

Impact of Media on the Citizenry During Political Campaigns in Nigeria: An Overview of Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of social media on Nigerian citizens during political campaigns, focusing on the 2023 elections. Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study examines how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok were utilized to mobilize voters and engage citizens politically. The research highlights the role of these platforms in enhancing political participation through direct communication, debates, and activism. However, it also identifies the significant negative impact of misinformation, particularly on WhatsApp, where rumours and fake news influenced voter behavior. Through qualitative observation, the study found that while social media fostered increased political engagement, misinformation posed a major challenge to credible electoral discourse. The study recommends enhancing media literacy and implementing stronger regulatory frameworks for social media platforms to ensure accurate political communication and mitigate the spread of false information.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Participation, Misinformation, Nigeria, Media Literacy.

Introduction

The media has historically played a critical role in shaping political communication and citizen engagement across the world. According to McNair (2017), media serves as a bridge between political elites and the public, facilitating the dissemination of information essential for informed participation in democratic processes. Early studies, such as that of Norris (2000), emphasized the importance of traditional media—radio, television, and newspapers—in informing voters, framing political debates, and influencing public opinion during electoral periods.

With the advent of the internet and digital technologies, the nature of political communication has significantly evolved. Chadwick (2013) notes that digital media has disrupted traditional hierarchies of information dissemination, allowing for more direct and interactive forms of political messaging. In particular, social media platforms have emerged as dominant communication tools, with Castells (2012) highlighting how they empower citizens to actively participate in political dialogue, mobilization, and activism beyond conventional channels.

Globally, political campaigns have increasingly integrated social media to reach diverse demographics and foster voter engagement. Koc-Michalska and Lilleker (2017) argue that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have redefined campaign strategies, enabling candidates to bypass mainstream media gatekeeping and communicate directly with the electorate. Similarly, Vaccari (2015) emphasizes that social media allows for personalization of political messages, targeted advertising, and real-time interaction, thus reshaping political campaigning in democratic societies.

In developing regions, including Africa, the rise of social media has had profound implications for political processes. Bosch (2017) observes that in African countries, social media platforms

provide alternative spaces for political discourse, especially where state control of traditional media remains strong. Social media has thus opened avenues for citizen empowerment, but it has also raised concerns about the spread of misinformation and the amplification of divisive rhetoric.

Focusing on Nigeria, the country has witnessed a notable shift in its political communication landscape, particularly since the 2011 general elections. According to Ojebuyi and Salawu (2019), Nigerian political actors increasingly leverage social media platforms to engage voters, disseminate campaign messages, and mobilize support, particularly among the youth population. The 2015 presidential election further exemplified the strategic use of social media, with scholars like Okoro and Nwafor (2013) documenting how platforms like Twitter and Facebook were used extensively by candidates and their supporters.

However, while social media has expanded political participation in Nigeria, it has also introduced new challenges. Uduakobong et al. (2019) point out the pervasive spread of fake news and propaganda during election periods, which often influences public perceptions and undermines democratic integrity. Similarly, Adebayo and Osunbiyi (2021) argue that social media's role in Nigeria's political campaigns is a double-edged sword, offering opportunities for engagement but also exacerbating political polarization and misinformation.

Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the impact of social media platforms on the citizenry during political campaigns in Nigeria. By analysing how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram influence political awareness, participation, and opinion formation among Nigerian citizens, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between media, politics, and society in the digital age.

Statement of the problem

The emergence of social media has revolutionized political communication worldwide, providing unprecedented platforms for direct interaction between political actors and citizens. In Nigeria, the adoption of social media during political campaigns has reshaped traditional patterns of political engagement, especially among the youth. However, while social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram have enhanced political participation and voter education, they have also introduced significant challenges. The spread of misinformation, political propaganda, hate speech, and fake news during election periods has raised concerns about the quality of political discourse and its influence on citizens' perceptions and behaviours. Despite the increasing reliance on social media for political campaigns in Nigeria, limited research has systematically examined how these platforms impact the citizenry's political awareness, decision-making, and democratic participation. Furthermore, the dual role of social media—as a tool for empowerment and a channel for manipulation—calls for a deeper understanding of its effects in the Nigerian political context. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the impact of social media platforms on Nigerian citizens during political campaigns, aiming to uncover both the positive contributions and the inherent risks posed by their widespread use in political processes.

Aim and objectives:

This study aims to examine the impact of social media on Nigerian citizens during political campaigns. The specific objectives are to:

- i. identify social media platforms used during campaigns.
- ii. assess how social media influences political participation.
- iii. determine the effects of misinformation on citizens.

Research questions:

- i. Which social media platforms are used during political campaigns?

- ii. How does social media influence citizens' political participation?
- iii. What is the impact of misinformation on citizens during campaigns?

Significance of the study

This study is significant as it highlights how social media shapes political awareness and participation within Nigerian communities, fostering more informed and engaged citizens. For the government, the findings will provide insights into managing digital political communication and combating misinformation during campaigns. Additionally, the study contributes to the field of mass communication by expanding understanding of new media's influence on political behavior, offering useful knowledge for media practitioners, scholars, and policymakers. It also underscores the importance of responsible digital engagement and suggests strategies for enhancing the positive role of social media in democratic processes.

Conceptual Clarifications

Definition of Media: Traditional vs. New Media

Media refers broadly to the channels of communication through which information is disseminated to the public. Traditional media include outlets such as radio, television, and newspapers. According to McQuail (2010), traditional media are characterized by one-way communication and limited audience feedback. Baran (2015) further emphasizes that traditional media are centralized and structured, with gatekeepers controlling the flow of information. In contrast, new media are digital platforms that facilitate two-way communication and real-time interaction. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) explain that new media include internet-based technologies like websites, blogs, and streaming platforms, offering participatory and decentralized communication. Thus, the major difference lies in interactivity, accessibility, and immediacy. While traditional media dominate older communication systems, new media have democratized information sharing, significantly affecting societal communication patterns, especially in political contexts.

Social Media

Social media are interactive web-based platforms where individuals create, share, and exchange information. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications" built on the ideological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Boyd and Ellison (2007) add that social media sites like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram enable users to build public or semi-public profiles and interact with a list of other users. According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media platforms are defined by features such as identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Examples include Facebook (social networking), Twitter/X (microblogging), Instagram (photo sharing), WhatsApp (instant messaging), and TikTok (short-form video sharing). These platforms have transformed personal and political communication by allowing rapid, wide-reaching interactions.

Political Campaigns in the Nigerian Context

Political campaigns involve organized efforts to influence decision-making within a specific group. In Nigeria, campaigns are characterized by rallies, advertisements, debates, and increasingly, digital outreach. Jega (2011) states that political campaigns in Nigeria are crucial for mobilizing voter support and shaping electoral outcomes. According to Omotola (2010), campaigns reflect Nigeria's complex political landscape, shaped by ethnicity, religion, and regional affiliations. Orji (2014) notes that modern Nigerian campaigns heavily use media to disseminate political messages and counter opponents, with social media playing an increasing role since the 2011 elections. Thus, Nigerian political campaigns blend traditional methods like

town hall meetings with modern digital strategies to reach diverse populations and influence voting behavior.

Citizenry in Terms of Political Participation and Public Opinion

Citizenry refers to the collective body of citizens who have legal rights and responsibilities within a nation. In political terms, participation and public opinion are central aspects. Almond and Verba (1963) describe the citizenry as the foundation of democratic systems, whose engagement shapes governance. Dahl (1971) emphasizes that active citizen participation — through voting, advocacy, and public discourse — is crucial for democratic legitimacy. In the Nigerian context, according to Ojo (2014), the citizenry plays a vital role in political processes, though issues like poverty, illiteracy, and distrust in political institutions often hamper full participation. Thus, citizenry in political science encompasses not only eligibility to vote but also the active contribution to shaping public policies and political leadership through informed opinions and actions.

Evolution of Media in Nigerian Political Campaigns

In Nigeria, traditional media were the primary tools for political communication throughout much of the 20th century. According to Oso (2012), radio, due to its affordability and wide reach, was the most influential medium during early elections. Uche (1989) explains that newspapers such as *The West African Pilot* were critical in colonial and post-independence political mobilization. Television, though less accessible, was employed mainly in urban areas, offering candidates a more visual and emotional connection to voters (Omenugha, 2004). These traditional media channels played essential roles in nation-building and public enlightenment, despite challenges such as government control and censorship.

Digital and Social Media in Elections (Since around 2011 to 2023)

The 2011 Nigerian elections marked a major shift toward digital engagement. According to Ifukor (2010), social media platforms became central to mobilization and information dissemination. Olorunnisola and Martin (2013) emphasize that platforms like Facebook and Twitter/X allowed citizens to bypass traditional media filters, enabling grassroots participation. By the 2015 and 2019 elections, politicians such as Muhammadu Buhari and Goodluck Jonathan actively used social media to communicate directly with voters (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). This trend continued into the 2023 elections, where newer platforms like TikTok and WhatsApp played significant roles in voter engagement, propaganda, and citizen journalism.

Growth of Mobile Technology and Internet Access in Nigeria

Mobile technology has dramatically expanded internet access, transforming communication landscapes. According to Afolayan (2014), the widespread availability of smartphones made social media accessible to a broad segment of the Nigerian population. GSMA (2020) reported that mobile internet penetration in Nigeria grew from 24% in 2014 to nearly 50% by 2020. Ajibade (2022) highlights that affordable data plans and increased smartphone adoption enabled millions to access political content online, contributing to greater political awareness and participation. Thus, mobile technology has democratized access to political information, empowering more citizens to engage actively in the electoral process through their devices. Therefore, the reviewed concepts collectively highlight the critical role of media, particularly social media, in shaping political engagement in Nigeria. Traditional media, such as radio, television, and newspapers, historically served as the main channels for political communication, ensuring public access to information during campaigns. However, with the evolution of new media technologies, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok have emerged as dominant tools, offering interactive spaces

for political discourse. Political campaigns in Nigeria have shifted from primarily physical rallies and traditional advertisements to strategic online engagements, reflecting broader global communication trends. The citizenry, central to this process, has evolved from passive recipients of information to active participants, using social media to express opinions, mobilize support, and scrutinize political actors. Thus, the concepts of media, social media, political campaigns, and citizenry are interconnected, each influencing and reinforcing the others in the dynamic Nigerian political landscape. Together, they show how technological advancements have transformed political communication and participation, making digital platforms vital in modern campaigns. This connection underlines the significance of studying the impact of social media on Nigerian citizens during political campaigns, given its growing influence on political behavior, public opinion, and democratic engagement.

Empirical review

Study by Ifukor (2010) "*Elections and the Internet: A Case Study of Nigeria's 2011 General Elections*", it focused on the role of the internet, particularly social media, in Nigeria's 2011 general elections. The aim was to examine how political actors and citizens used online platforms for campaign communication. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study employed a qualitative method through content analysis of online discussions and political pages. Findings revealed that social media facilitated real-time engagement, political debates, and mobilization of voters, particularly the youth. The study concluded that social media had begun to democratize political participation, though it was limited mainly to urban populations with internet access. Recommendations included expanding internet accessibility and political digital literacy. However, a major weakness of the study was its narrow focus on the 2011 elections and limited geographical representation, making its conclusions less applicable to the broader Nigerian context over time.

Study by Chiluwa and Ifukor (2015) "*Social Media and Political Communication in Nigeria: Tweets, Facebook Likes and Civic Engagements*", it investigated how Nigerian politicians and citizens utilized Twitter and Facebook during the 2015 elections. The study aimed to determine the effectiveness of social media as a political communication tool. Using the Agenda-Setting Theory, they adopted a mixed-methods approach, analysing posts and conducting online surveys. Findings showed that political messages disseminated via social media significantly influenced public opinion, campaign narratives, and voter turnout among youths. The study concluded that social media became a powerful political mobilization tool, though concerns over misinformation and propaganda were noted. They recommended stricter regulations on political content and education on digital literacy. The weakness of the study lies in its emphasis on political elites' use of social media, with limited attention to grassroots citizen participation and rural perspectives, thus providing an incomplete picture of the citizenry's broader engagement.

Study by Ajibade (2022) "*Social Media Influence on Voter Behavior in Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election*" it explored how social media shaped voter behavior during the 2023 presidential election. The study aimed to understand the impact of platforms like TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram on political decision-making. Drawing on the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the researcher used surveys and focus group discussions targeting first-time voters. Results indicated that social media exposure significantly affected political awareness, candidate perception, and voting patterns, especially among young Nigerians. The conclusion emphasized that social media had become an indispensable tool for political learning and engagement. Ajibade recommended that political education programs leverage social media more systematically. However, a key weakness was the limited sample size,

mainly urban youth, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader, diverse Nigerian electorate.

The reviewed studies consistently highlight the growing influence of social media in shaping political communication and citizen participation in Nigeria. They show that while social media promotes engagement, it also poses challenges like misinformation and limited rural reach. However, these studies often focus on a particular election cycle, demographic group (mostly youths), or urban areas, neglecting a more comprehensive analysis across different elections, diverse citizenry, and platforms. This present study aims to fill that gap by providing a broader overview of the impact of multiple social media platforms on the entire Nigerian citizenry during political campaigns, considering urban-rural differences, cross-platform influences, and evolving patterns from 2011 to 2023.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), originally developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974). UGT emphasizes that audiences are active participants who use media to satisfy various needs such as information, personal identity, integration, and entertainment. In the context of political campaigns, this theory is particularly relevant because it explains how citizens purposefully engage with social media platforms to seek political information, connect with candidates, express opinions, and participate in public discourse. Several scholars have applied UGT in mass communication studies. For example, Oyeleye (2016) used UGT to examine how Nigerian youths utilized Twitter during the 2015 elections for political mobilization. Similarly, Ojebuyi and Fadeyi (2019) employed the theory to study radio listeners' engagement with political content in southwestern Nigeria, highlighting audience-centred media use. Additionally, Okoro and Nwafor (2013) applied UGT in their research on social media's influence on political awareness among Nigerian youths, showing that gratification-seeking behaviours drive online political participation. These applications demonstrate the theory's suitability for analysing the impact of media, especially social media, during political campaigns. Therefore, UGT provides a strong framework for understanding how Nigerian citizens actively use social media to engage with political campaigns and form public opinions.

Method

This study employed an observational method to collect data from major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Political campaign activities, posts, comments, hashtags, and user interactions were systematically observed and recorded during the 2023 election period. A purposive sampling technique was used to select political pages, groups, and trending topics related to major political parties. Observations focused on patterns of citizen engagement, campaign strategies, and public opinion formation. Data were documented through screenshots, notes, and content logs, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how social media influenced citizen behavior during political campaigns in Nigeria.

Results and discussion

The results and discussion are integrated to address the research questions by examining the social media platforms used during political campaigns, their influence on citizen participation, and the impact of misinformation. Findings highlight diverse platform usage, active political engagement, and misinformation challenges.

Research question 1: Which social media platforms are used during political campaigns?

Data collected through observation of social media activities during the 2023 Nigerian elections reveal that the most utilized platforms were Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Facebook hosted numerous official pages for political parties and candidates like APC and PDP, where daily updates, manifestos, and campaign videos were posted. Twitter/X was used for trending hashtags such as #NigeriaDecides2023, providing real-time updates and facilitating direct interaction between candidates and voters. WhatsApp was instrumental in the rapid spread of political messages, especially within private and community groups. Instagram was primarily used for image-based campaigns, showcasing rallies, endorsements, and behind-the-scenes content, while TikTok emerged as a surprising tool, with younger voters creating political memes and short campaign videos. According to Ajibade (2022), social media platforms, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, became the "modern campaign grounds," replacing traditional rallies. This diversification in platform use allowed candidates to target different demographics based on age, literacy level, and geographic location. Observations also indicated that urban areas leaned more on Twitter and Instagram, while rural communities heavily relied on WhatsApp and Facebook for political content distribution.

Research question 2: How does social media influence citizens' political participation?

Observational data showed that social media significantly enhanced citizens' political participation during the 2023 elections. Platforms like Twitter/X allowed citizens to voice opinions through trending political debates, while Facebook groups organized virtual town halls where candidates interacted with the electorate. WhatsApp groups became powerful mobilization tools, circulating campaign materials and encouraging group discussions that increased voter awareness. Studies like Okoro and Nwafor (2013) affirm that social media offers a platform for political enlightenment, empowering citizens to engage critically and participate in elections. Social media influenced citizens to not only vote but also participate in campaign donations, volunteer activities, and political protests. For instance, viral campaigns such as the #TakeBackNigeria movement largely mobilized first-time voters among the youth. Moreover, social media lowered the traditional barriers to political participation by allowing users to support candidates, criticize policies, and rally behind issues without requiring physical presence at rallies. However, observations also noted that digital activism sometimes replaced physical participation, raising concerns about "slacktivism," where online support does not always translate into real-world action. Nevertheless, the overall trend clearly shows that social media has become a vital space for citizen political engagement in Nigeria.

Research question 3: What is the impact of misinformation on citizens during campaigns?

Data observed across WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter/X revealed that misinformation had a significant negative impact on citizens during political campaigns. Several false stories and doctored images circulated, especially on WhatsApp groups, affecting voters' perceptions of candidates. Ajibade (2022) observed that rumors about candidates' health, scandals, and fake endorsements spread rapidly, shaping public opinion and polarizing the electorate. For example, misinformation about candidate disqualification went viral on WhatsApp days before the election, causing confusion among rural voters. Studies by Ifukor (2010) corroborate this finding, highlighting that social media, while democratizing information, also fosters rapid spread of falsehoods due to lack of verification. Misinformation discouraged political participation in some cases, as fear and distrust among voters increased. Additionally, rival political parties often planted fake news to discredit opponents, exploiting the low media literacy among the masses. Illustratively, screenshots captured during the observation period showed multiple fake polls and manipulated campaign posters being widely shared without

source verification. While platforms like Twitter/X attempted fact-checking with warning labels, the reach of misinformation often outpaced corrective efforts. The study thus reveals that misinformation remains a serious challenge to credible political engagement in Nigeria's digital campaign space.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively explored the impact of media, particularly social media platforms, on the citizenry during political campaigns in Nigeria. Findings revealed that Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok were extensively utilized during the 2023 elections, each serving specific campaign strategies and demographic outreach. Social media significantly boosted political participation, creating avenues for dialogue, mobilization, and activism among citizens. However, the pervasive spread of misinformation emerged as a major challenge, distorting political discourse, undermining trust, and influencing voter behavior negatively. Observational evidence showed that while digital platforms democratized political participation, they also became battlegrounds for disinformation campaigns. The Uses and Gratifications Theory successfully anchored this study by highlighting how citizens actively engaged media platforms to satisfy their political needs. Above all, while social media offers transformative potential for political communication in Nigeria, it also demands greater regulatory oversight, media literacy programs, and responsible platform governance to minimize misinformation risks. Thus, this study fills a critical gap by empirically documenting the dual role of social media as both an enabler of political engagement and a conduit for political misinformation in the Nigerian democratic landscape.

Recommendations:

- i. Political parties should diversify their use of social media platforms to reach different demographics effectively.
- ii. Citizens should be encouraged to actively engage with credible political content on social media to enhance their political participation.
- iii. Government and media organizations should strengthen efforts to combat misinformation through public education and digital literacy campaigns.
- iv. Social media companies should improve fact-checking measures and swiftly flag or remove false political information.
- v. Community leaders and influencers should promote responsible sharing of verified information during election periods.
- vi. Political candidates should use social media ethically to build trust and transparency with citizens.
- vii. Citizens should be trained to critically evaluate political content they consume online before acting on it.
- viii. Educational institutions should include media literacy programs to prepare students for responsible digital citizenship.

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