
Social Media Campaign Techniques Employed by Presidential Candidates in the 2023 Nigerian Elections

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Abstract

The researchers carried out the study to determine the social media campaign techniques employed by presidential candidates in the 2023 general election in Nigerian. The researchers reviewed the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, X and WhatsApp using descriptive analysis as the mode of data collection and analysis. The findings revealed that the social media platforms significantly influenced voter behaviour through diverse political messaging techniques, including hashtags, emails, videos, infographics and blogs. It was also found that social media channels used in the presidential campaign were not only used for political communication, but also, to disseminate propaganda news and to defame characters of other presidential candidates. The researchers concluded that despite the prevalence of propaganda and character assassination, social media were considered vital tools for political mobilisation. It was recommended that political actors should leverage the social media for voter engagement while prioritising the dissemination of accurate information rather than for propaganda.

Keywords: Evaluation, Social Media, Campaign Techniques, Voter Engagement, Political Communication

Introduction

The advent of internet communication platforms, particularly social media and other digital channels, has revolutionised political communication on a global scale. These platforms offer candidates unprecedented opportunities to engage with voters and garner support, leading to the widespread adoption of social media campaign techniques by political candidates. This shift has become a significant element of political competition, as evidenced in the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections.

In the United States, the use of social media for political electioneering gained prominence with Barack Obama's 2008 campaign. By the 2016 elections, social media had become the second most popular means of reaching potential voters in the United States of America (USA). This has significantly shaped political events leading to global acceptance and influence of the social media in political campaign world-wide (Barthel, 2016). Ellis (2017) concurs that social media played a crucial role in the 2016 US. general election, changing technology and fostering personable online interactions. The public increasingly relied on these platforms for news, a trend capitalised on by candidates during the election.

A similar trend played out in 2017 during the French election campaign. Nielsen (2023) observes that Twitter now X apart from being a source of news was instrumental in political campaigns to garner support and initiate public discussions. In the 2022 French election, social media became essential tools for far-right politics, it contributed to the rapid rise of polemicist Eric Zemmour (Tech Policy Press, 2022). According to Merouani's (2019) study, as referenced by Andrew, Bernard & Anthony (2024), social media consumption in Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia significantly impacts voter participation, a phenomenon also noted in Kenya. Ndavula (2018) argues that social media has significantly influenced political discussions in Kenya, attributing increased voter engagement to the widespread use of social media platforms for political communication. Through these platforms, political aspirants strategically disseminate campaign messages, engaging actively with their constituents (Grow & Ward, 2013). African political figures increasingly recognise the unparalleled potential of social media, incorporating it into their strategies. Okoro & Nwafor (2013) assert that social media channels enable political candidates to engage with prospective voters and maintain direct communication, facilitating active participation and feedback. This influence extends beyond Nigeria, impacting voting behaviour across the continent. For instance, social media significantly affected voter decisions in Ghana's multiparty elections in 2012 and 2016, as noted by Dzisah (2018). Over the past decade, political parties in democratic nations have leveraged social media platforms to solicit votes during electoral campaigns (Dampsey & Akparep, 2022).

In Nigeria, digital media has emerged as a formidable platform for political engagement. As of January 2021, the country had approximately 33 million social media users, accounting for over 40% of the population (Premium Times, 2022). Additionally, more than 90 million Nigerians own mobile phones, with over 48% of the population having internet access, and 36% actively using it. These statistics suggest that a significant portion of the Nigerian electorate has access to social media, making it an important medium for political and social communication, potentially surpassing traditional media. Ibrahim (2023) corroborates this position that active participation of social media campaigns such as #Atikulatd, #obidients and #social media vote dominated the political landscape of Nigeria during the 2023 General Election.

In a nutshell, while social media is praised for facilitating political discourses between politicians and the electorate, it is also criticised for spreading political propaganda. It is against this backdrop that this paper evaluates the social media campaign techniques employed by presidential candidates in the 2023 General Election in Nigerian.

Statement of the Problem

In contemporary political discourse, digital communication platforms have become omnipresent, profoundly influencing public opinions and behaviours globally. Politicians increasingly leverage social media to disseminate messages, understand constituents' concerns, solicit donations, and build support networks (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). Despite ongoing debates regarding the actual impact of social media narratives on voter decisions, it is evident that Nigerian politicians have acknowledged the power of social

media, especially during the 2023 presidential elections. The strategic use of social media has become crucial for candidates aiming to shape public opinion and behaviour (Moyo, 2018). Given Nigeria's status as Africa's most populous nation and a burgeoning democracy, its political activities hold significant regional and global importance. The tactical deployment of social media by candidates has played a substantial role in shaping the electoral scenery, though the effectiveness of these strategies remains uncertain, prompting questions about their impact on electoral outcomes and democratic processes (Olorunnisola, 2020).

Extensive research has explored the intersection of social media and political activities. For instance, Alakali, Titus, Akpan & Tarnongo (2013) examined the role of social media in mobilising Nigerian youths during the 2011 elections, while Dagona, Karick & Abubakar (2013) investigated youth engagement with social media and its influence on political attitudes. Nanyelugo & Tsegyu (2017) assessed social media usage during the 2011 Nigerian presidential election, and Dzisah (2018) explored digital media's role in enhancing democratic participation in Ghana. Dampsey & Akparep (2022) studied the influence of digital media on voting behaviour in Ghana. Although these studies have enriched the literature on social media and political communication, none have specifically evaluated the social media campaign techniques employed by presidential candidates in the 2023 Nigerian elections. This gap accentuates the need for focused research on this topic to understand its implications for electoral outcomes and democratic processes in Nigeria.

Conceptualisation of Social Media

Social media refer to online platforms and technologies that facilitate participation, collaboration and information sharing (Newson, Houghton & Pattern, 2008, cited in Igbashangev, Abdullahi, Basil, Gbasha, Meshach & Terhide 2023). These platforms encompass a broad spectrum of web-based and mobile services that enable users to engage in online discussions, contribute original content, and join online communities. According to Dollarhide (2023), social media include a variety of internet-based and mobile services such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube, which facilitate user interaction and participation in online communities.

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) define social media as a collection of internet-based applications built on the foundations of Web 2.0 technologies, allowing for the creation and exchange of user-generated content. This perspective is supported by Lutkevich & Wigmore (2023), who describe social media as encompassing software tools that enable the generation and sharing of user-created content. Manning (2014) defines social media as online platforms where individuals with shared interests can convene to exchange thoughts, comments and opinions, further characterising it as a novel domain of unpaid media produced by both individuals and companies on the internet. These platforms play a crucial role in political discourse, as evidenced by their extensive use in the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections, where candidates leveraged social media to shape public opinion and mobilise voters.

Understanding Election

The Oxford Learners' Dictionary (7th edition) defines an election as "the process of choosing a person or a group for a position, especially a political position, by voting." Elections can also be described as procedures that enable members of an organisation or community to select representatives who will hold positions of authority within it. The

most critical elections are those that select the leaders of local, state, and national governments. They function as instruments of legitimisation for those directing the affairs of the state over the populace. Olisa (2015) remarks that an election is a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. Since the 17th century, elections have been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracy operates. According to Momoh & Adejumobi (1999), cited in Olisa (2015), elections occupy a central place in the democratic process by providing the animating force for representative government. They serve as instruments of legitimisation for the state and those managing state power while ensuring political accountability to the people. Elections are a vital component of democratic governance, providing legitimacy to rulers and accountability to the electorate. They are essential for expressing the collective will of the people and ensuring that their voices are heard in the governance process.

Social Media and Political Engagement

Social media platforms have emerged as influential tools for communication and interaction in contemporary society. This transformation is driven by the interactive features of social media, enabling users to engage, create content and access information in real-time (Arthur, 2012). Technological advancements have played a crucial role in the widespread adoption and societal impact of social media platforms (Evans, 2011), facilitating the rapid spread of ideas and serving as catalysts for societal change (Schwab, 2015).

The collaborative nature of social media platforms fosters interconnectedness among users, facilitating the exchange of information, ideas, and opinions (Suchidipata & Saravanan, 2016). Personal profiles on these platforms enable connections with individuals, groups, and communities, forming networks where users interact, share information and engage in discussions (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Sánchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015). Choi, Panek, Nardis & Toma (2015) underscore the role of social media networks in enabling direct contact, messaging, and the sharing of personal updates, thereby enhancing interaction and engagement among users.

Social media platforms function as democratic and participatory communication channels, allowing real-time exchange of information (Chijioke, 2013). This participatory nature empowers users to contribute to discussions, share insights, and engage in political processes, thus becoming integral to modern political communication (Mariam, Nurazmallail & Miftachul, 2020). The evolving role of social media in political communication has reshaped how political campaigns are conducted, offering new avenues for engagement, interaction, and the dissemination of information. Understanding the diverse roles of social media in political contexts is crucial for evaluating its effectiveness in shaping voter preferences and influencing electoral outcomes.

Strategies Employed on Social Media Platforms during Political Campaigns/Messaging

The concept of a political campaign is synonymous with an election campaign evolving over time. The overarching goal of every political campaign, as articulated by Nickerson and Rogers (2014, p. 57), is "to maximise the probability of victory." The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (2009, p. 24) notes that a campaign

message is "a succinct statement reiterated consistently throughout the campaign to persuade target voters." Aduradola & Ojukwu (2013, p. 106) characterise a campaign message as "a vital and potent tool used by politicians to convey perspectives and sentiments to the public, intending to reshape and align the electorate's opinions with their own." They further elaborate that a political campaign involves "the mobilisation of resources by organisations or individuals to influence others, aiming to effect an identified and desired political change" (Aduradola & Ojukwu, 2013, p. 106). A campaign message, therefore, aims to capture and persuade voters to support a particular candidate. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs identifies several key characteristics of an effective campaign message, including brevity, truthfulness, persuasiveness, clarity, and repetition (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2009).

Olisa (2015) conceptualises a political campaign as an organised effort to influence decision-making within a specific group. In democratic settings, political campaigns typically revolve around electoral processes where candidates or referendums are contested. Ginsberg (2009), as cited in Olujide, Adeyemi & Gbadeyan (2011, p. 180) states that a political campaign is an "organised effort by a political party or candidate for public office to garner voter support in an election." He identifies five fundamental elements of a political campaign: professional public relations, polling, broadcast media, direct mail and the internet. Understanding the dynamics and techniques employed in political campaigns, particularly on social media platforms, is crucial for comprehending their impact on voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

Propaganda

Propaganda constitutes a strategic instrument wielded by individuals or groups to shape public perceptions of a person or product. It is defined as ideas or statements, often false or exaggerated, disseminated to promote a cause, political leader, government or other entities (Merriam-Webster Online). Propaganda embodies a deliberate and systematic effort to influence opinions, manipulate thoughts, and alter behaviour to achieve specific goals set by the propagandist (Jowett, 2023). This multifaceted practice employs various techniques, including name-calling, portraying oneself as a common person, linguistic manipulation and the testimonial approach, among others.

According to Merriam-Webster Online, propaganda involves the dissemination of information, ideas, or rumours to influence public opinion. Jowett (2023) further explains that propaganda is characterised by its intent to manipulate perceptions and attitudes through selective presentation of facts or distortions of truth. This strategic use of communication aims to sway public opinion in favour of the propagandist's agenda or against their adversaries, often employing emotional appeals or exploiting societal fears and prejudices.

In the realm of political campaigns, propaganda plays a significant role in shaping voter perceptions and influencing electoral outcomes. Political candidates and their teams strategically deploy propaganda techniques through various media, including social media platforms, to sway public opinion in their favour. This may involve framing opponents negatively, highlighting achievements selectively or appealing to specific demographics using tailored messages. Understanding the nature and impact of propaganda in electoral contexts is essential for evaluating the efficacy and ethical implications of campaign strategies. It raises critical questions about transparency,

truthfulness, and the ethical boundaries of political communication in democratic processes Jowett (2023). Examining how propaganda operates within the framework of social media campaign techniques in the 2023 Nigerian elections, this paper seeks to provide insights into its role in shaping public discourse and electoral outcomes.

Influence of Social Media on Nigerian Political Campaigns in 2023 General Election

Over the past decade, the use of social media by Nigerian political actors has surged, significantly influencing campaign activities. As noted by Edozien (2015), in the 2015 elections, Nigerian voters extensively used social media platforms to document and share each stage of the election process. Eddings (2015) echoes this sentiment, arguing that the 2015 general elections in Nigeria were decisively influenced, dominated and directed by social media, which served as a critical watchdog platform for monitoring the entire electoral process. Supporting these assertions, Bartlett, Krasodonski-Jones, Daniel, Fisher & Jespersen (2015) emphasise the significant role of social media in the 2015 elections, highlighting its extensive use before, during, and after the elections for voter canvassing, mobilisation, and persuasion by candidates and their supporters. This underscores social media's effectiveness as a tool for political aspirants to mobilise and sway the electorate in their favour.

Temitope & Ahmad (2017) established that social media was used in the 2015 elections to encourage voter turnout and to collate and preserve election results to prevent potential election manipulation, a common occurrence in Nigeria. Suntai & Targema (2015) highlight the proliferation of social media campaigns such as #iHavedecided during the 2015 elections, promoted by politicians and their allies. Other hashtags like #NigeriaDecides, #Nigeria2015, and #iPledgeToVote aimed to enhance citizen participation in the electoral process.

In the 2019 general elections, Zekeri (2019) conducted a study reinforcing the facilitative role of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp in enabling direct political interactions between candidates and voters. Ojoye (2019) observes that social media provided avenues for politicians to disseminate information and attract supporters and donors. A report by the Centre for Democracy and Development (Nigeria) and the University of Birmingham (UK) in 2019 highlighted the establishment of organisations like the Buhari New Media Centre (BNMC) and Atikulated Youth Force (AYF) on various social media platforms to bolster the campaigns of President Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar (Oluwole, 2019).

In the 2023 general elections, various social media groups emerged in support of political figures, including the Atiku Support Group, Tinubu Support Group (TSG), Professor Yemi Osinbajo 2023, Peter Obi Volunteers Electioneering Team (POVET), and Nigerian Youth for Peter Obi Presidential Support Group (NYFPO), among others. From this, Okolo, Ugonna, Nebo & Obikeze (2017) provide evidence of a significant positive relationship between Facebook usage as an awareness tool and the projection of a political candidate's image, underscoring social media's capacity to influence the perception of political candidates in Nigeria. This suggests that political candidates should strategically plan and execute communication strategies using various social media platforms to leverage their inherent benefits, including credibility and awareness.

In alignment with this perspective, Emetumah (2016) posits that social media's role in Nigerian elections has been significant, shaping the opinions of many Nigerians and enhancing their political knowledge and awareness. Nnanyelugo & Santas (2017) concluded that social media altered the narrative of political campaigns in Nigeria, advocating for voters to prioritise candidates based on their transformative potential rather than ethnic, regional, or religious affiliations.

Challenges of Social Media Techniques in Political Campaigns During Nigerian Elections

Social media have revolutionised political campaigns worldwide, offering candidates a platform to engage directly with voters. In Nigeria, the 2023 presidential elections underscored the significant role of social media in political campaigns. Despite their potentials, social media campaign techniques face numerous challenges that affect their effectiveness and credibility. One of the primary challenges of social media in political campaigns is the proliferation of misinformation and fake news. According to Olorunnisola & Martin (2013), the spread of false information on social media can significantly impact voter perceptions and election outcomes. In the context of Nigerian elections, this challenge is exacerbated by the lack of stringent regulations and the high rate of social media usage among the youth. The rapid dissemination of misinformation can distort the political landscape, leading to misguided voter choices and undermining the democratic process.

Akinola & Ojebuyi (2019) highlight the digital divide as a significant challenge in the Nigerian context. Despite the increasing penetration of social media, a substantial portion of the population still has limited access to digital platforms. This disparity can skew campaign reach and engagement, disproportionately favouring candidates with tech-savvy supporters. The digital divide poses a barrier to inclusive political participation, marginalising those without access to social media and diminishing their influence on electoral outcomes.

Cybersecurity threats pose another critical challenge to the use of social media in political campaigns. As noted by Chiluya & Ifukor (2015), cyber-attacks, including the hacking of candidate accounts and dissemination of malicious content, can undermine the integrity of political campaigns and erode public trust. The vulnerability of social media platforms to cyber threats raises concerns about the security of campaign communications and the potential for manipulation by malicious actors.

The regulatory landscape for social media in Nigeria is still evolving, with significant gaps in policy and enforcement. Omojuwa (2019) discusses the ethical implications of unregulated political advertising and the use of bots and trolls to manipulate public opinion. The lack of clear guidelines and accountability mechanisms further complicates the use of social media in campaigns. Unregulated practices can lead to the amplification of harmful content, the spread of propaganda, and the erosion of democratic norms.

Nwagwu & Adekoya (2021) explore the cultural and socio-political factors that influence social media usage in Nigeria. Ethnic and religious divisions often manifest on social media platforms, leading to polarised and sometimes hostile online environments. These dynamics can hinder constructive political discourse and affect campaign strategies. The fragmentation of the online space along ethnic and religious lines poses a

challenge to fostering unity and coherent political messaging Nwagwu & Adekoya (2021). The challenges identified above highlight the composite nature of social media campaign techniques in Nigerian elections. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach involving technological, regulatory, and educational interventions. For instance, improving digital literacy among the populace can mitigate the effects of misinformation, while robust cybersecurity measures can protect against cyber threats. The development of comprehensive regulatory frameworks can ensure ethical conduct and accountability in social media campaigns.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is anchored on uses and gratifications theory.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratification theory, developed by Jay Blumler & Elihu Katz in 1974, signifies a critical shift in mass communication research. This theory shifts the focus from analysing the effects of social media on passive audiences to understanding the active role of social media users in seeking gratification from their social media consumption (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

The uses and gratifications theory asserts that individuals interact with social media platforms not as passive recipients, but as active agents who selectively engage with social media content to satisfy specific needs and gratifications (West & Turner, 2010). West & Turner (2010) underscore the autonomy of social media users, attributing them to the ability to actively shape their media experiences. Apuke (2016) and Wong (2012) argue that this theory firmly places the locus of control in the hands of the audience, emphasising their role in choosing the content they consume and the gratifications they obtain from it. Central to the theory is the concept that media consumption is driven by individuals' desires to fulfil social and psychological needs (Apuke, 2016; Wong, 2012). The uses and gratifications sought by social media users can be categorised into four primary motives, as identified by West & Turner (2010):

- a. **Diversion:** Users seek relaxation and escape from daily demands, using media for entertainment and distraction.
- b. **Personal Relationships:** Media consumption helps individuals connect with social groups, maintain relationships and fulfil social needs.
- c. **Personal Identity:** Engagement with media allows individuals to explore and reinforce their self-identity, values, and beliefs, aiding personal development.
- d. **Surveillance:** Users stay informed about current events and news, helping them navigate their social environment.

This framework indicates that social media consumption is a deliberate process driven by individual needs and preferences (McQuail, 2010). Thus, in the context of political communication and electoral campaigns, the uses and gratifications theory provides valuable insights into how political aspirants and candidates use social media platforms to engage with voters. Understanding the diverse needs and gratifications sought by audiences allows political actors to tailor their communication techniques toward influencing electoral outcomes. Applying the theory to the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections, it is evident that social media were crucial in campaign strategies.

Discussion

The researchers observed that social media significantly influenced respondents' selection of candidates during the 2023 presidential election. This observation is consistent with Udoka's (2015) research, which underscored the substantial impact of social media in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. According to the agenda-setting theory, media platforms possess the capability to emphasise critical topics, by moulding public opinion and shaping how audiences respond.

The researchers further highlighted social media's role in boosting the popularity of presidential candidates of Tinubu, Obi and Atiku during the 2023 election campaign. Apuke & Tunca (2018) provide supporting evidence, noting that social media was effectively used for political campaigning, articulating manifestos, enhancing candidates' reputations and mobilising voters. It was observed that respondents' voting decisions were significantly influenced by propaganda disseminated through social media regarding the three main presidential candidates. This finding corroborates Nnanyelugo & Tsegysu's (2017) assertion that political messages on digital media platforms played a crucial role in shaping voter preferences during election campaigns.

Social media platforms such as X, Instagram and TikTok played a vital role in enhancing youth participation in the electoral process. This aligns with Boulianne's (2015) research, which demonstrated a positive correlation between social media use and political engagement among youth. Candidates effectively used interactive and engaging content to mobilise younger voters, thereby influencing overall election outcomes.

During the election campaign, social media also served as a platform for fact-checking and countering misinformation. Various independent organisations used these platforms to debunk false claims and provide accurate information to the electorate. Tambini (2017) emphasises the critical role of social media in promoting information literacy and combating fake news, thus enabling voters to make more informed decisions.

It is the submission of this paper that multimedia content on social media, including videos and memes, facilitated emotional engagement between candidates and voters. This emotional connection, as highlighted by Brader (2006), played a significant role in shaping voter sentiment and preferences, thereby influencing electoral outcomes.

Conclusion

The researchers have critically evaluated social media campaign techniques and voter's decision. It is evident from the discourse that there have been significant transformations in Nigeria's political communication landscape, largely driven by the widespread adoption of social media in electoral processes. Thus, considering the successes achieved by the social media as campaign tools for political mobilisation, initiatives aimed at enhancing social media literacy among the electorate should be prioritised. Educational programmes to empower citizens with critical thinking skills to discern credible information from misinformation and propaganda can be encouraged.

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