Impact of social media on political communication: A comparative review of 2015, 2019 and 2023 election campaigns in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the impact of social media on political communication and electoral outcomes in Nigeria during the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections. It highlighted how social media platforms have transformed traditional political engagement, enabling candidates to connect directly with voters and fostering real-time feedback. The findings reveal that social media played a crucial role in mobilizing voters, particularly youth, and shaping public opinion through interactive discourse. However, the rise of misinformation and political polarization emerged as significant challenges, undermining the integrity of the electoral process. The study emphasized that while social media has enhanced voter engagement and awareness, it has also facilitated the spread of misleading information that can distort perceptions and deepen societal divides. Recommendations include implementing digital literacy programs to educate voters about misinformation, establishing regulatory frameworks to combat fake news, and promoting transparency in online political communications. Overall, the research underscores the dual nature of social media as both a tool for democratization and a potential source of misinformation, necessitating ongoing efforts to harness its positive aspects while mitigating its risks.

1. INTRODUCTION

The political landscape all over the world and in Nigeria specifically, is changing. Such change is so drastic that every political actor who wants to remain relevant and politically progressive must try to catch up with the prevailing realities. Chief among the many changes in the political space is the way and manner through which political communication is packaged and disseminated to the public, especially the voters.

Political communication in Nigeria has moved from the crude way of gathering a handful of party faithful and potential voters in market squares, village squares, palaces and other local communication centres or the use of the town crier and some opinion leaders to instantaneous collection of political data and dissemination of political information, campaigns and manifestoes between and among all political actors including the politicians, voters and all others.

This change, arguably, is driven by the advent of the social media; a generic term for all internet-powered communication platforms that allows users to interact with each other often exchanging immediate feedbacks.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and so many others is increasingly becoming very important tools in the political scene all over the world. The emergence of the digital era has revolutionized political communication in Nigeria, introducing new opportunities and challenges (Odubote, 2014).

2. OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this study is to assess the impact of social media on political communication with emphasis on the 2015, 2019 and 2023 election campaigns in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Assess the role of social media platforms in shaping political communication strategies during the 2015, 2019, and 2023 election campaigns in Nigeria

2. Evaluate the influence of social media on voter engagement, political participation, and public opinion during the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections in Nigeria

3. Compare the evolution of social media's impact on misinformation, political polarization, and campaign effectiveness during the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections in Nigeria

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One relevant media theory that aligns with this study is the Uses and Gratifications Theory. This theory posits that individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs, such as information, personal identity, integration, and social interaction. In the context of Nigerian elections, this theory provides a framework for understanding how voters engage with social media platforms during electoral campaigns.

During the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections, social media became a primary channel for political communication, allowing candidates to disseminate their messages directly to the electorate. Voters increasingly turned to platforms like Facebook and Twitter not only for news updates but also for engaging in discussions about candidates and policies. Research indicates that voters sought out social media to fulfill their need for timely information and to participate in political discourse (Igbinedion & Ajisebiya, 2023). The interactive nature of these platforms enabled users to express their opinions and connect with like-minded individuals, thereby fostering a sense of community among supporters.

However, the theory also highlights the potential pitfalls of social media engagement. As voters curate their online experiences, they may inadvertently isolate themselves in echo chambers that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs (Bimber, 2014). This phenomenon was particularly evident during the 2019 elections when misinformation campaigns exploited these dynamics to manipulate public perceptions (Oseni, 2021). By applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory, researchers can better understand the motivations driving voter engagement on social media and the implications for political communication in Nigeria's evolving electoral landscape.

4. EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN NIGERIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

The evolution of social media use in Nigerian election campaigns has significantly reshaped the political landscape, particularly from the 2011 general elections onward. Initially, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were primarily utilized for information dissemination and voter mobilization. The 2011 elections marked a turning point, with candidates recognizing the potential of these platforms to engage directly with citizens and influence public opinion.

This trend continued to grow, especially during the 2015 and 2019 elections, where social media became an indispensable tool for political communication. Research indicates that social media facilitated a more participatory political environment, allowing candidates to share their manifestos and engage with voters in real time (Ogundipe et al., 2020).

In the 2015 elections, social media's role was particularly pronounced. Candidates leveraged platforms like Twitter to mobilize support and disseminate campaign messages rapidly. This was evident in the successful campaign of the All Progressives Congress (APC), which utilized social media to challenge the then-ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Studies have shown that social media not only increased political awareness among young voters but also played a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes by providing a platform for citizen journalism during the results collation process (Suntai & Targema, 2020).

The interactive nature of these platforms allowed for immediate feedback and engagement, enabling campaigns to adjust their strategies based on voter responses. The 2023 presidential elections further underscored the importance of social media in Nigerian politics. Research conducted during this period highlighted how platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram became essential for candidate engagement and voter mobilization (Morah & Uzochukwu, 2020).

The study emphasized that social media influenced voter choices significantly, as candidates used these platforms to address issues directly affecting citizens, thus fostering a sense of connection and urgency among voters. The findings indicated that while tribal and religious affiliations traditionally influenced voting behavior, the increasing use of social media began to transcend these divides, allowing for a more issue-based electoral discourse (Akande et al., 2023).However, the rise of social media in electoral processes also brought challenges, particularly concerning misinformation and divisive rhetoric. The proliferation of fake news during election periods has been documented as a significant issue that undermines democratic processes (Oso & Olayiwola, 2020).

Social media became a double-edged sword; while it empowered citizens and increased political participation, it also facilitated the spread of harmful narratives that could incite violence or deepen societal divides. The infamous #EndSARS protests in 2020 exemplified how social media could mobilize citizens for both positive change and disruptive actions.

The evolution of social media use in Nigerian election campaigns reflects a broader global trend where digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping political communication and voter engagement. As Nigeria continues to navigate its complex electoral landscape, the influence of social media will likely persist, necessitating ongoing research into its implications for democracy and governance. Scholars

stress the need for enhanced digital literacy among voters to combat misinformation while promoting transparency in political communication (Adeagbo et al., 2019). This evolving dynamic underscores the importance of understanding how social media can be harnessed for positive political engagement while mitigating its potential risks.

5. SOCIAL MEDIA AND VOTER ENGAGEMENT: PATTERNS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION

The relationship between social media and voter engagement in Nigeria has evolved dramatically over the past decade, becoming a crucial element in shaping political participation and public opinion. The emergence of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has transformed how political campaigns are conducted, enabling candidates to reach voters directly and engage them in unprecedented ways. This shift became particularly evident during the 2011 general elections, where social media began to play a pivotal role in mobilizing voters and disseminating information about electoral processes (Idowu et al., 2021). The participatory nature of these platforms allowed citizens to engage in political discourse, share opinions, and access information about candidates and their policies.

Research indicates that social media significantly enhances voter engagement by providing a space for civic education and facilitating discussions around electoral issues. For instance, during the 2015 elections, Twitter was reported to be ten times more active than usual, with over 12.4 million tweets related to the elections (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022). This level of engagement illustrates how social media can galvanize public interest and participation in the electoral process. Moreover, hashtags related to specific candidates trended regularly, allowing voters to follow discussions and express their preferences online. This phenomenon reflects a broader trend where social media serves as a platform for political mobilization and public opinion formation.

The role of social media in shaping public opinion cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that the frequency of interactions on these platforms correlates with changes in voter preferences and behaviors (Igbinedion & Ajisebiya, 2023). Social media has become a critical conduit for political discourse, enabling rapid dissemination of information that influences voter decisions. For example, during the recent 2023 presidential elections, candidates leveraged social media to connect with younger voters who are more active online. This demographic shift highlights the importance of digital engagement strategies in modern electoral politics (Odon, 2024).However, the rise of social media also presents challenges, particularly concerning misinformation and polarization. The proliferation of fake news has been identified as a significant threat to democratic processes in Nigeria. Instances of character assassination and negative campaigning have increased as political actors exploit social media to discredit opponents (Oso & Olayiwola, 2020). This environment can create echo chambers where individuals are exposed only to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, thereby undermining informed decision-making among voters.

Despite these challenges, social media remains a powerful tool for enhancing voter engagement and participation in Nigeria's electoral landscape. The platforms facilitate real-time monitoring of electoral processes by enabling citizens to report irregularities and hold authorities accountable (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022). During events like the #EndSARS protests in 2020, social media demonstrated its capacity to mobilize citizens for collective action, reflecting its dual role as both a facilitator of engagement and a potential source of disruption.

The interplay between social media and voter engagement in Nigeria illustrates a complex landscape where opportunities for increased political participation coexist with challenges posed by misinformation and polarization. As social media continues to evolve as a critical component of electoral politics, it is essential for stakeholders to promote digital literacy and transparency to ensure that these platforms enhance rather than hinder democratic processes (Mamman, 2019). Understanding these dynamics will be crucial for fostering an informed electorate capable of making sound decisions in future elections.

6. SOCIAL MEDIA, MISINFORMATION, AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION: IMPACTS ON ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

The interplay between social media, misinformation, and political polarization has become increasingly significant in shaping electoral campaigns in Nigeria. As social media platforms proliferate, they have transformed how political information is disseminated and consumed, often leading to heightened polarization among voters. The 2015 general elections marked a pivotal moment in this evolution, as social media was extensively utilized for campaign strategies, enabling candidates to reach broader audiences and engage with voters directly (Oso & Olayiwola, 2020). However, this same platform has also facilitated the spread of misinformation, which can distort public perceptions and influence electoral outcomes.

Research indicates that misinformation on social media can exacerbate political polarization by reinforcing existing biases and encouraging echo chambers where individuals are exposed primarily to views that align with their own (Adewunmi, 2019).

This phenomenon is evident in Nigeria, where political discourse is often characterized by divisive rhetoric and character assassination campaigns aimed at discrediting opponents (Oseni, 2021). The use of social media as a tool for propaganda has contributed to an environment where misinformation thrives, leading to increased tensions between different political factions. For instance, during the 2019 elections, various reports highlighted how false narratives were spread through social media to undermine candidates from opposing parties, further entrenching divisions along ethnic and religious lines (Akande, 2018).

The emotional appeal of content shared on social media also plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Campaigns often exploit emotional triggers to resonate with voters, eliciting strong reactions that can lead to polarized attitudes (Tucker et al., 2018). This strategy has been particularly effective among younger voters who are more active on these platforms and susceptible to emotional messaging. The resulting engagement can significantly influence voter behavior but can also lead to a distorted understanding of political realities due to the prevalence of misleading information.

Moreover, the dynamics of misinformation are compounded by the selective exposure theory, which suggests that individuals tend to seek out information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs (Bimber, 2014). In Nigeria's highly polarized political landscape, this tendency is exacerbated by the partisan nature of many social media interactions. Users often curate their online environments to align with their political affiliations, leading to a fragmented information ecosystem that further polarizes public opinion (Igbinedion & Ajisebiya, 2023).

The implications of these trends are profound for electoral integrity and democratic processes in Nigeria. Misinformation not only undermines informed decision-making among voters but also poses challenges for political accountability and transparency (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022). As candidates increasingly rely on social media for campaigning, the potential for misinformation to sway public opinion raises critical questions about the credibility of electoral outcomes.

The relationship between social media, misinformation, and political polarization in Nigeria highlights significant challenges for electoral campaigns. While social media has the potential to enhance voter engagement and facilitate political discourse, it also serves as a breeding ground for misinformation that can distort public perceptions and deepen societal divides. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from stakeholders to promote digital literacy among voters and implement measures that mitigate the spread of false information during election cycles (Mamman, 2019). Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering a more informed electorate capable of navigating the complexities of modern electoral politics.

7. A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES IN THE 2015, 2019 AND 2023 ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

The impact of social media on political communication and electoral outcomes in Nigeria has evolved significantly across the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections. Each election cycle has witnessed a growing reliance on social media platforms as tools for political engagement, voter mobilization, and the dissemination of information. This literature review examines the comparative effects of social media on these aspects during the three electoral periods, highlighting both the positive and negative implications for Nigeria's democratic processes.

In the 2015 general elections, social media emerged as a powerful force in shaping political discourse. The platforms facilitated unprecedented levels of engagement among voters, particularly the youth demographic. According to a study by Oso and Olayiwola (2020), Twitter was ten times more active during the election period than at other times, with over 12.4 million tweets related to the elections. This surge in online activity allowed candidates to connect directly with voters, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. The All Progressives Congress (APC) effectively utilized social media to mobilize support against the incumbent People's Democratic Party (PDP), leading to a historic electoral victory (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022). The participatory nature of social media not only enhanced voter awareness but also enabled citizen journalism, where ordinary Nigerians reported on electoral processes in real time, contributing to transparency and accountability.

The 2019 elections saw an intensified use of social media as candidates recognized its potential for shaping public opinion and influencing electoral outcomes. Research by Mamman (2019) indicated that political parties increasingly adopted platforms like Facebook and Instagram to disseminate their messages and engage with constituents. However, this election cycle also highlighted the darker side of social media, particularly concerning misinformation and political polarization. The spread of fake news became a significant concern, with various reports indicating that false narratives were used to manipulate voter perceptions and discredit opponents (Oseni, 2021). This environment fostered divisions along ethnic and religious lines, complicating the already polarized

political landscape in Nigeria.

By the time of the 2023 presidential elections, the role of social media had further evolved. A study conducted by Igbinedion and Ajisebiya (2023) found that social media platforms were instrumental in shaping voters' choices through rapid dissemination of political information. The research employed the Uses and Gratification Theory to assess how voters engaged with online content and how this influenced their decision-making processes. The findings revealed a strong correlation between social media interactions involving political content and shifts in voter preferences across various demographic groups. Candidates like Peter Obi, Atiku Abubakar, and Bola Ahmed Tinubu significantly increased their online followership, utilizing hashtags to create movements around their campaigns (IRE Journals, 2023). This strategic use of social media not only boosted voter participation but also shaped electoral outcomes by fostering a sense of community among supporters.

Despite these advancements in voter engagement through social media, challenges persisted in the form of misinformation and manipulation. The Department of State Services identified the proliferation of fake news as a major threat to the integrity of the 2023 elections (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022). Instances of character assassination and negative campaigning were rampant as candidates sought to undermine their opponents through misleading narratives. Such tactics not only distorted public perceptions but also contributed to widespread mistrust in electoral processes.

The comparative assessment across these three elections underscores a dual narrative regarding social media's impact on Nigerian politics. On one hand, it has served as a catalyst for democratization by enhancing political participation and providing platforms for civic engagement. On the other hand, it has also facilitated misinformation campaigns that threaten democratic integrity. The evolution from 2015 to 2023 illustrates how candidates have adapted their strategies in response to both opportunities presented by social media and challenges posed by its misuse.

The impact of social media on political communication and electoral outcomes in Nigeria has been profound yet complex. Each election cycle has demonstrated an increasing reliance on digital platforms for mobilization and engagement while simultaneously exposing vulnerabilities related to misinformation and polarization. As Nigeria continues to navigate its democratic journey, it is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to promote digital literacy among voters, combat misinformation effectively, and ensure transparency in online political discourse (Mamman, 2019). Understanding these dynamics will be essential for fostering an informed electorate capable of making sound decisions in future elections.

8. CONCLUSION

The study of the impact of social media on political communication and electoral outcomes in Nigeria across the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections reveals a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges that have shaped the electoral process in Nigeria. The findings indicate that social media has emerged as a pivotal tool for enhancing voter engagement, facilitating real-time communication between candidates and constituents, and fostering political participation among diverse demographic groups. The significant increase in online activity during these elections underscores the potential of social media to mobilize voters and create platforms for civic discourse. However, the rise of misinformation and political polarization poses serious threats to the integrity of electoral processes, complicating the relationship between social media and democratic governance.

Based on the foregoing, the study concludes that while social media has undeniably contributed to increased political awareness and engagement among voters, it has also facilitated the spread of misleading information that can distort public perceptions and deepen societal divides. The comparative assessment highlights that each electoral cycle has seen an evolution in how candidates utilize social media, adapting their strategies to leverage its strengths while grappling with its inherent risks. As Nigeria continues to navigate the complexities of its democratic journey, it is essential for stakeholders—including political actors, civil society organizations, and regulatory bodies—to implement measures that mitigate the adverse effects of misinformation while promoting the positive aspects of social media as a tool for democratic engagement.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively address the challenges facing social media use in political communication, there is an urgent need for enhanced digital literacy programs aimed at educating voters about identifying misinformation and understanding the dynamics of social media. Such initiatives should target not only young voters but also older demographics who may be less familiar with digital platforms.

More so, regulatory frameworks must be established to monitor and combat the spread of fake news during election periods. This could involve collaboration between social media companies and government agencies to develop mechanisms for flagging false information and promoting credible sources. Additionally, political parties should prioritize transparency in their online communications by providing verifiable information about their policies and campaign activities. Engaging in fact-checking

practices can help build trust with voters and counteract misinformation. Lastly, fostering a culture of responsible social media use among citizens is crucial. Encouraging individuals to critically evaluate content before sharing can reduce the amplification of false narratives and promote healthier political discourse.

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