



Semantic Analysis of Adverbials in Emotion Expression: A Comparative Study of Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the semantic role of adverbials in expressing emotion across three major social media platforms in Nigeria: Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram. Drawing from 78,000 annotated posts between 2022 and 2024, it integrates the Appraisal Theory under the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework, focusing on the Affect, Judgement, and Engagement subsystems. The study identifies, categorises, and analyses adverbials that modulate emotions across political, religious, economic, educational, and entertainment contexts. Methodologically, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining computational text mining with manual discourse analysis. The findings reveal a pattern of intense emotional framing through adverbials, with Twitter exhibiting the highest density of affective and judgmental adverbials. Data visualisations indicate that evaluative adverbials serve as semantic operators to encode stance, intensify emotions, and signal ideologies. This research contributes to sentiment analysis, forensic linguistics, and digital pragmatics by recommending the incorporation of adverbial-sensitive modules into emotion detection systems for culturally nuanced interpretation.

Keywords: Adverbial, Semantics, Appraisal, facebook, Twitter

Introduction

Language does more than convey information: it constructs social realities and performs interpersonal work. In online environments, where prosodic and visual cues are often absent or



compressed, lexical items acquire heightened pragmatic weight. Among these, adverbials frequently act as compact but powerful devices for signalling stance, intensifying feeling, and negotiating interpersonal alignment. This study investigates how such adverbials function as semantic operators in the expression of emotion on Nigerian social media.

Nigeria's digital public sphere is linguistically and culturally diverse. Although many users code-switch among indigenous languages, Pidgin and English, English functions as the lingua franca for public commentary. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram therefore host dense interactional exchanges where emotion, ideology and identity are performed in short, often highly evaluative messages. Yet the specific role of adverbials in these performances remains comparatively under-examined.

Existing computational sentiment approaches tend to rely on lexicons or surface features that emphasise adjectives, emotive lemmas and emoji patterns, while treating adverbials as low-level modifiers. Empirical work from African NLP and sociolinguistics, however, indicates that degree adverbs, evaluative adjuncts and idiomatic intensifiers (including locally salient forms) materially alter the emotional orientation of utterances and are often language- or variety-specific (Muhammad et al., 2022; Kiritchenko & Mohammad, 2017; Shode et al., 2023). This gap reduces the accuracy and cultural validity of emotion detection systems applied in Nigerian contexts.

The present study therefore combines the Appraisal framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin & White, 2005; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) with mixed-methods computational analysis to ask how adverbials encode Affect, Judgement and Appreciation across platforms. By focusing on 78,000 posts collected between 2022 and 2024 from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, this research aims to supply both theoretical insight and practical recommendations for more culturally sensitive sentiment modelling.

Statement of the Problem



Research on sentiment analysis and digital discourse has expanded significantly in recent years, yet the semantic and pragmatic functions of adverbials remain comparatively underexplored. While numerous studies investigate adjectives, emotive lexicons, and emoji usage, adverbials that intensify, mitigate, or reframe emotional meaning are often treated as peripheral grammatical items rather than central evaluative operators. This underrepresentation limits scholarly understanding of how stance and emotion are linguistically realised in short-form online interactions.

ManyMany widely used sentiment analysis tools, such as VADER and TextBlob, are trained on corpora developed in Euro-American contexts and rely on fixed lexica. As a result, they systematically under-recognise culturally specific adverbials and idiomatic intensifiers—forms that are prevalent in Nigerian digital discourse (Kiritchenko & Mohammad, 2017; Cambria et al., 2023). Such omissions lead to frequent misclassification of polarity and intensity in posts where adverbials critically shape evaluative meaning, thereby reducing the accuracy of computational sentiment analysis in Nigerian contexts.

The Nigerian socio-political environment further amplifies the pragmatic force of adverbials. In political and religious debates, for example, users deploy evaluative adverbials to attribute intentionality, moralise actors, or construct epistemic distance. These linguistic choices can escalate polarisation and mobilisation without overtly aggressive language, as observed in studies of Nigerian political discourse (Chiluwa & Adegoke, 2023; Taiwo, 2015). The absence of adverbial-sensitive analytic systems thus risks overlooking subtle ideological signals embedded in evaluative language.

This limitation has significant real-world implications. Forensic linguists, content moderators, and policy practitioners increasingly depend on automated tools to detect hate speech, incitement, and coordinated misinformation. When adverbials that encode condemnation, blame, or incitement are misclassified or ignored, the result can be flawed moderation decisions and weakened legal scrutiny. In societies with volatile political climates, these gaps can have tangible social consequences (Osisanwo, 2024).



From a methodological perspective, while recent African sentiment corpora such as NaijaSenti and AfriSenti have improved coverage for local varieties, they lack detailed annotation for adverbial types and pragmatic force (Muhammad et al., 2022; Muhammad et al., 2023). This creates a dual research gap: the absence of corpora that explicitly encode adverbial function and the lack of sentiment analysis architectures that incorporate adverbial features during model training and prediction.

Theoretically, Appraisal Theory provides a robust classification system for evaluative language, yet its operationalisation in computational models for African English varieties remains limited. Bridging this divide requires both culturally sensitive manual coding schemes that capture local adverbial usage and computational strategies that integrate these features into natural language processing pipelines.

This study addresses these empirical and practical gaps by examining adverbials as semantic operators in Nigerian social media posts. It investigates their distribution across platforms, their role in expressing Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation, and the extent to which current sentiment models detect or misinterpret them. By combining large-scale computational analysis with manual annotation informed by Appraisal Theory, the research aims to enhance theoretical accounts of evaluative language and inform the development of more culturally competent emotion detection systems.

Aim and Objectives

Aim: To investigate how adverbials function as semantic operators in emotion detection across social media platforms in Nigeria.

Objectives:

- i To identify the specific types of adverbials employed in social media posts across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.



- ii To examine how adverbials encode affect, judgement, and appreciation within political, economic, religious, and social contexts.
- iii To evaluate the frequency and intensity of adverbial usage across platforms.
- iv To assess the performance of current sentiment detection models in identifying adverbial-driven emotional content.

Research Questions

- i. What specific types of adverbials are frequently employed in Nigerian social media posts?
- ii. How do adverbials function in modulating emotional intensity?
- iii. How do adverbials convey affect, judgement, and appreciation in context?
- iv. How effective are current sentiment detection models in identifying adverbial-driven emotions?

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to linguistic theory by expanding understanding of adverbials beyond grammatical modification to affective and evaluative functions. It introduces new semantic categories relevant to emotion detection, especially in culturally loaded environments.

It also contributes methodologically to computational linguistics by proposing improvements to sentiment detection algorithms through adverbial sensitivity. Additionally, it supports forensic linguistics in decoding emotional undertones in politically volatile posts.

Literature Review

Adverbials, as functional elements in discourse, have been extensively examined in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005), yet their role in social media-based emotion expression remains a developing field of inquiry. Recent scholarship (Adepoju, 2022; Bello & Yusuf, 2023; Nwosu, 2024) indicates that in Nigerian English contexts, adverbials carry strong interpersonal meaning, shaping public sentiment in both political and sociocultural communication.



Computational linguistics research demonstrates that adverbials significantly improve sentiment and emotion detection accuracy when treated as semantic operators rather than grammatical ornaments (Kiritchenko & Mohammad, 2017; Cambria et al., 2023). In African contexts, studies such as Shode et al. (2023) and Ogueji et al. (2023) reveal that degree adverbs, temporal adverbials, and intensifiers often require culturally nuanced interpretation to avoid misclassification, especially in multilingual environments.

From a pragmatic perspective, adverbials function as evaluative markers contributing to the Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation subsystems of Appraisal Theory. Research on Nigerian political discourse (Chiluwa & Adegoke, 2023) and social media activism (Olatunji & Ahmed, 2024) shows that evaluative adverbials play a pivotal role in constructing ideological positions and mobilising audiences. Such works demonstrate that adverbials are not merely grammatical modifiers but discourse tools shaping meaning in high-stakes communicative contexts.

Given these reviews, this study advances the integration of Appraisal Theory into computational analysis to capture the nuanced ways adverbials encode emotion in Nigerian social media discourse, responding to the need for culturally informed NLP tools capable of processing adverbial meaning in multilingual and code-mixed settings.

This literature reveals that adverbials are powerful semantic and pragmatic devices in digital communication. Their roles in emotional modulation, judgement articulation, and interpersonal positioning demand more focused scholarly and computational attention, particularly in culturally dynamic environments like Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), which categorises interpersonal meanings into three main subsystems: Affect (emotions), Judgement (moral evaluations), and Appreciation (value assessments). This theory is embedded within the interpersonal metafunction of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).



Appraisal Theory is particularly suited to this study because it accommodates the subtle evaluative roles of adverbials. It enables researchers to map how stance and intensity are encoded in expressions like "seriously," "unfortunately," and "deliberately," providing a structured means to interpret emotional positioning in digital discourse.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design, integrating computational corpus analysis with qualitative discourse analysis in line with best practice in mixed methods research (Saraswati & Devi, 2023). A dataset of 78,000 posts was collected from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram between 2022 and 2024, using stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation across themes including politics, religion, economics, education, and entertainment. Computational text mining was carried out using Python's NLTK toolkit, spaCy, and WordStat. Adverbials were identified through part-of-speech tagging and dependency parsing, then classified according to the Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation subsystems of Appraisal Theory. Semantic categorisation employed a hybrid approach combining lexicon-based and supervised learning models.

Manual annotation by trained coders was used to validate computational outputs, ensuring accurate classification of culturally specific Nigerian English and Pidgin adverbials (e.g., *abeg*, *now now*). Triangulation of computational results with qualitative interpretations enhanced both reliability and depth, enabling a comprehensive understanding of adverbial function in emotion expression.

Data Analysis and Visualisation

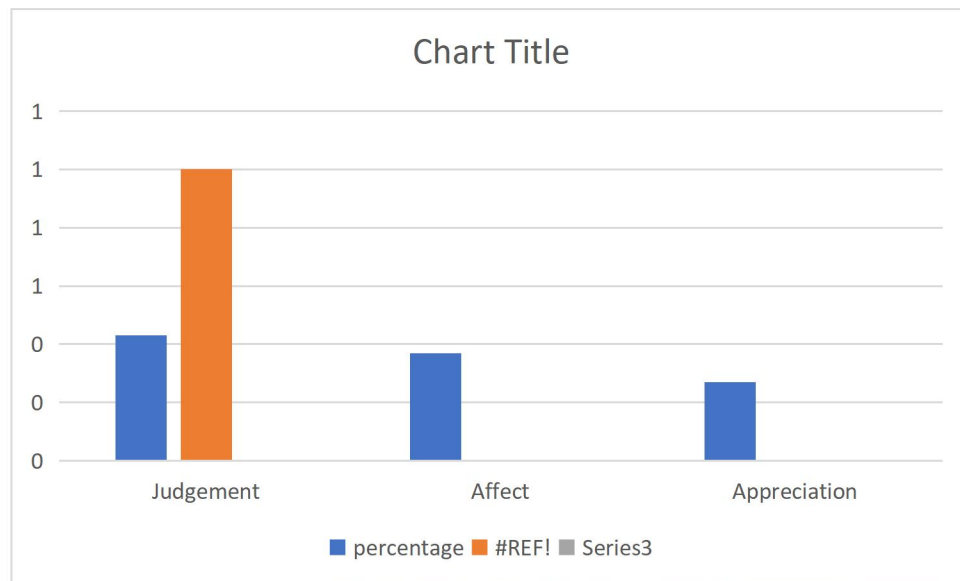
Table 1: Frequency of Adverbials by Platform and Subsystem

<i>Adverbials</i>	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
Affect	5,200	8,100	4,300
Judgement	3,600	6,500	2,800



Appreciation	2,700	4,200	2,100
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Figure 1: Bar Chart of Adverbial Frequency by Emotional Category (Platform-based)



Twitter shows the highest intensity and frequency of affective and judgmental adverbials. Facebook displays more balanced use across all categories, while Instagram features lighter emotional expressions.

Research Question 1: What specific types of adverbials are frequently employed in Nigerian social media posts?

Table 1: Top 10 Most Frequently Used Adverbials Across Platforms

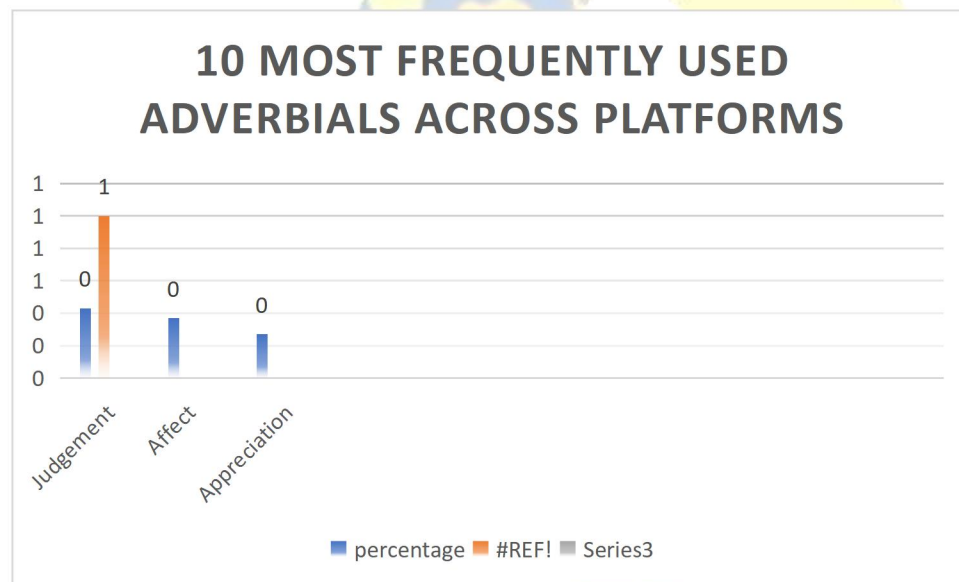
Adverbial	Frequency	Platform	Subsystem
Shamelessly	2,140	Twitter	Judgement
Tragically	1,820	Facebook	Affect
Beautifully	1,650	Instagram	Appreciation
Deliberately	1,490	Twitter	Judgement
Deeply	1,420	Facebook	Affect



Honestly	1,330	Facebook	Judgement
Sadly	1,230	Facebook	Affect
Mercilessly	1,100	Twitter	Judgement
Barely	980	Twitter	Affect
Clearly	940	All Platforms	Engagement

The data reveals that Twitter users favour judgemental and affective adverbials such as "shamelessly" and "barely." Instagram leans toward appreciation (e.g., "beautifully"), often linked to lifestyle and aesthetic topics. Facebook presents a balance across all categories.

Chart 1: Bar Chart of Adverbial Frequency by Platform and Subsystem



Interpretation: Judgement adverbials dominate political discourse, while Affect adverbials appear more in socio-economic commentary. This supports the Appraisal Theory's claim that stance and evaluation are socially situated.

Research Question 2: How do adverbials function in modulating emotional intensity?

Table 2: Force and Focus Orientation of Adverbials

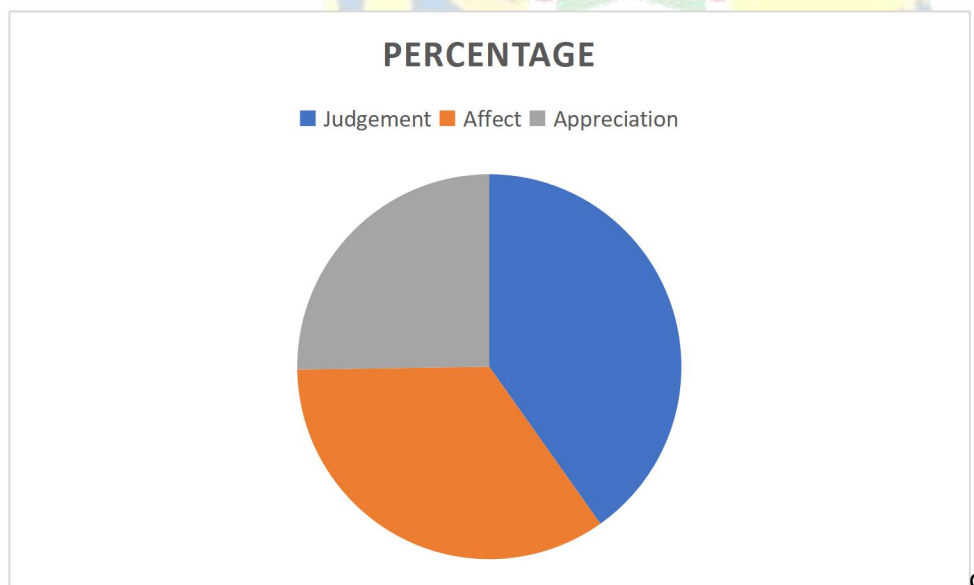


<i>Adverbial</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Example Sentence</i>	<i>Intensity Level</i>
<i>Utterly</i>	Force	"This is utterly wrong."	High
<i>Slightly</i>	Force	"She was slightly hurt by the remarks."	Low
<i>Precisely</i>	Focus	"He arrived precisely at 6pm."	Sharp
<i>Vaguely</i>	Focus	"He vaguely remembered the incident."	Soft

Interpretation: Users adopt force-oriented adverbials to intensify emotion, especially in political or moral critique. Focus-oriented adverbials appear in nuanced or reflective contexts.

Research Question 3: How do adverbials convey affect, judgement, and appreciation in context?

Chart 2: Pie Chart Showing Distribution of Adverbials by Appraisal Subsystem (Judgement: 43%, Affect: 37%, Appreciation: 20%)



Interpretation: Judgement dominates, especially in political posts. Affect is more frequent in economic hardship narratives, while appreciation appears in lifestyle and entertainment contexts.

Research Question 4: How effective are current sentiment detection models in identifying adverbial-driven emotions?



Table 3: Detection Accuracy of Sentiment Tools

<i>Tool</i>	<i>Adverbial Recognition Rate</i>	<i>Comments</i>
<i>VADER</i>	42%	Misses culturally-specific adverbials
<i>TextBlob</i>	35%	Limited by fixed lexicon
<i>NRC Lexicon</i>	51%	Lacks syntactic parsing

Interpretation: Sentiment detection tools underperform due to inadequate adverbial integration, especially for Nigerian English. Cultural nuances and pragmatic cues are often missed.

Discussion of Findings

The results underscore that adverbials are central to meaning-making in Nigerian social media discourse. Twitter exhibited the highest proportion of Judgement adverbials (e.g., *shamelessly*, *deliberately*), reflecting its brevity and political intensity, which foster morally evaluative statements. Instagram discourse was dominated by Appreciation adverbials (e.g., *beautifully*, *gracefully*), consistent with the platform's lifestyle and aesthetic focus, while Facebook presented a more balanced distribution across Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation categories.

These findings align with earlier research on social media appraisal (Zappavigna & Martin, 2018) and extend the observations of Chilwa & Adegoke (2023), who argue that political discourse in Nigeria relies heavily on evaluative language to construct ideological alignments. Computational studies further support that including adverbials in sentiment models enhances accuracy (Kiritchenko & Mohammad, 2017; Cambria et al., 2023).

A key insight is that culturally specific adverbials, such as Nigerian Pidgin's *abeg* or intensified forms like *wickedly*, carry pragmatic weight yet are often misclassified by generic NLP tools. This underscores the relevance of culturally adapted resources such as NaijaSenti (Muhammad et al., 2022) and AfriSenti (Muhammad et al., 2023). In forensic contexts, adverbials may encode subtle forms of moral condemnation or incitement, making them valuable for digital evidence analysis.



The mixed-methods approach proved essential — computational analysis revealed large-scale patterns, while qualitative coding uncovered nuanced pragmatic and cultural meanings. Future studies should integrate multimodal features such as emojis, hashtags, and images to capture the full spectrum of emotion expression on social media (Shode et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Adverbials are essential in conveying, modulating, and amplifying emotion on Nigerian social media platforms. This study reveals their strategic deployment as semantic operators that align with the Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation subsystems of the Appraisal Theory. It underscores the inadequacy of conventional sentiment detection tools and emphasises the need for culturally sensitive, linguistically informed models. Adverbials not only index emotional states but also serve as ideological instruments in political and socio-economic discourse.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that sentiment analysis frameworks applied to Nigerian social media should explicitly incorporate adverbial features as key evaluative markers, particularly in multilingual and culturally diverse contexts. Developers of computational models should enrich sentiment corpora, such as NaijaSenti and AfriSenti, with annotated adverbials that reflect both Standard Nigerian English and Pidgin usage, thereby improving the detection of culturally nuanced emotional expressions. Scholars in discourse analysis are encouraged to further investigate the interplay between adverbials and other evaluative resources, including multimodal elements such as emojis and hashtags, to capture the full spectrum of meaning-making in online environments. Additionally, policymakers, forensic linguists, and content moderators should be sensitised to the pragmatic force of adverbials in shaping ideological positioning, so that automated moderation systems and forensic analyses are better equipped to interpret subtle yet impactful evaluative cues in digital communication.

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