



Musical Narratives of Oil Exploration and Profit Manoeuvring in Post-Colonial Nigeria 1989-2022

Olufemi Akanji Olaleye¹ & Omolara Olasunbo Loko²

¹Federal University of Technology, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria

²Lagos State University of Education, Lagos State, Nigeria

Article History

Received: 2025-01-29

Revised: 2025-08-30

Accepted: 2025-09-03

Published: 2025-09-04

Keywords

Mobility

Musical narratives

Post-colonial infrastructure

Profit

How to cite:

Olaleye, O. A. & Loko, O. O. (2025). Musical Narratives of Oil Exploration and Profit Manoeuvring in Post-Colonial Nigeria 1989-2022. *Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 3(1), 11-23.

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Abstract

Anchored in Deprivation-Frustration-Aggression and Critical Discourse Theory, this study beams its searchlight on deep musical narratives of oil exploration, mobility, and profits manoeuvring in post-colonial Nigeria from 1989 to 2022. Several studies have examined the menace of oil exploration in Nigeria with little focus on musical narratives. Therefore, this study explores oil exploration activities and musical narratives to exhume the injustice in the Nigerian oil business and to awaken the stakeholders to proper oil wealth distributions. Qualitative design methods were employed with musical and textual analysis of three selected songs - "Niger-Delta" by Nneka Egbuna, "Black Tide" by Ubrei-Joe, and "Which Way Nigeria?" by Sunny Okosun, alongside available data on Nigeria's oil revenue. The lyrics of the analysed songs were based on their relevance to issues of oil exploration, mobility, and profit manoeuvring, and it helps to support the central argument of the Musical narratives in Nigeria. Secondary data were sourced from relevant scholarly publications and books. Findings revealed that while militants engage in rebellious activities against the state, these musicians take a pseudo-neutral stand that prevents them from being soft targets by the state, while holistically addressing issues of injustice and uneven distribution of oil wealth. I conclude that there is a need for the Nigerian leadership to address the situations amplified by these artists through proper monitoring of oil exploration and profits; cleaning of the Niger-Delta environment; and judicious use of oil profits to benefit the entire citizenry.

Introduction

Nigeria is the third-largest crude oil producer in Africa; however, the country has little to show for its natural oil endowment, especially during the period between 1989 and 2022. Historically, 1989 - 2022 connotes the climax of oil exploration and mobility struggle that led to several unrest, killings, armed struggle, and violent conflict that birthed mercenaries like *Egbesu* boys, Niger-Delta militants, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta (MEND), and the Volunteer Force. Moreover, this uneven distribution of oil wealth has prompted Nigerian popular musicians such as Nneka Egbuna, Ubrei-Joe, Jeru the Damaja, Idem Emmanuel, Orlando Owoh, and Ras Kimono to lament through dirges, thereby immortalising the injustices of oil exploration, illegal migration, environmental degradation, and profit manipulation. The historic pioneering efforts of oil exploration in Nigeria can be traced back to a German company, the Nigerian Bitumen Corporation, in 1908, near *Oloibiri* in Ondo State, Nigeria. However, the subsequent oil exploration in Nigeria, its transportation, and



exportation to other parts of the world have heralded a lack of proper accountability, which has caused untold hardships to 200 million Nigerians.

The application of musical narratives in the context of oil exploration and profit manoeuvring is based on the notion that music is often employed and serves as a potent tool of protest and a resistant force against societal issues, incorporating fresh and current data. There is a strong relationship between forms of cultural production, such as music, chant, and poems, and how they serve as arts of resistance (Titus, 2021). The current socio-economic struggle and violent attack between the youths and the political class, especially in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, has a direct link to infrastructure exploration, mobility, and profit manoeuvring. Therefore, popular musicians seek to raise awareness about the unfortunate plight of humans, their environments, and abject poverty amidst oil-well infrastructure and illegal migration. Music produced by artists has served as a marker of resistance to the pollution of the sea and other watery spaces in the Niger Delta (Titus, 2021). It analyses oil infrastructure mobility and the injurious profits manoeuvring embedded in Nigerian popular 'resistance' music from 1989 to 2022, providing an informed, critical assessment of the effects of oil infrastructure exploration and mobility, thereby filling the critical gap created by earlier studies.

The significance of this study lies at the intersection of oil exploration, profit manoeuvring, and the emergence of musical narratives in Nigerian popular music. The marriage of the narratives above will be beneficial for stakeholders in Nigeria's strategic planning, particularly in mitigating the issues in oil mobility, such as exposing the hidden secrets of oil distribution and pricing, and correcting the imbalances and complexities in the oil business in Nigeria. It will also serve as a reawakening of the benefits of good governance as a way to resuscitate peaceful coexistence in Nigeria, while exploring how the socio-economic hardships that gave rise to different oil mercenaries and agitators, such as the *Ogoni*, *Ijaw Youth Movement*, and MEND, may be mitigated. The objective was not to compile and address all of the environmental and demographic issues facing the Niger-Delta, but to have a better understanding of the issues as expressed directly by the concerned and selected musicians.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The historic evolution of the infrastructure mobility struggle in Nigeria dates back to the precolonial era, which witnessed several intertribal wars over land demarcation matters between towns and villages in Nigeria. Notably, over fifty years of oil exploration and mobility in the Niger Delta have resulted in land, air, and water pollution. Gas flaring, spills, and leaks from old infrastructure are choking the Delta's vast ecosystem and habitats (Titus, 2021). Elum et al. (2016) noted that this pollution has had significant socio-economic effects on the people of the region, most of whom were initially farmers and fishermen. While it results in the degradation of farmlands for farmers, it constitutes significant damage to aquatic ecosystems, threatening the livelihood of fishermen, and eroding the long-sustained cultural heritage of the region (Alens, 2014; Elum et al., 2016). In addition, Elum et al. noted the contribution of oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta to food insecurity, which results from the increased rate of environmental degradation. Apart from authorised oil exploitation in the region, illegal oil exploitation and refining cause more harm, especially as it is challenging to hold perpetrators of such activities accountable in terms of environmental concerns (Bodo & Gimah, 2020; Bodo et al., 2020). The communities where illegal activities are carried out suffer from contamination of their consumable water resources (Gimah & Bodo, 2019), resulting in water-related illnesses and diseases (David & Bodo, 2019), and the loss of sustainable economic activities by law-abiding citizens.

The discourse of oil exploitation and environmental degradation in the Niger-Delta has also captured musicological attention. For instance, Titus (2022) examined the displacement of wildlife as a result of



environmental pollution, focusing on honeybees, as well as how popular music contributes to safeguarding the environment for a sustainable ecosystem. For instance, Anthony (2025) noted how traditional music can enhance tourism and contribute to gainful employment, while also possessing potential for cultural exchange, if well-structured and guided with policies. Okujeni et al. (2024) enumerate the potential of music to communicate social change, emphasising its role in creating awareness and inspiring action. While Olaleye and Osuagwu (2020) examine the use of popular music in contributing to health campaigns during pandemics, Sofola (2023) also engaged in a critical discourse on how art music, due to its growing influence in Nigerian society, can serve as a tool of sustainable development. Despite these scholarly engagements, the use of music as a narrative tool in oil exploration and uneven profit manoeuvring in post-colonial Nigeria has not been explored, creating a critical gap that this study addresses.

The theoretical frameworks for this study are Deprivation-Frustration-Aggression (DFA) and Critical Discourse Theory (CDT). DFA focuses on rebellion being the result of the discrepancies between a people's expectations and the government's inadequacy in meeting such expectations. Within the scope of this study, the Niger-Delta people engage in rebellious activities due to the government's inadequacy in delivering a livelihood proportionate to the revenue generated from oil infrastructure, which directly impacts their alternative means of survival. Titus (2017) asserts that in the face of the absence of an absolute standard of living, deprivation creates a gap between people's expectations and achieved citizen welfare. Deprivation-Frustration-Aggression (DFA) brings about collective discontent, armed struggle, and guerrilla warfare in the Niger-Delta that resulted to musical discontents expressed by several musicians such as "Niger-Delta" by Nneka Egbuna, "Black Tide" by Ubrei-Joe, and "Which Way Nigeria?" by Sunny Okosun. This theory has been employed to explain civil unrest, such as riots and violence, and aptly captures the oil infrastructure mobility struggle currently being witnessed in Nigeria. Nigerian youths, especially those in the Niger-Delta, due to deprivation, frustration, and dissatisfaction, have engaged in aggressive activities targeting oil infrastructure. This has brought uncountable hardships that account for the 'JAPA' (massive migration) syndrome in Nigeria. JAPA is the current slang that denotes 'RUN' or 'ESCAPE' to a foreign land, away from the immeasurable sufferings currently going on in Nigeria.

This study, therefore, argues that the selected songs were motivated by the expectations and struggles of Nigerians, amidst the lack of benefits from oil infrastructure that causes them loss of livelihood. Furthermore, Critical Discourse Theory addresses social wrongs such as injustice, inequality, lack of freedom, wickedness, suffering, and homelessness by analysing their causes, resistance, and possible solutions (Van Dijk, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Within the scope of this study, CDT examines the injustice entwined in the selected lyrics and themes of the selected songs. Additionally, CDT examines the causes of the uneven distribution of oil infrastructure revenue and the neglect of the impact of oil exploitation on the ecosystem, amplifying the call for decisive action against environmental degradation in the Niger Delta and other parts of Nigeria. It calls for the protection of the physical environment, as well as humans, land, aquatic animals, and the socio-economic life of affected people.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design that engages in musical and textual analysis, alongside available data on Nigeria's oil revenue. Secondary data were sourced from relevant scholarly publications and books from libraries and the internet. Specifically, the study analyses three purposively selected songs - "Niger-Delta" by Nneka Egbuna, "Black Tide Niger-Delta" by Ubrei-Joe, and "Which Way Nigeria?" by Sunny Okosun. These songs have a theme of protest that interrogates various aspects of the uneven distribution of oil revenue, as well as the negative effects of oil



exploration infrastructure in the Niger Delta. The study analyses the selected songs based on their relevance to issues of oil mega-infrastructure, exploration, mobility, and profit manoeuvring in Nigeria. It does this through content and thematic analysis. The three songs were also annotated to enable readers to have a feel of the songs and their basic musical properties. Data was validated through cross-referencing, reflexivity, and meticulous documentation of oral evidence.

Findings and Discussion

The uniqueness and characteristics of music narratives are rooted in the logical structure of theme(s), presentation, discussion, and subject focus, which in this case are sorrowful, given the collective experiences of each musician and their society. Ordinarily, popular music usually focuses on merrymaking, pleasure, sex, women, materiality, dance, romance, and money. However, the contemporary development in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria has witnessed artists shifting their attention to themes of resistance in the form of dirge that exposes uneven oil infrastructure mobility, environmental degradation, land destruction, air and water pollution, aquatic and wildlife extinction, an inhabitable society for humans, and injurious profits manoeuvring. Deep music revolutionary expressivity was created out of socio-tragedies, sorrow, suffering, and abject poverty. For instance, the lyrics of Nneka Egbuna's "Niger-Delta" expressed these concerns as shown in its lyrical content below.

Song No 1: Niger-Delta

Verse 1

*Dem come fish our water empty
Dem come chop our oil plenty
Come take resources away
Come take all our riches
Dem come use us as dem store
For raw material to make them rich.
Oh brother, brother, bross wetin,
Sister, sister, sis...*

They came to empty the fish in our river
They came to exploit our oil
All our resources are taken away
They have taken away our wealth and riches
Our land is used as a depository
Where do they draw raw materials to make them rich
Oh! My brother, oh! My brother
Oh! My sister, oh! Sister...

Chorus:

*Wetin we dey do thief thief thief?
Wetin we dey do dem thief thief
Where we dey wen dem own us
What we sow na I we go reap
Tell me wetin I go do*

What are we doing about these thieves?
What are we going to do to these thieves?
How did we allow them dupe us this much?
We suffer from enabling them this much
Tell me, what shall I do?

Verse 2

*Cos I dey loss in the sins
In the flesh of the world Lord,
Forgive wouldn't save my soul from dying Kai,
Oga suffri oh, oga suffri oh, oga suffri oh,
It don tey wen u dey do me like am no more
But right now I no go take am no more
I go open my mouth go tell u wetin I dey feel*

Because I am a sinner
A human being operating in flesh
Forgiveness will not save me from dying
Mister, the suffering is much
You've been treating me like this for a while
Henceforth, I will not take it anymore
I will be outspoken now on how I feel



Verse 1

Dem com fish o-ur wa-ter emp-ty___ Dem com chop o-ur o - il plen-ty___

Com take re-sour-ces a- way___ com take all o-ur ri- ches___

Dem com use us as dem sto - re___ for raw ma-te-ri-al to make them rich

bro-ther bro-ther bros we - tin sis-ter sis-ter

Chorus

sis we - tin we dey do tey tey tey we - tin we dey do dem

thief thief where we dey wen dem o- wn___ us what we sow na - im we go re - ap___

Figure 1: Music score of Nneka Egbuna's "Niger-Delta"

Source: Researcher, 2025

The above near dirge was a popular protest song by Nneka Egbuna, addressing issues such as illegal oil exploration, environmental degradation, the selfish manipulation of oil revenue, corruption, and the unauthorised movement of infrastructure in Nigeria. The pop musician engaged in soul searching, whether to forgive the injustice done to his people and the environment, but was unable to do so, having been psychologically battered with neglect, hunger, and poverty. The song laments how the Niger-Delta is treated as a mere discovery site. In this repository, oil and other minerals are harvested as though they are the birthright of the exploiters - the government and oil companies. The artist frames the exploiters as "Thief" and "Mister," who have been perpetuating injustice through the uneven mobilisation of oil revenue, as well as illegal infrastructure mobility that causes irreversible damage to the well-being of her society.

In her critique of the situation, she acknowledges the roles of community leaders in enabling the injustice. She does this by asking the question "where we dey wen dem own us?" (How did we allow them to dupe us this much?). This assumption stems from the notion that traditional leaders and community elders, who are expected to be at the forefront of activism for their people, often remain quiet, possibly due to government and oil company surveillance. In expressing the pains of the Niger-Delta people, the artist remarks about the invalidity of forgiveness, due to the deep destruction of their livelihood.



This position is reflective of the Deprivation-Frustration-Aggression (DFA) by the citizen that led to rebellion.

Song No 2: Black Tide Niger-Delta

*For a very, very long long-time
Our people are suffering
For a long time
Our people are waiting
So many things have been happening
So many years gone by
I know my people, the suffering
I know my people cry
From buglers to explosion
Food poisoning in the nation
What is the conclusion
Is there no solution*

For a very long time
The Niger Deltas have been suffering
For a very long time
Niger-Delta people are waiting
So many things have happened
So many years gone by
Niger-Delta people, are suffering
Niger-Delta people are crying
From buglers to explosion
Food poisoning in the nation
What is the conclusion?
Is there no solution?

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a tempo of 95. It consists of seven staves of music with lyrics underneath. The lyrics are: 'For a ve - ry ve - ry long long time o - ur peo - ple are suf - fering_ for a long time o - ur peo - ple are wai - ting_ so ma - ny things been happen - ing so ma - ny years gone by I know my peo ple suffer - ing I know my peo ple cry from bug - lers to ex - plo - sion food poisoning in the na - tion what is the con - clu - sion is there no so - lu - tion Stop dril - ling o - il we - lls o'. The score ends with a double bar line.

Stop drilling oil wells

Stop drilling oil wells

Figure 2: Music score of "Black Tide Niger-Delta"
Source: Researcher, 2025



The artist's expression of suffering in the music is laden with a heavy, soulful outpouring of socio-environmental distortion and ecological degradation occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation. The revolutionary lyrics convey the ongoing dynamics and tension of perpetual expectation and hope for the liberation of the Niger Delta people of Nigeria. The song "Black Tide Niger-Delta" focuses on activism, utilizing the undesirable state of the physical environment to convey the song's ideas. He narrates how the destabilisation of the region, resulting from oil exploration and other related activities, has caused pain and suffering to the people. Most importantly, he mentions how the activities of the oil companies, carried out without regard for the people, have harmed their health as they drink poisonous and contaminated water and eat foods grown in contaminated soil. Nwaemeka (2020) noted that oil spillage in the region contributes to water contamination both on the surface and in the ground, as well as contamination of ambient air and crops, through which hydrocarbons and naturally occurring radioactive materials find their way into people of these communities.

The artist, approaching the narrative from the perspective of Critical Discourse Theory, addresses social wrongs such as injustice, inequality, lack of freedom, wickedness, suffering, and homelessness by analysing their causes, resistance, and possible solutions. The people of the Niger Delta echo the importance of the environment – including farmland, water resources, aquatic animals, and wildlife – to them, and how these matters more to them than oil and its derivatives. This is reflective of the realities of the common man in the region, who do not have the technical and logistical capacity to engage in oil exploration, but rather, would live more fulfilled life by being able to cultivate the land, gather aquatic animals for food and income generation, earn a decent living by transporting people across the various water bodies in the region without the risk of a faceoff between militants and the military causing them their lives, and being able to allow their kids enjoy the serenity of the water dominated region without the risk of them being kidnapped or caught in an explosion. Ebegbulem et al. (2013) emphasise farming and fishing as the primary occupations of the people of the region, especially in rural communities. The artist further reinforces these concerns in the music video, in which the opening scene shows a young boy setting his hook and line to catch a fish, but is forced to abandon his intended adventure and run to inform his father of an explosion on an oil infrastructure, depicting psychological trauma on the part of young individuals.

In the musical narrative, Sunny Okosun rhetorically asked the fundamental question in his song titled "Which way Nigeria?", in which he mentions issues of injustice and the degradation of the environment at the expense of the people of the oil-producing communities.

Song No 3: Which Way Nigeria

Which way Nigeria
Which way is Nigeria/2ce
Which way to go
I love my fatherland
I want to know
Which way Nigeria
Is heading to?

Verse 1

Many years after independence, we still find it hard to start
How long shall we go
Before we reach the Promised Land
Let's save Nigeria
So Nigeria won't die



Verse 2

We made mistakes during the oil boom
Not knowing that was our doom
Some people now have everything
While many have nothing
Let's save Nigeria
So that Nigeria will not fall

Chorus

Which way Ni - ge - ri - a? Which way Ni - ge - ri - a? Which way to go -

- I love my fa - ther - land I want to know - Which way Ni - ge - ri - a is hea - ding

Verse 1

to? Ma - ny years af - ter in - de - pen - dence we still

find it hard to start - - How long shall we go - - be - fore

we reach the Pro - mised Land - Let's save Ni - ge - ri - a so Ni - ge - ria won't die

Figure 3: Music score of Okosun's "Which Way Nigeria"

Source: Researcher, 2025

The song discusses the many years of suffering and deprivation after Nigeria's independence and laments how the discovery of oil in Nigeria brought hardships, backwardness, disaster, and abject poverty, rather than prosperity. To put it in context, Nigeria, according to a 2022 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, had a low Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.560, coming behind other oil-producing nations like Algeria (0.763), Libya (0.721), Saudi Arabia (0.900), and the United Arab Emirates (0.940). In the second verse of the song, the artist engages in a discourse surrounding how, instead of Nigeria's oil boom being a starting point of progress for the country, it has turned into a regrettable past marred by heavy corruption and the lack of investment commensurate with the earnings of the country, especially in the area of infrastructural development. He laments how past leaders feasted on the oil surplus that would have transformed the country and especially, the oil-producing communities, into a greater place that could compete with other top oil-producing countries of the world. Like Nneka's "Niger-Delta", Okosun's "Which way Nigeria?" also acknowledges the role of traditional and political leaders of the oil-producing regions in aiding and abetting the sustained injustice against their own people, which also alludes to the Critical Discourse Theory, which addresses social wrongs like injustice



Several theoretical analyses conducted over the last decade have demonstrated that oil production has played a leading role and occupies a strategic position in Nigeria's economic development (Azaiki & Shagari, 2007). In 2015, daily oil production stood at 1.748 million barrels; in 2016, it was 1.4 million barrels; in 2017, it was 1.53 million barrels; in 2018, it was 1.601 million barrels; in 2019, it was 1.73 million barrels; and in 2020, it stood at 1.49 million barrels. In total, Nigeria exported 4.192 billion barrels of crude oil between 2015 and 2020, despite a drop in production.

Nigeria's Crude Oil Exports in Millions Barrels between 2015 and 2020

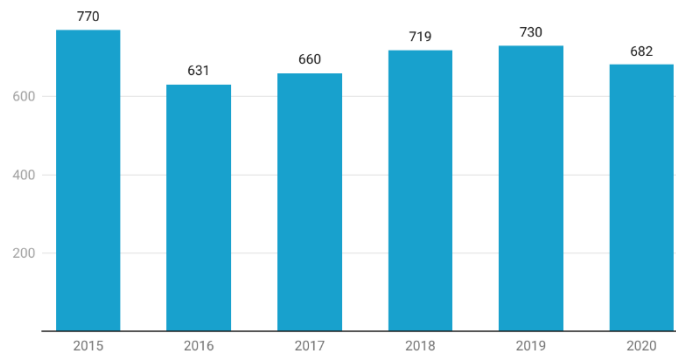


Chart: Dataphyte • Source: OPEC, Dataphyte Research • Created with Datawrapper

*Figure 4: Chart showing Nigeria's Crude Oil Production 2015 - 2020
Source: OPEC, Dataphyte Research*

In 2015, the daily crude oil export stood at 2.11 million barrels, in 2016, it was 1.73 million barrels, in 2017, and 1.81 million barrels, while in 2018, the country exported 1.97 million barrels per day, in 2019, exports stood at 2 million barrels daily, and in 2020, the figure was 1.87 million barrels daily. Nigeria's crude oil export in 2018-2020 (2.141 billion barrels). Therefore, between 2015 and 2020, Nigeria exported petroleum to the tune of \$234.195 billion according to OPEC.

Nigeria's Petroleum Exports between 2015 and 2020 (in Billion Dollars)

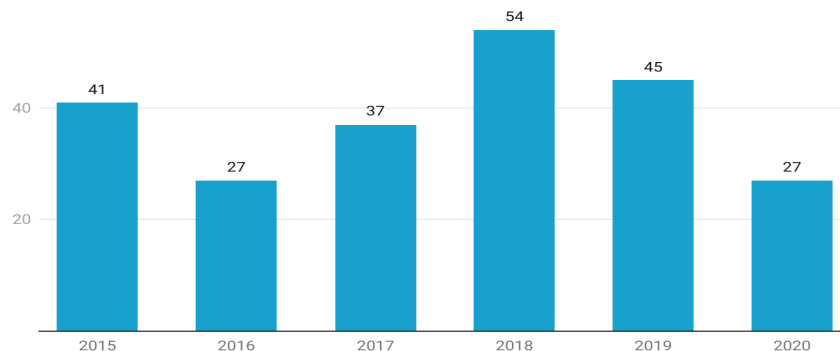


Chart: Dataphyte • Source: OPEC • Created with Datawrapper

*Figure 5: Chart showing Nigeria's Crude Oil Production 2015 - 2020
Source: OPEC created with a data wrapper*



The multidimensional poverty index in 2022 reveals that 130 million Nigerians are impoverished (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Poverty is so endemic that universities and government agencies are usually on constant strikes, protests, agitations, and riots. Specifically, the Niger-Delta, which houses the oil resources that account for a massive portion of Nigeria's income, was tagged as one of the most environmentally degraded regions in the world. They attributed the problems with the Nigerian economy to the failure of successive governments to utilise oil revenue and excess crude oil income effectively, particularly in the development of other economic sectors.

Environmentally Degraded Oil Sites (In Niger-Delta and Other Areas)



Figure 6: One of the oil fields in Ogoniland showing land degradation
Source: www.unep.org – October 2018



Figure 7: Scorched earth from artisanal crude oil refineries near Bodo in Ogoniland in Nigeria's Niger-Delta.
Source: <https://saction.org> – March 2017



Figure 8: Picture showing gas flaring at one of the oil facilities in Ogoniland
Source: www.unep.org – October 2019

Conclusion

Within the scope of Deprivation-Frustration-Aggression theory, the three artists employ a subtle yet powerful artistic device in driving a civil narrative that, though it does not promote violence, provides a soft and neutral but ideologically aligned support for the various militant groups taking up arms in the fight against the age-long injustice being perpetuated in their land. Being public figures, popular musicians often avoid confrontation with political powers, but employ non-offensive but revolutionary lyrics in their fight against injustice. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Theory, in line with the ideas of Van Dijk (2015), the three selected songs engage in musical activism with respect to the injustice in oil-related activities in the Niger-Delta, to amplify the need for collective action against environmental degradation, both in the Niger-Delta and other parts of the country. Nigeria's indigenous lyrics and popular music can chronicle issues of imbalance, injustice, and inequality in the sharing of oil wealth and advocate for equal distribution and peaceful coexistence. The findings in this study revealed that the three songs analysed corroborate and validate the themes and lyrics examined. The three songs reflect the struggle of oil exploration in Nigeria. Nwaichi and Osuoha (2022) noted that despite policy-based efforts to regulate and control environmental pollution, enforcement has remained inadequate, thereby impacting biodiversity, degrading agricultural soil, and prompting many people to abandon farming, which was their primary source of livelihood.

There is a need for the Nigerian leaders to avert the ongoing violence between the youths and the military through the proper monitoring of oil exploration and profit-sharing among the citizens. The current arm struggle in the nation is inimical to growth and an impediment to an egalitarian and peaceful society. Both the armed militants and the military constitute the Nigerian youths, and it is disheartening that the so-called leaders of tomorrow are destroying themselves as a result of natural endowment. The government of Nigeria must yield to the cry of the Niger-Delta people by cleaning the Niger-Delta environment to avert the continuing environmental degradation, diseases, water pollution, air pollution, poverty, hunger, and death. Oil profits should be used judiciously for the betterment of society, education, youth empowerment, promotion of sports, procurement of health facilities, and the promotion of agriculture for food production and sustainability. This study posits that for a truly egalitarian and peaceful Nigerian society, the equal distribution of oil wealth is sacrosanct.



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