



ASSESSMENT OF DIGITAL CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES IN THE 2023 NIGERIAN ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT: *The ascendancy of digital technologies has revolutionised political communication strategies, with presidential contenders increasingly exploiting online platforms to interact with electorates. This investigation aims to evaluate the efficacy and implications of digital campaign strategies adopted by presidential candidates during the 2023 Nigerian Elections. Using survey research methodology, with questionnaires as the primary data collection instrument, this inquiry endeavours to evaluate the impact of social media campaigns on voter perceptions, engagement, and ultimately, electoral behaviour. Drawing on Agenda Setting, Uses and Gratification, and Conspiracy Theories, the study identifies Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp as the preferred social media platforms among respondents for receiving political communications. Findings suggest that social media notably influenced respondents' preferences for candidates during the 2023 presidential election, augmenting the popularity of Tinubu, Obi, and Atiku. The research emphasises that social media content pertaining to these candidates directly shaped respondents' voting choices. Moreover, the research affirms that social media usage profoundly influences election campaigns in Nigeria, advocating, among other measures, for Nigerian political stakeholders to persist in using social media to engage with electorates.*

KEYWORDS: Digital campaign strategies, Presidential candidates, 2023 Nigerian elections, Social media engagement, Voter perception, Political communication.



INTRODUCTION

The advent of digital technology has revolutionised political communication and campaigning worldwide, offering candidates unprecedented opportunities to engage with voters, disseminate their messages, and garner support. In this context, the adoption of digital campaign strategies has become a significant element of political competition, as evidenced notably during the 2023 presidential elections. As noted by Olorunnisola (2017), digital campaigning encompasses a diverse array of online platforms and tactics, including but not limited to social media engagement, targeted advertising, website optimisation, email marketing, and mobile applications. Over recent years, Nigerian political candidates have increasingly embraced these digital tools as integral components of their campaign strategies, aiming to engage with voters, amplify their messages, and influence public opinion. The 2023 presidential elections marked a significant escalation in the use of digital campaign strategies, underscoring the burgeoning significance of online communication channels in both engaging and mobilising the electorate.

The advancement in communication technology has given way for new techniques in political activities across the globe. This communication technology has been used by political candidates to sell their manifestos to the electorates. Silas (2023) asserts that digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube among others have been employed for political campaigns, electioneering crusades, ideological trumpeting exercises, and the mobilisation of voters. In the United States of America, the use of social media for political electioneering was first made popular by Obama in 2008. During the 2016 elections, social media was the second most popular source of reaching the would-be voters in the U.S. (Barthel, 2016). The author further states that social media played a significant part in shaping the course of events leading up to, during and after the 2016 United States of America presidential election. Ellis (2017) concurs that “social media have been applied in the US general election; the 2016 election became what is considered the most influential in terms of changing technology and personable online interactions. The public has continued to use social media platforms to obtain news, particularly taken advantage of by candidates in the 2016 general election” (1). Social media was used massively by candidates in the 2017 France election. Majo-Vazquez and Nielsen (2023) opine that Twitter played an important role beyond being a source of news; political campaigns used the platform to increase support and initiate discussion with the general public. According to Tech Policy Press (2022), digital media became important tools for far-right politics in the French 2022 election; the platforms contributed to the rapid rise of polemicist Eric Zemmour.

Recent investigations have underscored the transformative role of digital media as a significant tool for political actors across the African continent. Through these digital platforms, political aspirants strategically disseminate campaign messages to their constituents who actively engage with their political endeavours (Grow & Ward, 2013). Consequently, African political figures have increasingly recognised the unparalleled potential of social media platforms and incorporated them into their political strategies. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) assert that through digital media channels, political candidates engage with prospective voters and maintain direct communication with their followers, facilitating active participation and feedback on their platforms. Notably, social media's influence on voting behaviour extends beyond Nigeria, as evidenced by its significant impact on Ghanaian voters' decisions. Political parties in democratic nations have leveraged social media platforms over the past decade to solicit votes during electoral campaigns (Dampety & Akpare, 2022). Dzisah (2018) further highlights the



profound influence of social media on Ghana's democratic processes, noting that the country's 2012 and 2016 multiparty elections were vigorously contested on viral social media platforms.

In Nigeria, digital media has become a powerful political platform. Records show that as of January 2021, the country has about 33 million social media users, with the percentage put at over 40%. Other statistics indicate that there are more than 90 million Nigerians with mobile phones, with over 48% and internet access of 36% (Premium Times, 2022). From this, it can be deduced that the majority of voters in Nigeria have access to social media platforms, implying that social and internet-related tools have nearly supplanted the combined mix of traditional media as essential routes of communication in political and social discourse. The use of digital media for election campaigns in Nigeria gained significant momentum starting from 2015. Taylor and Eshkeme (2023) assert that since that time, the prominence of digital media in electioneering activities in Nigeria has become increasingly evident. Nwokoma (2023) concurs, noting that over the past decade, social media has assumed a crucial role in electoral processes in Africa's most populous country. Furthermore, research conducted by Obisesan (2022) concludes that social media platforms played a dominant role in shaping citizens' decisions during Nigeria's 2019 general elections, influencing their choices of which candidates to support (Obisesan, 2022). Ibrahim (2023) corroborates these findings by highlighting the active engagement of social media teams such as the Atikulated Youth Force, representing the People's Democratic Party (PDP) presidential candidate, and the Buhari Media Centre (BMC), associated with the All-Progressives Congress (APC), in the online sphere during the 2019 Nigerian elections, as they sought to promote their respective candidates to potential voters.

The lead-up to the 2023 elections in Nigeria witnessed extensive use of digital media platforms for voter mobilisation efforts. Ibrahim (2023) contends that social media played a significant role in facilitating the organisation of election-related activities and disseminating audio and video content featuring various candidates, owing to its widespread user base. While social media is acknowledged for fostering political discourse between politicians and the electorate, it is also criticised for its potential to propagate political propaganda on behalf of candidates and their supporters. This phenomenon was particularly evident during the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. For instance, on January 7, 2023, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the presidential candidate of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), labelled Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as "Mr. Sell Everything" and referred to Peter Obi of the Labour Party as "Mr. Stingy," remarks that circulated widely across social media platforms (Adeyemi, 2023). Additionally, Nigerian politician, Balarabe Musa's statement during the previous general elections in Nigeria, which went viral, expressed scepticism about Atiku's potential presidency due to his alleged connections with certain influential figures, including former presidents, whom Musa attributed to the nation's prevailing challenges (Adeyemi, 2023). It is against this backdrop that this study aims to explore the assessment of digital campaign strategies adopted by presidential candidates in the 2023 Nigerian Elections represents a timely and relevant research endeavour with implications for both academic scholarship and practical politics. Through rigorous empirical discourse and theoretical engagement, this study seeks to advance our understanding of the evolving role of digital media in shaping political discourse and democratic processes in Nigeria with a specific focus on the residents of Bwari in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.



Statement of the Problem

In the realm of contemporary political discourse, the adoption of digital communication platforms for political engagement has become ubiquitous worldwide. A prevailing perspective suggests that these emerging communication technologies are progressively evolving into dependable instruments for influencing public opinions and behaviours across various domains, including politics. According to Clark and Aufderheide (2009), there is a growing inclination among politicians and their organisations to use social media platforms for various purposes such as distributing political messages, comprehending the interests and concerns of constituents, seeking financial contributions, and nurturing support networks. However, there exists a contentious debate regarding whether the narratives propagated by digital media during electoral campaigns truly impact voters' decisions. Regardless of one's stance on this issue, it is evident that Nigerian politicians have recognised the significance of social media and have actively leveraged it during the 2023 presidential elections. The strategic utilisation of social media has emerged as an indispensable tool for candidates endeavouring to shape public opinion and behaviour (Moyo, 2018). Nigeria, as the most populous nation in Africa and a burgeoning democracy, holds considerable political significance regionally and globally. Consequently, the tactical deployment of digital media by candidates has assumed a significant role in moulding the electoral landscape. Nonetheless, the efficacy of these strategies remains uncertain, prompting inquiries into their impact on electoral outcomes and democratic processes (Olorunnisola, 2020).

Scholars have conducted extensive research on the intersection of digital media and political activities (Dampsey & Akparep, 2022; Dzisah, 2018; Obisesan, 2022; Nanyelugo & Tseggyu, 2017; Alakali, Titus, Akpan & Tarnongo, 2013; Dagona, Karick & Abubakar, 2013). For instance, Alakali et al. (2013) examined the use of social media for mobilising Nigerian youths during the 2011 general elections, focusing on the youth population in Benue State. Similarly, Dagona et al. (2013) explored youth engagement with social media and its influence on political attitudes in Nigeria. Nanyelugo and Tseggyu (2017) assessed the use of social media for political communication during the 2011 Nigerian presidential election. Dzisah (2018) investigated the role of digital media in elections in Ghana, emphasising its potential to enhance democratic participation. Meanwhile, Dampsey and Akparep (2022) delved into the influence of digital media on voting behaviour in Ghana. While these studies have enriched the literature on digital media and political communication, none have specifically focused on evaluating the Assessment of Digital Campaign Strategies adopted by Presidential Candidates in the 2023 Nigerian Elections, particularly among residents of Bwari in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This research endeavours to fill this gap in the literature.

Objectives of the Study

In order to conduct a thorough examination of the Assessment of Digital Campaign Strategies adopted by Presidential Candidates in the 2023 Nigerian Elections, this study delineates four primary objectives:

1. To analyse the Nature of Social Media Strategies Employed by Presidential Candidates during the 2023 Nigerian Elections;
2. To assess the Reach and Engagement Levels of Social Media Campaigns throughout the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria;



3. To evaluate the Impact of Social Media Strategies on Voter Decision-Making during the 2023 Nigerian Elections; and
4. To identify the factors contributing to the success or failure of social media strategies employed by presidential candidates during the 2023 Nigerian Elections.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Media and Political Engagement

Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for communication and interaction in contemporary society. Defined as internet-based applications that facilitate the creation, exchange, and sharing of user-generated content (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010), social media have revolutionised communication dynamics, making the world more interconnected and information dissemination more rapid (Apuke, 2016). This transformation is underpinned by the interactive nature of social media, allowing users to engage with each other, generate content, and access information in real-time (Arthur, 2012). The evolution of social media is closely intertwined with technological advancements, which have facilitated its widespread adoption and societal impact (Evans, 2011). Schwab (2015) highlights the role of technological changes in enabling the rapid dissemination of ideas through social media platforms, emphasising their significance as catalysts for societal change. Moreover, the collaborative nature of social media platforms fosters a sense of interconnectedness among users, enabling the exchange of information, ideas, and opinions (Suchidipata & Saravanan, 2016).

Central to the functionality of social media platforms is the creation of personal profiles, which allow users to connect with individuals, groups, and communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These connections form networks wherein users can interact, share information, and engage in discussions, thereby enhancing communication within virtual communities (Sánchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015). Choi, Panek, Nardis and Toma (2015) emphasise the role of social media networks in facilitating direct contact, messaging, and the sharing of personal updates among users, contributing to increased interaction and engagement.

Furthermore, social media platforms serve as democratic and participatory communication channels, enabling users to exchange information in real-time (Chijioke, 2013). This participatory nature empowers users to contribute to discussions, share insights, and engage with political processes, making social media integral to modern political communication (Mariam, Nurzmallail & Miftachul, 2020). Social media platforms have transformed the landscape of political communication, offering new avenues for engagement, interaction, and information dissemination. Understanding the multifaceted role of social media in politics is crucial for assessing 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, synonymous with an election campaign, remains dynamic, lacking a universally accepted definition due to its evolving nature over time. Various media scholars and political scientists have offered divergent definitions based on their perceptions, resulting in a lack of consensus on the term's precise meaning. Despite this diversity, the



overarching objective of every political campaign, as posited by Nickerson and Rogers (2014: 57), is "to maximise the probability of victory." This study contributes to the discourse on political campaigns, adding to the array of interpretations surrounding the concept. According to the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (2009: 24), a campaign message is "a succinct statement reiterated consistently throughout the campaign to persuade target voters." Similarly, Aduradola and Ojukwu (2013: 106) characterise a campaign message as "a vital and potent tool utilised by politicians to convey perspectives and sentiments to the public, intending to reshape and align the electorate's opinions with their own." The authors further delineate political campaign as:

"The mobilisation of resources by an organisation or individuals to influence others, aiming to effect an identified and desired political change. It demonstrates the ability of individuals, particularly political candidates, to engage and sensitise the political community, positioning themselves as potential and superior representatives of the populace" (Aduradola & Ojukwu, 2013: 106).

Thus, a campaign message endeavours to capture and persuade voters to support the preferred candidate. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs outlines several 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 endeavour aimed at influencing decision-making within a specific group. In democratic settings, political campaigns typically pertain to electoral processes, wherein candidates or referendums are contested. Gingsberg (2009), as cited in Olujide, Adeyemi, and Gbadeyan (2011: 180), defines a political campaign as "organised efforts by a political party or candidate for public office to garner voter support in an election." He further identifies five fundamental elements of a political campaign: professional public relations, polling, broadcast media, direct mail, and the internet. Understanding the dynamics and strategies employed in political campaigns, particularly on social media platforms, is vital for comprehending their influence on voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

Propaganda

Propaganda constitutes a strategic instrument wielded by individuals or groups to mould public perceptions of a person or product. Defined as ideas or statements, often false or exaggerated, disseminated to support a cause, political leader, and government, among others (Merriam-Webster Online), propaganda embodies a deliberate and systematic endeavour to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and influence behaviour to achieve the propagandist's desired objectives (Jowett, 2023). This multifaceted practice encompasses various techniques, including name-calling, portraying oneself as a common person, linguistic manipulation, and the testimonial approach, among others.

Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Nigerian Political Campaigns

The past decade has witnessed a surge in the utilisation of digital media tools by Nigerian political actors for campaign activities. Edozien (2015) highlights that in 2015, technologically savvy Nigerian voters extensively used social media platforms to document and share each



stage of the election process. Echoing this sentiment, Eddings (2015) argues that the 2015 general elections in Nigeria were decisively influenced, dominated, and directed by social media, serving as a critical watchdog platform for monitoring the entire electoral processes. Supporting these assertions, Bartlett et al. (2015) emphasise the significant role of Twitter in the Nigerian 2015 elections, with extensive use before, during, and after the elections for voter canvassing, mobilisation, and persuasion by contesting candidates and their supporters. This underscores Twitter's effectiveness as a tool for political aspirants to mobilise and sway the electorate in their favour. Similarly, Temitope and Ahmad (2017) established in their study that social media was used in the 2015 elections as a means of encouraging voter turnout, collating and preserving election results to prevent potential election manipulation, a common occurrence in Nigeria. Furthermore, Suntai and Targema (2015) highlight the proliferation of social platforms such as #iHavedecided during the 2015 elections, promoted by politicians and their allies, alongside hashtags like #NigeriaDecides, #Nigeria2015, #iPledgeToVote, and others, aimed at enhancing 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. Moreover, 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).

Similarly, 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), Nigerian Youth for Peter Obi Presidential Support Group (NYFPO), among others. From the foregoing, Okolo et al. (2017) provide evidence of a significant positive relationship between Facebook usage as an awareness and social media tool and the projection of a political candidate's image, underscoring the capacity of social media 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 anticipated, shaping the opinions of many Nigerians and enhancing their political knowledge and awareness.

Review of Empirical Studies

Several empirical studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of the impact of social media on political campaigns and voting behaviour, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of electoral processes.

Nnanyelugo and Santas (2017) conducted a research on an appraisal of the utilisation of social media for political communication in the 2011 Nigerian presidential election using survey data collected through random sampling techniques. Employing the uses and gratification theory, the study revealed that social media messages deployed by candidates significantly influenced voters during the 2011 presidential election, leading to increased visibility for participating



candidates. The study 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.

In a study titled "The Influence of Media on Voting Behaviour in Ghana: The Case in Western North Region," Dampsey and Akparep (2022) used mixed research strategies involving quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the impact of media on voting behaviour. Their findings indicated that various media platforms, including broadcast, social, print, and transit media, significantly influenced voting behaviour in the Western North Region during the 2020 general elections. Apart from media influence, factors such as party affiliation, party manifesto, economic conditions, and social networks also played crucial roles in shaping voting behaviour. The study recommended the expansion of technical infrastructure for media and the enhancement of media ethics to meet the increasing demand for information among voters.

Apuke and Tunca (2018) delved into "Understanding the Implications of Social Media Usage in the Electoral Processes and Campaigns in Nigeria," employing agenda-setting and uses and gratification theories. Their research revealed that social media played a significant role in Nigerian elections, facilitating political campaigns, dissemination of election results, and mobilisation of voters, particularly among young people. Social media also served as a platform for influencing political awareness and opinion, contributing to unexpected electoral outcomes. However, the study highlighted concerns regarding the spread of misinformation and its potential to incite unrest, emphasising the importance of fact-based and responsible political messaging on social media platforms.

In another study, Oyenuga (2015) explored "Social Media Participation and Pollution of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria," highlighting the significant role of social media in disseminating election-related information, including polling results. The study observed increased political participation among Nigerians due to the accessibility of real-time information through social media platforms. However, it also noted challenges related to the spread of unverified information, emphasising the need for responsible social media usage to mitigate misinformation and maintain the integrity of electoral processes.

These empirical studies collectively underscore the transformative influence of digital media on political campaigns and voting behaviour in Nigeria and other contexts, emphasising the importance of informed and ethical communication practices to uphold the democratic process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on uses and gratification theory, conspiracy theory and agenda setting theories.

Uses and Gratification Theory

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) emerged as a significant paradigm shift in mass communication research, redirecting focus from the traditional perspective of analysing media effects to understanding the active role of digital media users in seeking gratification from media consumption. Developed by Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz in 1979, this theory posits that individuals engage with digital media platforms not as passive recipients but as active agents



who select and use digital media content to fulfil specific needs and gratifications (West & Turner, 2010).

According to West and Turner (2010), UGT emphasises the agency of digital media users, attributing them with the power to actively contribute to and shape their media experiences. Apuke (2016) and Wong (2012) assert that the theory places the locus of control firmly in the hands of the audience, highlighting their role in determining the content they consume and the gratifications they derive from it. Central to the theory is the idea that media consumption is driven by individuals' desire to satisfy social and psychological needs (Apuke, 2016; Wong, 2012).

The uses and gratifications sought by media users can be categorised into four primary motives, as outlined by West and Turner (2010):

1. **Diversion:** Media users seek relaxation and escapism from the demands of everyday life, using media content as a form of entertainment and distraction.
2. **Personal Relationships:** Media consumption serves as a means for individuals to connect with social groups, maintain personal relationships, and fulfil social needs.
3. **Personality Identity:** Media engagement allows individuals to explore and reinforce their sense of self-identity, values, and beliefs, contributing to personal development.
4. **Surveillance:** Media users use platforms to stay informed about current events, news, and information, enabling them to understand and navigate their social environment.

This theoretical framework suggests that individuals actively select media content based on their perceived needs, interests, and preferences. Media consumption is not merely passive reception but a deliberate and selective process driven by audience motivations and desires (McQuail, 2010).

In the context of political communication and electoral campaigns, the Uses and Gratification Theory offers valuable insights into how political aspirants and candidates use digital media platforms to engage with voters. By understanding the diverse needs and gratifications sought by audiences, political actors can tailor their communication strategies to effectively reach and influence potential voters, thereby shaping electoral outcomes

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting Theory, popularised and articulated by Bernard Cohen in 1963, posits that the media play a significant role in influencing public perception and determining the salience of issues by determining what topics and issues receive attention from the public (Chinedu, Nwamaka & Olarewaju, 2017). This theory suggests that while the media may not always dictate what people should think, they significantly influence what people think about, thereby shaping public discourse and priorities. Cohen's assertion that the media tells its audience not only what to think but also what to think about underscores the powerful influence of media in setting the agenda for public discussion (Chinedu et al., 2017). Social media platforms, as integral components of contemporary media landscapes, have been extensively used by politicians and their supporters during election campaigns to disseminate their views and opinions (Apuke & Apollos, 2017). Apuke and Tunca (2018) further emphasise that the agenda



setting process highlights the media's ability to determine which issues gain prominence and attention in public discourse.

According to Zhu and Blood (1997), Agenda Setting Theory operates as a mechanism through which the mass media guides public attention by determining the relative importance of various societal issues. This theory suggests that media messages influence the perception and priorities of media consumers, shaping their understanding of what is significant and deserving of attention. McCombs and Shaw (1964) argue that the media have the power to transfer items from their news agenda to the public agenda, leading people to perceive issues as important based on media coverage.

The relevance of Agenda Setting Theory to this study lies in its assertion that issues receiving extensive media coverage become subjects of public discussion, debate, and action. In the context of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, the way social media platforms report on the activities of political candidates before and during the elections can significantly influence the voting behaviour of the electorate. By shaping the public agenda and determining which issues gain prominence, digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping voters' choices and electoral outcomes.

Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theories have become prevalent throughout the discourse surrounding Nigeria's 2023 elections, permeating various facets of electioneering activities (Chen, 2021). In the digital age, where information proliferates freely across diverse digital media platforms, the emergence of conspiracy theories raises concerns regarding the potential influence of misinformation on public opinion and political dynamics. Broadly defined, a conspiracy theory posits that significant events or situations are the result of clandestine actions by powerful and clandestine groups, often driven by political motives (Jaron & Stef, 2021; Ted, 1994).

At its core, conspiracy theory suggests the existence of a hidden truth deliberately withheld from the public eye. Such theories seek to interpret events or phenomena as the outcomes of covert manipulations orchestrated by actors seeking to advance their own agendas (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Within the digital landscape, social media platforms like Facebook serve as conduits for the rapid dissemination of rumours and misinformation among ideologically aligned groups (Shin et al., 2016). However, these platforms often fail to effectively counteract false information, with misleading posts often gaining more traction than those containing accurate information, particularly concerning political figures (Sharma et al., 2017).

Psychological factors, including the need for cognitive consistency and perceived control, play significant roles in driving individuals to embrace misinformation and conspiracy theories (Festinger, 1957; Kunda, 1990). By providing a coherent narrative that aligns with pre-existing beliefs, conspiracy theories offer a sense of understanding and certainty in the face of complex and ambiguous events. Moreover, partisan ideology influences the propensity for individuals to endorse conspiracy theories, with both liberals and conservatives susceptible to motivated reasoning that reinforces their existing worldview (Miller et al., 2015).

Given its relevance to the context of political campaigning and public opinion formation, the conspiracy theory framework offers valuable insights into the potential impact of



misinformation and ideological biases on voters' choices during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used survey research design. Nwodu (2006: 7) states that “the survey research works on the premise that a given population is too large for any researcher to realistically observe all the elements of the population”. The method, which is quantitative in approach, is one in which a group of people or items are studied by collecting and analysing data from only a few people considered to be representative of the entire population.

The population of the study are the residents of the Federal Capital Territory, with a focus on those in Bwari Area Council. According to City Population (2022), the estimated number of the residents of Bwari Area Council is 500,100. From this estimated population, a sample size of 384 was purposely selected using Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) sample size determination table. The choice of purposive sampling was because the researcher was interested in studying residents who make use of social media to access and spread political messages.

Further, the study used questionnaires as instruments of data collection. The adoption of the questionnaire was due to the size of the population as it was a good instrument for collecting data from a large population. The questionnaire was distributed through the availability method. Descriptive statistics using tables, charts, figures, frequencies, percentages and mean deviation of five-point likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD), which the criterion mean was put at 3 is accepted result, while 2 is rejected result were used to present the quantitative data. The reason for the adoption of this data analysis method was for easy understanding by anyone that may stumble on the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 384 copies of the questionnaire were administered for the purpose of this research. Figure 1 below shows that out of the 384 copies of questionnaire administered, 352 were returned representing 92% of the total distributed, while 32 copies of the questionnaire, representing 8%, were not returned and some not valid for analysis. The retrieved copies of the questionnaire showed a good percentage. Graphical representation of the response rate is shown in the chart below:

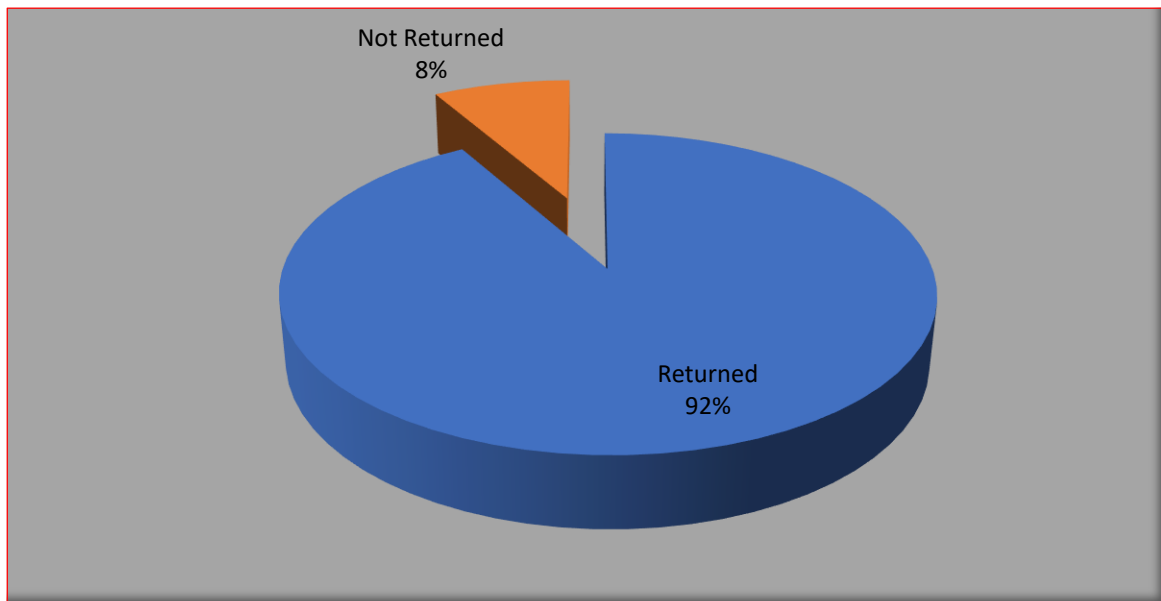


Figure 1: Analysis of Response Rate

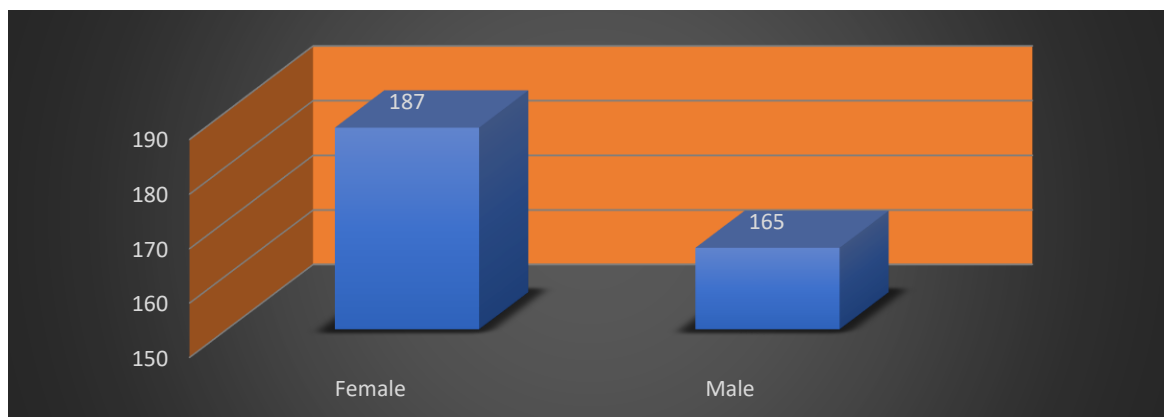


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Figure 2 above reveals that 53% of the respondents were female, while 47% were male. The discrepancies in the ratio of male and female did not in any way affect the findings but rather points to the random distribution of the questionnaire within the sample population.

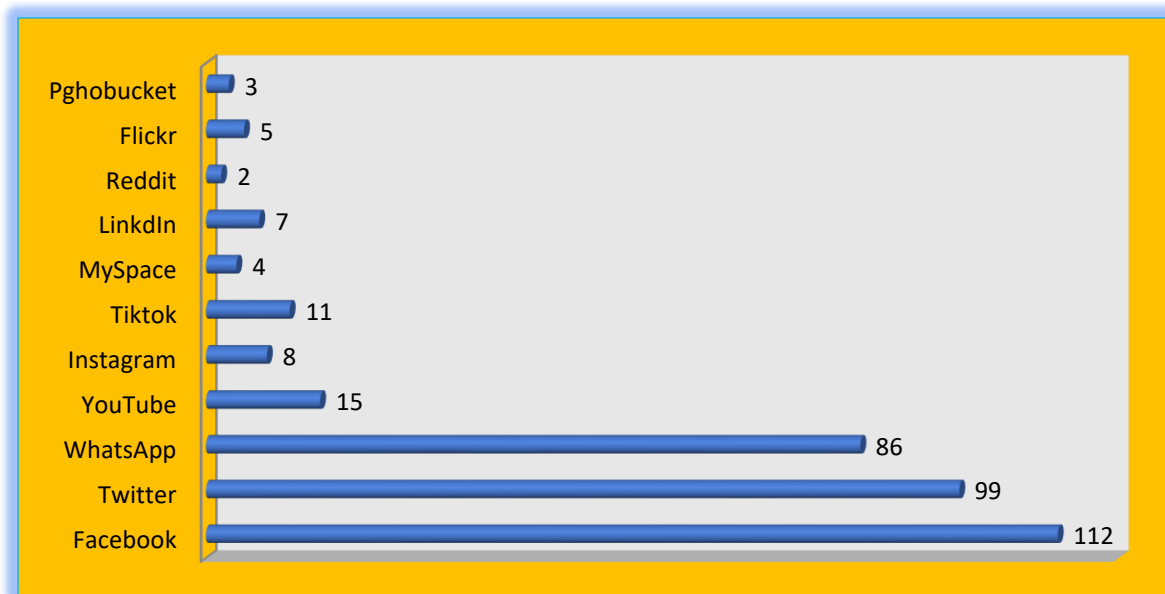


Figure 3: Choice of Digital Media Use for Political Messages by Respondents

The findings in the above Figure are not unconnected with the fact that Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube are among most used social media tools among people across the globe for searching for health messages and other information.

Table 1: Responses on Research Objectives

Options	SA	A	U	SD	D	Mean Rating	Decision
Did social media posts regarding the candidacies of Tinubu, Obi, and Atiku during the 2023 presidential election influence your decision of choice making?	177	168	2	5	0	4.4	Accepted
Did the use of social media by Tinubu, Obi, and Atiku during the 2023 presidential election contribute to an increase in their fame?	212	125	7	3	5	4.8	Accepted
Was your voting decision influenced as a result of social media messages on these presidential candidates?	193	144	9	6	0	4.4	Accepted
Were you cognizant of the dissemination of political propaganda via social media by specific candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?	188	152	1 2	0	0	4.5	Accepted
Did the political propaganda used by the candidates through social media affect your voting decision?	111	226	1 5	0	0	4.2	Accepted



Based on the findings presented in the Table above, it can be inferred that social media continues to serve as a significant catalyst in influencing voters' choices of candidates due to the nature of messages disseminated through these platforms.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The research reveals that among the respondents, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube are the most preferred social media platforms for receiving political messages (refer to Figure 3 above). This finding is consistent with the study by Nnanyelugo and Tsegysu (2017), which found that Facebook ranked highest among various digital media platforms used by the electorate for political engagement during election campaigns. Ossai (2018) supports this, indicating that approximately 86.4% of Nigerians utilise Facebook to access diverse information, including political matters. Igwenagu (2023) further corroborates this by asserting that WhatsApp is the most dominant social media platform in Nigeria, with over 94% usage, followed by Facebook at 76%.

Moreover, the study indicates that social media significantly influenced respondents' selection of candidates during the 2023 presidential election. This finding aligns with Udoka's (2015) discovery that social media played a decisive role in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election and resonates with the agenda-setting theory, which underscores the influential capacity of communication media to highlight prominent issues, thereby shaping audience reactions.

Furthermore, the research findings underscore that social media played a significant role in enhancing the popularity of presidential candidates Tinubu, Obi, and Atiku during the presidential 2023 Nigerian election. This assertion is supported by Apuke and Tunca (2018), who found that social media was used for political campaigning, articulating manifestoes to voters, enhancing candidates' reputations, and mobilising the electorate.

Additionally, data from the study indicate that respondents' voting decisions were influenced by propaganda messages disseminated through social media concerning the three presidential candidates during the presidential 2023 Nigerian election. Nnanyelugo and Tsegysu (2017) affirmed that the electorate's choice of political candidates during election campaigns in 2015 was significantly influenced by messages politicians posted on digital media platforms.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on evaluating the Digital Campaign Strategies adopted by Presidential Candidates in the 2023 Nigerian Elections. The findings of the study suggest significant transformations in Nigeria's political communication landscape, primarily attributed to the widespread use of social media in electoral processes. Presently, political stakeholders use digital media platforms to solicit votes from the electorate. Conversely, voters perceive social media as crucial channels to connect with their representatives, providing them with unrestricted access to political developments. Consequently, it can be deduced that the utilisation of social media influences electioneering campaigns in Nigeria and potentially extends beyond its borders.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Nigerian political actors should persist in leveraging social media to engage with voters effectively.
2. The electorate should exercise discernment in evaluating information on social media before making decisions regarding which candidate to vote for during elections. This caution is necessary due to the abundance of biased information about candidates circulating on online platforms.
3. Political messages should prioritise truthfulness and provide comprehensive information to empower the electorate to make informed decisions that contribute to the selection of capable individuals for governance roles.

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