

Pauline Speech Ethics in Nigeria's Digital Public Sphere: An Exegetical Reading of Ephesians 4 on Hate Speech and Trolling

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how the ethical instructions of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 can inform Christian responses to hate speech and trolling in Nigerian social media. It addresses the limited engagement between New Testament ethics and scholarship on digital communication in Nigeria by interpreting Pauline teachings on peace, anger, speech, and reconciliation within a contemporary digital context. **Methodology:** The study employs a qualitative library research design using historical-critical exegesis. The primary textual data consist of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 in the *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed.). The analysis integrates textual, grammatical, lexical, literary, and socio-historical examination of the selected passages, supported by major exegetical commentaries, Greek lexicons, and peer-reviewed scholarship on hate speech, trolling, and digital communication in Nigeria. The exegetical findings are subsequently related to contemporary digital speech through principled normative application. **Findings:** The analysis identifies four interrelated Pauline principles. Ephesians 4:3 frames peacemaking as an intentional and sustained communal responsibility; Ephesians 4:26 acknowledges anger while imposing ethical limits on its escalation and duration; Ephesians 4:29 rejects *logos sapos* ("corrupt" or "harmful speech") and replaces it with speech oriented toward *oikodomē* ("edification"); and Ephesians 4:32 presents kindness, compassion, and gracious forgiveness as practices of reconciliation. Together, these principles offer a coherent ethical framework for evaluating forms of online communication characterised by hostility, provocation, degradation, and prolonged conflict. **Implications:** The findings suggest that Pauline speech ethics can provide a theological resource for Christian digital literacy, pastoral formation, and constructive online engagement in Nigeria. The framework complements socio-legal and computational approaches by foregrounding moral responsibility, relational repair, and the effects of speech on communities. As a normative exegetical study, however, it does not establish the actual behavioural effects of these principles on social media users. **Originality:** This study contributes to New Testament ethics and digital religion scholarship by systematically relating Ephesians 4 to contemporary hate speech and trolling in the Nigerian digital public sphere. It extends Pauline ethical interpretation beyond ecclesial communication to the field of digital media ethics and provides an African-contextual application of biblical speech ethics.

Keywords: Digital Ethics; Ephesians 4; Hate Speech; Nigeria; Pauline Ethics; Trolling

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed public communication, civic engagement, and religious interaction in Nigeria. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram have become important arenas for political mobilisation, cultural expression, community formation, and religious discourse among Nigeria's estimated 122 million internet users (Ajaegbu & Ajaegbu, 2024; Chiadika, Egielewa, & Akpor, 2025). Their capacity to support real-time and asynchronous communication enables users to create, circulate, and respond to content across geographic and social boundaries (Bayer, Tri u, & Ellison, 2020; Yang & Feng, 2024). In this sense, social media extend

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the participatory communication logic associated with Web 2.0 by allowing users to function simultaneously as producers, distributors, and consumers of public discourse (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

At the same time, the communicative affordances of social media have intensified concerns about hate speech, trolling, and other forms of harmful digital interaction. In Nigeria, these practices intersect with political competition, ethnic diversity, religious pluralism, and social tension, creating conditions in which inflammatory and dehumanising language can circulate rapidly and acquire significant public visibility (Ayeni & Ibileye, 2024; Nwankpa, Ezeji, Nweke, & Dennis, 2024). The 2023 Nigerian general elections illustrate this problem, as Facebook and X became important spaces for the circulation of ethnically and religiously charged messages capable of deepening political polarization (Chiadika et al., 2025; Nwankpa et al., 2024). Similar dynamics are visible in episodes of online harassment surrounding public figures, where trolling can develop into sustained campaigns of verbal aggression (Ayeni & Ibileye, 2024). Social media are therefore not only infrastructures of participation but also environments in which hostility, misinformation, and dehumanising discourse may be intensified (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022).

Existing scholarship on the three key phenomena undergirding this study, social media, hate speech, and trolling, provides the scientific foundation from which the research gap emerges. Social media, as defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and refined by Aichner et al. (2021), designates web-based platforms built on Web 2.0 technologies that enable large-scale user-generated content creation, curation, and exchange; in Nigeria, these platforms have become central arenas for political engagement, business promotion, and religious interaction, but their communicative architecture, characterised by anonymity, virality, and the collapse of traditional gatekeeping functions, simultaneously creates structural conditions that amplify destructive speech (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021; Yang & Feng, 2024). Hate speech, as defined by the United Nations (2019), encompasses communication that attacks persons or groups on the basis of religion, ethnicity, race, nationality, or gender using derogatory language; Van Dijk (2008) situates it within a broader discourse-analytical framework as the systematic misrepresentation of social facts to denigrate out-groups, while Naseem, Razzak, and Eklund (2021) and Ayoola and Adewuya (2025) have empirically documented its multi-register operation, ethnic, religious, and political across Nigerian social media platforms, particularly during electoral cycles. Online trolling, while distinct from hate speech, functions as its principal dissemination mechanism: March and Marrington (2019) define it as the deliberate posting of offensive or manipulative content designed to provoke emotional reactions, driven by the psychological affordances of anonymity, and in the Nigerian context, it has been identified as the vehicle through which political actors deploy coordinated harassment campaigns against opponents, journalists, and civil society figures (Ayeni & Ibileye, 2024; Shola, Deji, & Abiodun, 2021).

Against this body of empirical and conceptual scholarship, three intersecting fields of inquiry are directly relevant to the present study: The first exegetical studies of Ephesians 4, which have extensively analysed Paul's ethics of communal unity, anger, and speech (Arnold, 2011; Fowl, 2012; Hoehner, 2002; Thielman, 2010), but have not applied these findings to digital communication contexts; second studies of Christian and Pauline ethics in contemporary social settings, which have addressed forgiveness (Cornelius, 2021), religious pluralism in public administration (Ezeudu & Saadu, 2025), and digital extremism (Syamsurrijal, Nurmandi, Jubba, Hidayati, & Hariyanto, 2024), but have not systematically engaged the specific phenomena of hate speech and trolling in Africa; and third empirical studies of hate speech and trolling in Nigerian social media (Ayeni & Ibileye, 2024; Nwankpa et al., 2024; Shola et al., 2021), which have predominantly adopted sociolinguistic, political-science, and computational frameworks without

engaging theological or exegetical resources. The convergence of these three fields defines a significant and productive lacuna: no published study has brought the exegetical resources of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 to bear systematically on the problem of hate speech and trolling in Nigerian social media spaces, leaving both the biblical ethics literature and the Nigerian digital communication literature impoverished by their mutual isolation.

The gap this study addresses is twofold. First, while the empirical literature on hate speech and trolling in Nigeria is substantial, theological and specifically exegetical perspectives on these phenomena remain absent from the scholarly conversation. Second, while Pauline ethics has been applied to various contemporary social challenges, its application to digital communication ethics, particularly in African contexts, is nascent. Cornelius (Cornelius, 2021) provides a valuable treatment of forgiveness in Ephesians, and Ezeudu and Saadu (Ezeudu & Saadu, 2025) address religious pluralism in Nigerian public administration, but neither study systematically connects New Testament ethics to digital speech behaviour. This study fills this gap by conducting a rigorous exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 and, from it, developing a normative framework for evaluating and addressing hate speech and trolling on Nigerian social media.

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in Pauline ethics as elaborated through the historical-critical method of biblical hermeneutics. Pauline ethics, as a field, examines the moral norms embedded in Paul's letters as responses to the concrete social challenges facing early Christian communities (Fowl, 2012; Thielman, 2010). The historical-critical method operationalises this inquiry by reconstructing the original linguistic, literary, and socio-historical contexts of Pauline texts to recover their intended meaning and then, by principled analogical reasoning, to apply those meanings to contemporary ethical problems (Arnold, 2011; Hoehner, 2002). In this study, the method proceeds through four sequential stages: (1) textual-grammatical analysis of the Greek New Testament, (2) lexicological analysis of key terms, (3) historical-contextual analysis of the Ephesian community, and (4) normative application to the Nigerian digital context. This framework positions Ephesians 4 not as an abstract doctrinal text but as a practical ethics of communal communication, directly relevant to contemporary challenges of digital speech.

Against this background, the study addresses the following research questions: What are the exegetical meanings of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 within their historical, literary, and grammatical context? How do Paul's ethical principles in these verses specifically address the phenomena of hate speech and online trolling in Nigerian social media environments? The study accordingly aims to: (1) analyse the selected passages using the historical-critical method; (2) establish the exegetical meaning and theological significance of each verse; and (3) apply the resulting ethical principles to the challenges of hate speech and trolling in contemporary Nigerian social media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative library research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) framed within the paradigm of exegetical biblical scholarship. Library research here denotes a systematic, source-based inquiry that draws on primary textual data and a curated body of secondary scholarly literature rather than field-based empirical data collection. The specific methodological approach is historical-critical exegesis, an established and widely employed method in New Testament studies that seeks to reconstruct the original meaning of biblical texts through rigorous analysis of their linguistic, literary, and socio-historical dimensions (Hayes & Holladay, 2022). The study

proceeded deductively, moving from the exegetical findings of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 to their normative implications for digital speech behaviour in contemporary Nigeria.

Primary data consisted of the Greek text of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 as contained in the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece (28th edition), the critical edition of the Greek New Testament adopted as the standard in contemporary New Testament scholarship. The selection of these four verses was governed by their shared thematic concern with communal speech ethics, including peacemaking (v. 3), emotional regulation (v. 26), speech quality (v. 29), and interpersonal reconciliation (v. 32) and their constitutive role in Paul's ethical instruction to the Ephesian community.

Secondary data sources comprised: (1) major exegetical commentaries on Ephesians (Arnold, 2011; Fowl, 2012; Hoehner, 2002; Thielman, 2010; Witherington, 2007); (2) Greek lexicons and concordances, specifically the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (BDAG) Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance (Strong, 1996); (3) peer-reviewed articles from Scopus-indexed journals addressing Pauline theology, New Testament ethics, and digital communication in Nigeria; and (4) primary policy documents, including the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (United Nations, 2019). Inclusion criteria for secondary sources required direct relevance to either (a) Ephesians 4 exegesis and Pauline ethics, (b) hate speech and/or trolling in digital environments, or (c) the Nigerian social media context. Exegetical commentaries published before 2020 were retained as foundational theoretical resources, consistent with standard practice in biblical scholarship.

Relevant secondary literature was identified through systematic searches of Scopus, ATLA Religion Database, and Google Scholar, using the search strings: "Ephesians 4 exegesis," "Pauline ethics digital," "hate speech Nigeria social media," "trolling online behaviour," and "Biblical communication ethics." Sources published within the five-year window of 2020–2025 were prioritised for empirical and contextual literature, while foundational exegetical commentaries were accessed regardless of publication date. A total of 48 sources meeting the inclusion criteria were incorporated into the study.

The analysis of the primary textual data proceeded through five sequential stages constituting the historical-critical exegetical method as operationalised in this study: Textual Analysis: Identification of the Greek text of each verse and notation of any textually significant variants in the manuscript tradition. Grammatical and Lexicological Analysis: Parsing of key verbal and nominal forms; examination of mood, voice, tense, case, and number; lexical analysis of significant terms using BDAG and Liddell-Scott. Literary-Contextual Analysis: Examination of each verse within the literary structure of Ephesians 4, including its intertextual relationships with the Psalms and the Colossian parallel. Historical-Contextual Analysis: Reconstruction of the socio-historical setting of the Ephesian community and its bearing on Paul's ethical instructions, drawing on historical scholarship regarding first-century Ephesus. Normative Application: Principled analogical reasoning from the exegetical findings to the contemporary Nigerian digital context, identifying points of structural and ethical correspondence between the challenges of the Ephesian community and those of Nigerian social media users.

This study was conducted in accordance with standard principles of academic integrity. All sources were accurately cited and attributed. As the study involved no human participants, no

institutional ethics review was required. The interpretation of biblical texts was undertaken with scholarly rigour and respect for the diversity of scholarly opinion within New Testament studies.

RESULTS

The authorship of Ephesians remains one of the most debated questions in Pauline scholarship. The letter explicitly identifies Paul as its author in Ephesians 1:1 and has historically been received within the Pauline corpus (Jung, 2020). Traditional scholarship generally accepts Pauline authorship, whereas a number of modern critical scholars question this attribution on the basis of differences in vocabulary, literary style, ecclesiology, and theological development when compared with the undisputed Pauline letters (Thielman, 2010; Yinger, 2011). Although this debate remains unresolved, it does not substantially alter the present study's exegetical focus, which concerns the ethical discourse embodied in the canonical text of Ephesians. Whether understood as directly Pauline or as emerging from a later Pauline tradition, the letter represents an important expression of Pauline theological and ethical thought. Under the traditional Pauline-authorship hypothesis, its composition is commonly associated with Paul's Roman imprisonment around AD 60–62 and is situated alongside the other so-called prison epistles (Witherington, 2007).

The socio-historical setting of Ephesus is equally important for interpreting the letter's ethical concerns. Ephesus was a major metropolitan centre in the Roman province of Asia, distinguished by commercial activity, cultural diversity, and religious plurality. The city included a substantial Jewish presence and an established synagogue community (Millar, 1987; Topal, 2020). It was also closely associated with the cult of Artemis, whose temple functioned not only as a major religious institution but also as an important centre of pilgrimage, civic identity, and economic activity (Casadio & Johnston, 2021; McMurtry, 2019). Such a plural and socially complex environment provides an important backdrop for understanding the letter's repeated emphasis on unity, communal cohesion, ethical conduct, and the regulation of interpersonal relationships.

The church in Ephesus was first established under the Apostle Paul's leadership for approximately three years, before Timothy assumed pastoral responsibility (Stephens, 2018). Being a congregation within a cosmopolitan urban environment, it confronted competing theological influences, including false teaching from within the community itself (LaFosse, 2012). The letter to the Ephesians addresses this context through two complementary movements: the first three chapters establish the theological foundation of the church's identity in Christ, while chapters four through six translate this theology into an ethics of communal life. Chapter 4 is therefore the pivotal ethical hinge of the letter, translating the indicative of divine grace into the imperative of communal conduct, including, centrally, the ethics of speech, anger, and interpersonal relations.

Within this literary structure, Ephesians 4 functions as a major transition from theological affirmation to ethical instruction. The opening exhortation to "walk worthy" of the calling received (4:1) introduces a sustained concern with the conduct required of the community. Unity, peace, anger, speech, compassion, and forgiveness emerge as interconnected ethical themes rather than isolated moral commands. The selected passages, therefore, belong to a coherent section concerned with maintaining communal relationships through disciplined dispositions and communicative practices. Their placement within this broader literary movement is essential for interpreting

Paul's speech ethics: the commands concerning anger and language are grounded in a prior theological vision of communal unity and culminate in practices of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

From this perspective, Ephesians 4 presents communication as an integral dimension of communal ethics. Speech is not treated as morally neutral but as a practice capable of sustaining or damaging the community's social bonds. The movement from preserving "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3), through the regulation of anger (4:26) and the prohibition of corrupt speech (4:29), to the cultivation of kindness and forgiveness (4:32) establishes the literary and ethical sequence within which the subsequent exegetical analysis must be read.

Exegetical Findings of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32

Greek Text and English Translation of the Selected Verses

The exegetical analysis focuses on four passages in Ephesians 4 that address interconnected dimensions of communal ethics: unity, anger, speech, and reconciliation. The Greek text serves as the primary textual basis for the grammatical and lexical analysis developed in the following subsections. The selected passages are presented below, together with the English renderings used in this study.

σπουδάζοντες τηρεῖν τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος ἐν τῷ συνδέσμῳ τῆς εἰρήνης "Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

ὀργίζεσθε καὶ μὴ ἁμαρτάνετε· ὁ ἥλιος μὴ ἐπιδυέτω ἐπὶ τῷ παροργισμῷ ὑμῶν "Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26).

πᾶς λόγος σαπρὸς ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν μὴ ἐκπορευέσθω, ἀλλ' εἴ τις ἀγαθὸς πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν τῆς χρείας, ἵνα δῶ χάριν τοῖς ἀκούουσιν "Let no corrupt speech come out of your mouths, but only what is good for building up according to need, so that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).

γίνεσθε δὲ εἰς ἀλλήλους χρηστοί, εὐσπλαγχοί, χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς, καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

These passages form a coherent ethical sequence within Ephesians 4. Verse 3 establishes the responsibility to preserve communal unity through peace; verse 26 regulates the expression and duration of anger; verse 29 addresses the ethical quality and communal effects of speech; and verse 32 presents kindness, compassion, and forgiveness as restorative dispositions within communal relationships. These textual relationships provide the basis for the verse-by-verse exegetical analysis that follows.

Ephesians 4:3: Intentional Maintenance of Unity and Peace

Ephesians 4:3 opens with the present active participle *σπουδάζοντες* (*spoudazontes*), derived from *σπουδάω* (*spoudazō*), a verb that carries the senses of being diligent, making every effort, or showing earnest commitment (BDAG, s.v. *σπουδάω*). Strong (1996) similarly records the term with meanings such as "endeavour," "be diligent," and "give diligence." Within the literary sequence

of Ephesians 4:1–3, the participle elaborates the manner in which the community is expected to live in a way worthy of its calling. The term, therefore, conveys deliberate and sustained effort rather than a casual or occasional concern for communal harmony.

The object of this effort is expressed by the infinitive *τηρεῖν* (*tērein*), “to keep,” “maintain,” or “preserve,” followed by *τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος* (*tēn henotēta tou pneumatos*), “the unity of the Spirit.” The lexical choice is significant. The community is not instructed to create unity from nothing but to preserve a unity already grounded in the Spirit. The community's ethical responsibility, consequently, lies in safeguarding an existing relational reality against practices that can produce fragmentation. This distinction places human ethical action within a theological framework: unity has a divine foundation, while its practical preservation requires continuing communal responsibility.

The phrase *ἐν τῷ συνδέσμῳ τῆς εἰρήνης* (*en tō syndesmō tēs eirēnēs*), “in the bond of peace,” further defines the means through which such unity is maintained. The noun *σύνδεσμος* (*syndesmos*) denotes that which binds or holds separate parts together and can carry the concrete sense of a bond, fastening, or ligament. Its metaphorical use, therefore, presents peace not merely as the absence of open conflict but as a relational force that holds the community together. A comparable use occurs in Colossians 3:14, where love is described as a binding principle of communal completeness (Wright, 2020).

The immediate literary context strengthens this interpretation. Ephesians 4:2 precedes the exhortation with humility, gentleness, patience, and mutual forbearance, while verses 4–6 subsequently emphasise the community's shared identity through the repeated language of “one body,” “one Spirit,” “one hope,” “one Lord,” “one faith,” and “one baptism.” The command to maintain unity in verse 3, therefore, occupies a transitional position between interpersonal virtues and the theological foundations of communal oneness. Unity is simultaneously grounded in shared religious identity and maintained through concrete relational practices.

Hoehner (2002) and Thielman (2010) accordingly interpret the verse as emphasising active responsibility for preserving Spirit-given unity. The force of *σπουδάζοντες* rules out an understanding of peace as mere passivity or avoidance of disagreement. Instead, maintaining unity requires intentional ethical effort, whereas *σύνδεσμος τῆς εἰρήνης* identifies peace as the relational condition that sustains communal cohesion. Ephesians 4:3 can therefore be summarised as establishing intentional peacemaking and the active preservation of communal unity as foundational elements of Pauline communal ethics.

Exegetical Analysis of Ephesians 4:26: Anger, Restraint, and Timely Resolution

Ephesians 4:26 presents a grammatically and ethically complex instruction concerning anger. The opening clause, *ὀργίζεσθε καὶ μὴ ἁμαρτάνετε* (*orgizesthe kai mē hamartanete*, “Be angry and do not sin”), echoes Psalm 4:4 in the Septuagint and has generated considerable exegetical debate concerning the force of the imperative *ὀργίζεσθε*. The construction may be read as a genuine imperative that acknowledges a legitimate form of anger or, alternatively, in a concessive sense: “If you become angry, do not sin” (Arnold, 2011; Hoehner, 2002). Hoehner (2002) and Arnold (2011) favour the latter reading, interpreting the verse primarily as an acknowledgement of anger as a human response rather than as a positive command to become angry. Thielman (2010), however,

allows greater scope for an imperatival reading in which anger directed toward wrongdoing or injustice may be morally permissible, provided that it remains subject to ethical restraint.

Regardless of the precise force assigned to the opening imperative, the second half of the verse places an unmistakable boundary on anger:

ὁ ἥλιος μὴ ἐπιδύετω ἐπὶ τῷ παροργισμῷ ὑμῶν

“Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26).

The noun *παροργισμός* (*parorgismos*) refers to anger, provocation, or an intensified state of irritation. In the immediate literary context, the temporal expression concerning sunset indicates that anger is not to be allowed to persist indefinitely. The image of sunset functions rhetorically as a boundary against the prolongation of hostility. Paul's concern is therefore not limited to the initial emotional response but extends to what anger may become when it is sustained and left unresolved.

This reading is reinforced by the following verse, which warns the community not to “give an opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:27). Read together, verses 26–27 suggest that unresolved anger creates conditions in which communal relationships may deteriorate further. The ethical logic moves from the recognition of anger to its restraint and eventual resolution. Anger may arise within communal life, but it must not become an enduring disposition that produces further wrongdoing or division.

The exegetical finding of Ephesians 4:26 can therefore be expressed as a threefold pattern of recognition, restraint, and resolution. The verse recognises the reality of anger, establishes a moral boundary against its sinful expression, and imposes a temporal limit on its continuation. Rather than presenting emotional suppression as the ethical ideal, the text emphasises disciplined regulation of anger in the interest of preserving communal relationships.

Exegetical Analysis of Ephesians 4:29: Corrupt and Edifying Speech

Ephesians 4:29 provides the clearest and most explicit instruction concerning speech among the selected passages. The verse begins with a negative prohibition:

πᾶς λόγος σαπρὸς ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν μὴ ἐκπορευέσθω

“Let no corrupt speech come out of your mouths.” (Ephesians 4:29).

The key expression is *λόγος σαπρός* (*logos sapros*). The adjective *σαπρός* originally denotes something rotten, spoiled, or decayed and is used in reference to deteriorated material such as fruit. When applied metaphorically to speech, however, it carries the sense of language that is corrupt, harmful, unwholesome, worthless, or morally degrading (BDAG, s.v. *σαπρός*; Hoehner, 2002). The combination of *πᾶς* (“every”) with the negative construction *μὴ ἐκπορευέσθω* (“must not come out”) gives the prohibition a comprehensive force: speech possessing a corrupting or destructive quality is excluded from the communicative life envisioned for the community.

The verse does not stop with a prohibition. Paul immediately introduces a positive alternative through the contrastive conjunction *ἀλλά* (“but”):

ἀλλ’ εἴ τις ἀγαθὸς πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν τῆς χρείας, ἵνα δῶ χάριν τοῖς ἀκούουσιν

“But only what is good for building up according to need, so that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29).

The adjective *ἀγαθός* (*agathos*, “good”) is further qualified by the phrase *πρὸς οἰκοδομήν* (*pros oikodomēn*, “for building up” or “for edification”). The noun *οἰκοδομή* literally refers to construction or house-building, but in Pauline usage it frequently functions metaphorically to denote the strengthening and development of persons and communities. The contrast between *λόγος σαπρός* and *οἰκοδομή* therefore, establishes two opposing communicative possibilities: speech may either deteriorate communal relationships or contribute to their constructive formation (Hoehner, 2002; Witherington, 2007)

The phrase *τῆς χρείας* (“according to need”) adds an important contextual dimension to this ethical instruction. Appropriate speech is not defined only by general moral qualities but also by its responsiveness to the particular needs of a communicative situation. The final purpose clause, *ἵνα δῶ χάριν τοῖς ἀκούουσιν* (“so that it may give grace to those who hear”), further shifts the ethical focus from the intentions of the speaker to the effects of speech upon its recipients. In this formulation, communication is evaluated not simply by what the speaker wishes to express, but by whether it contributes positively to those who receive it.

Ephesians 4:29 thus establishes a twofold Pauline ethic of communication: the rejection of speech that corrupts, demeans, or damages, and the cultivation of speech that builds up, responds appropriately to communal needs, and benefits its hearers. The exegetical significance of the verse lies in this movement from prohibition to constructive responsibility. Speech is treated as a relational and communal act whose ethical value is determined by its capacity to either damage or strengthen social relationships. This distinction provides the textual foundation for the later discussion of hate speech and trolling as contemporary forms of destructive digital communication.

Exegetical Analysis of Ephesians 4:32: Kindness, Compassion, and Forgiveness

Ephesians 4:32 concludes the chapter's ethical sequence by presenting a set of positive relational dispositions that stand in contrast to the bitterness, anger, hostility, and harmful speech rejected in the preceding verse. The instruction is introduced by the present imperative *γίνεσθε* (*ginesthe*, “be” or “become”), followed by two predicate adjectives, *χρηστοί* (*chrēstoi*, “kind”) and *εὐσπλαγχνοί* (*eusplanchnoi*, “tenderhearted” or “compassionate”), and the participle *χαριζόμενοι* (*charizomenoi*, “forgiving” or “graciously extending forgiveness”):

γίνεσθε δὲ εἰς ἀλλήλους χρηστοί, εὐσπλαγχνοί, χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς, καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

The adjective *χρηστός* (*chrēstos*) denotes kindness, goodness, or benevolence expressed toward others. In the context of Ephesians 4, kindness is not merely a polite disposition but part of a broader pattern of communal conduct aimed at maintaining constructive relationships. Fowl (2012) accordingly interprets kindness in this passage as an ethical orientation characterised by goodwill and practical concern for others.

The second term, *εὐσπλαγχνος* (*eusplanchnos*), denotes tenderheartedness or compassion. Its semantic background is associated with *σπλάγχνα* (*splanchna*), literally the inward parts or

viscera, which came to function metaphorically as the seat of deep emotion and affection. The term, therefore, emphasises an affective orientation toward others rather than the act of forgiveness itself. This distinction is important because compassion and forgiveness represent related but lexically distinct dimensions of the ethical instruction.

The act of forgiveness is expressed by *χαριζόμενοι* (*charizomenoi*), a present middle participle derived from *χαρίζομαι* (*charizomai*), which carries the sense of giving freely, showing favour, or graciously forgiving. The lexical connection with *χάρις* ("grace") is particularly significant: forgiveness is represented as an act of gracious release rather than merely the suspension of hostility. The participial construction further presents forgiving as an ongoing practice accompanying the imperative to "be" kind and compassionate.

The theological basis of this interpersonal ethic is provided by the concluding comparative clause:

καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν

"As God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

The conjunction *καθὼς* ("as" or "just as") establishes divine forgiveness as the model and theological ground for human forgiveness. The same verbal root appears in *χαριζόμενοι* and *ἐχαρίσατο*, creating a lexical correspondence between the forgiveness expected within the community and the forgiveness attributed to God in Christ. Human reconciliation is therefore not presented merely as an interpersonal strategy but as an ethical response patterned after divine action (Arnold, 2011; Cornelius, 2021).

The plural forms throughout the verse are also significant. The imperative *γίνεσθε* and the expressions *εἰς ἀλλήλους* ("toward one another") and *ἐαυτοῖς* ("one another") locate kindness, compassion, and forgiveness within reciprocal communal relationships. These virtues are therefore not simply private moral qualities but practices expected to characterise the community as a whole.

Ephesians 4:32 thus completes the ethical movement developed throughout the selected passages. Whereas verse 3 emphasises the preservation of unity, verse 26 regulates anger, and verse 29 distinguishes destructive from constructive speech, verse 32 identifies kindness, compassion, and gracious forgiveness as restorative practices that sustain communal relationships. The verse, therefore, establishes relational restoration through kindness, compassion, and forgiveness grounded in the divine example as the concluding principle of the selected Pauline ethical sequence.

The analysis of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 reveals an interconnected ethical structure rather than four isolated moral instructions. The selected passages move from the preservation of communal unity to the regulation of anger, the ethical evaluation of speech, and finally the restoration of relationships through kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Table 1 summarises the principal lexical and exegetical findings emerging from the analysis.

Table 1. Summary of the Exegetical Findings of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32

Verse	Key Terms	Greek	Lexical Meaning	Exegetical Finding
Ephesians 4:3	σπουδάζοντες; σύνδεσμος τῆς εἰρήνης		Making every effort; bond of peace	Spirit-given unity requires intentional and continuing preservation through peace.
Ephesians 4:26	ὀργίζεσθε; παροργισμός		Be angry; anger, provocation, or sustained irritation	Anger is acknowledged but must be restrained from sinful escalation and prolonged hostility.
Ephesians 4:29	λόγος σαπρός; οἰκοδομή		Corrupt or harmful speech; building up or edification	Destructive speech is rejected and replaced by communication that responds to need and benefits hearers.
Ephesians 4:32	χρηστοί; εὐσπλαγχνοί; χαριζόμενοι		Kind; compassionate/tenderhearted; graciously forgiving	Communal relationships are to be restored through kindness, compassion, and forgiveness modeled on divine forgiveness in Christ.

Source: Authors' exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32.

These findings reveal a coherent Pauline ethic of communal communication organised around four interrelated principles: intentional preservation of unity, disciplined regulation of anger, constructive use of speech, and restorative interpersonal conduct. The progression is significant because Paul's ethical concern extends beyond the prohibition of harmful behaviour. The passages move toward a positive vision of communal life in which speech and interpersonal responses are evaluated according to their capacity to preserve, strengthen, and restore relationships.

Discussion

The exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:3, 26, 29, and 32 yielded four principal findings directly relevant to the phenomena of hate speech and trolling on Nigerian social media. First, Ephesians 4:3 establishes intentional peacemaking (σπουδάζοντες) as an active, ongoing communal obligation, not a passive assumption a principle that repositions social media participation as an ethical responsibility rather than a neutral communicative act. Second, Ephesians 4:26 constructs a nuanced framework for anger: permitting its righteous expression while categorically prohibiting its prolongation (παροργισμῶ) and its escalation into sin, thereby addressing both the reality of provocation and its ethical management in digital contexts. Third, Ephesians 4:29 provides the most direct speech ethical norm: a categorical prohibition of λόγος σαπρὸς (rotten, offensive, degrading speech) and a positive alternative standard of edifying speech (οἰκοδομῇ) that gives grace to hearers. Fourth, Ephesians 4:32 establishes a triad of communal virtues kindness (χρηστοί), tenderheartedness/compassion (εὐσπλαγχνοί), and gracious

forgiveness (χαριζόμενοι) grounded in the divine example of forgiveness in Christ, as the restorative response to the damage caused by harmful speech.

The finding that Ephesians 4:3's principle of intentional peacemaking constitutes an active ethical norm is consistent with and extends the interpretations of major Ephesian commentators. Hoehner (Hoehner, 2002) and Thielman (Thielman, 2010) both underscore the volitional force of σπουδάζοντες, but neither applies this analysis to digital communication contexts. Wright (Wright, 2020) moves closer to contextual application by connecting the "bond of peace" to the contemporary church's challenge of unity, yet stops short of addressing social media specifically. This study extends that trajectory by demonstrating the structural correspondence between the communal conflicts of the Ephesian church and the fragmentation produced by hate speech and trolling in Nigerian online spaces. In dialogue with the digital communication literature, Cinelli et al. (Cinelli et al., 2021) document the echo-chamber effects of social media algorithms, which structurally undermine the communal unity Paul envisions. The Pauline norm of active peacemaking thus functions, in this context, as a counter-algorithmic ethic: requiring deliberate, intentional effort precisely because the platform architecture pushes in the opposite direction.

On Ephesians 4:26, this study aligns with the scholarly consensus of Arnold (Arnold, 2011), Hoehner (Hoehner, 2002), and Thielman (Thielman, 2010) in reading the verse as a concessive permission for human anger rather than a command to be angry, but adds the important observation that the temporal boundary of sunset maps productively onto the dynamics of online conflict escalation documented by March and Marrington (March & Marrington, 2019) and Sahebi and Formosa (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022). March and Marrington (March & Marrington, 2019) identify anonymity and the loss of immediate social consequences as key drivers of sustained trolling behaviour online; Paul's insistence on timely resolution addresses the same problem of unaccountable, prolonged antagonism from a theological direction. This convergence between the ancient Pauline instruction and modern psychology of online hostility strengthens the argument for the contemporary relevance of the exegetical findings.

The exegetical finding concerning λόγος σαπρός in Ephesians 4:29 is particularly significant in dialogue with the hate speech literature. The United Nations (United Nations, 2019) definition of hate speech focuses on content targeting protected identity characteristics; Van Dijk's (Van Dijk, 2008) discourse-analytical approach foregrounds the structural role of derogatory language in constructing negative out-group representations. Both frameworks identify the communicative damage of such speech. The Pauline concept of λόγος σαπρός encompasses this semantic range "rotten," "worthless," "offensive" speech, while adding two significant ethical dimensions absent from socio-legal frameworks: the positive alternative of edifying speech (οικοδομῆν), and the orientation toward the grace-experience of the hearer. This extends the ethical frame from prohibition (what must not be said) to construction (what must be said instead, and why), offering a more comprehensive communicative ethics than regulatory approaches alone can provide.

The exegetical clarification of the terminology in Ephesians 4:32 distinguishing ευσπλαγχνοὶ (compassion/tenderheartedness) from χαριζόμενοι (extending grace/forgiving) adds precision to the analysis of Cornelius (Cornelius, 2021), who discusses forgiveness in Ephesians but does not foreground this terminological distinction. The three-term structure of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness presents an ordered sequence in which affective disposition (compassion) precedes and grounds the volitional act (forgiveness). This has important implications for digital communication ethics: it suggests that the cultivation of empathy (the capacity to be moved by others' suffering) is a prerequisite for the

practice of online reconciliation, rather than forgiveness being a purely cognitive or volitional act achievable without affective transformation.

The principal strengths of this study lie in its methodological rigour and its originality. By grounding the analysis in the Greek New Testament and engaging in detail with the major exegetical commentaries, the study achieves a level of philological precision that goes beyond surface-level thematic application. The identification of the specific grammatical forms and lexical ranges of σπουδαζοντες, οργιζεσθε, λογος σαπρος, ευσπλαγχνοι, and χαριζομενοι provides a textual foundation that is traceable, reviewable, and open to scholarly critique. The study's originality consists in the first systematic application of these exegetical resources to the specifically Nigerian digital context, filling a documented gap in both Pauline scholarship and African digital communication studies.

The study's limitations must equally be acknowledged. First, it is normative and theological in scope rather than empirical: it establishes what Pauline ethics prescribes for digital speech but does not verify how or whether these prescriptions affect the actual online behaviour of Nigerian Christians. The gap between normative theology and empirical behaviour is genuine and important. Second, the study operates exclusively within the Christian, specifically Pauline, ethical tradition, without engaging the rich resources of other religious ethics present in Nigeria's pluralistic landscape most notably, Islamic communicative ethics, which governs the digital behaviour of a significant proportion of Nigerian social media users. Third, the historical-critical method, while rigorous, involves interpretive judgments at each stage of analysis; alternative exegetical conclusions are possible, particularly regarding the grammatical status of οριζεσθε in verse 26. These limitations define the boundaries of the study's claims and indicate productive directions for future inquiry.

The findings of this study carry implications for ecclesial practice, digital communication policy, and scholarly inquiry. For Nigerian churches and Christian communities, the study provides a biblical-exegetical rationale for developing structured digital literacy programmes grounded in Pauline ethics programmes that could equip congregation members to critically evaluate their online speech practices in light of the standards of οικοδομη (edification) and χαριζομενοι (gracious forgiveness). Specifically, faith communities might integrate reflection on Ephesians 4 into pre-election pastoral programmes, given the documented intensification of hate speech during electoral cycles in Nigeria (Anthony & Anyanwu, 2019; Nwankwo & Ayegba, 2023).

For scholars and researchers, this study opens several productive avenues for future inquiry. An empirical follow-up study measuring the impact of Pauline-ethics-based digital literacy instruction on the online communication behaviour of Nigerian church members would significantly extend and validate the normative framework developed here. A comparative inter-religious study examining the correspondence and divergence between Pauline speech ethics (Ephesians 4) and Qur'anic communicative ethics (e.g., the concept of qawlan sadidan in Q. 33:70 and qawlan karimān in Q. 17:23) in the context of Nigerian social media would address the limitation of the exclusively Christian perspective and contribute to the broader literature on religion and digital ethics in pluralistic African societies. Additionally, a replication of the exegetical methodology employed here, applied to other New Testament loci of speech ethics such as James 3:1–12 or Colossians 3:8–17 would further develop the biblical-theological resources available for digital communication ethics.

CONCLUSION

The historical-critical analysis established that the four verses constitute an integrated Pauline ethics of communal speech: Ephesians 4:3 mandates active, sustained peacemaking as a Spirit-formed communal obligation; Ephesians 4:26 acknowledges human anger while imposing strict temporal and moral limits on its expression; Ephesians 4:29 categorically prohibits rotten, offensive speech (λογος σαπρος) and prescribes edifying speech (οικοδομη) oriented toward the grace-experience of hearers; and Ephesians 4:32 grounds communal virtues of kindness (χρηστοι), compassion (ευσπλαγχνοι), and gracious forgiveness (χαριζομενοι) in the theological reality of divine forgiveness in Christ. The study demonstrated that these Pauline principles correspond structurally and ethically to the challenges posed by hate speech and trolling in Nigerian social media: the logic of σπουδαζοντες directly counters the passive consumption and amplification of divisive content; the limit on παροργισμω addresses the online perpetuation of hostile exchanges; the prohibition of λογος σαπρος is a direct ethical indictment of the content of hate speech and trolling; and the virtue of χαριζομενοι offers a theological basis for digital reconciliation.

This study makes a substantive contribution to the field of New Testament ethics by demonstrating, through rigorous exegetical method, that Pauline speech ethics in Ephesians 4 constitutes a viable and nuanced normative framework for evaluating and addressing digital communication failures in contemporary Nigerian society. It advances biblical hermeneutics beyond ecclesiastical application into the domain of digital media ethics, offering a theologically grounded complement to the socio-legal and computational approaches that currently dominate the study of hate speech and trolling. No prior study in the existing literature has undertaken this specific exegetical task in the Nigerian social media context, making this contribution both original and replicable.

Future research should pursue three directions: (1) empirical investigation of the effect of Pauline-ethics-based digital literacy programmes on online communication behaviour in Nigerian Christian communities; (2) comparative inter-religious exegetical study examining the correspondence between Pauline speech ethics and Qur'anic communicative ethics (e.g., qawlan sadidan, Q. 33:70) in the shared Nigerian digital public sphere; and (3) extension of the exegetical methodology employed here to other New Testament loci of speech ethics, particularly James 3:1–12 and Colossians 3:8–17, to develop a more comprehensive biblical theology of digital communication.

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