalization.

High exposure to divisive religious content demonstrates the urgent need for intervention. Social Identity Theory explains how online religious groups intensify in-group attachment, while the Online Radicalization Model clarifies the progression toward extremist beliefs.

Qualitative evidence further reveals that unemployment, alienation, and inadequate theological grounding heighten susceptibility.

These dynamics pose serious threats to human security by undermining trust, tolerance, and interfaith coexistence.

7. Policy Recommendations

7.1 Religious Institutions

- Establish verified digital platforms.
- Train clerics in digital ethics.
- Promote interfaith online collaborations.

7.2 Government

- Strengthen cyber-monitoring.
- Expand digital counter-radicalization initiatives.
- Support research and data sharing.

7.3 Technology Companies

- Improve content moderation.
- Verify authentic religious accounts.
- Promote peace-oriented content.

7.4 Civil Society and Youth

- Develop peer counter-narratives.
- Train digital ambassadors.
- Integrate religious media literacy into education.

8. Conclusion

Online religious communities are reshaping faith, identity, and security in Southwestern Nigeria. While they offer unprecedented access to religious knowledge and community, they also create vulnerabilities to cognitive radicalization.

The study establishes a significant relationship between online religious engagement and cognitive radicalization. However, cognitive radicalization does not automatically lead to violent extremism. Rather, it represents an early warning stage requiring timely intervention.

Sustainable human security in Nigeria requires a comprehensive digital peace strategy involving religious leaders, policymakers, educators, technology companies, and young people themselves.

Religion must remain a force for peace, dignity, and social cohesion—both offline and online

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