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Exploring social media strategies use during the presidential campaign of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social networking during Nigeria's presidential campaign 2023 represented a significant era of heightened political engagement as social media became a crucial tool. This study critically evaluates the effectiveness and shortcomings of the social media strategies adopted by candidates, highlighting issues such as misinformation, cyberbullying, and the polarisation of the electorate. The research was grounded in conspiracy theory, employing quantitative and qualitative methods. A cluster sampling technique was employed to ensure a representative sample, dividing the population into six distinct clusters based on the six Area Councils of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. The Cochran formula was used to calculate a sample size of 385 respondents for the quantitative component of the study, and 18 participants were selected through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. The study was directed by research questions that aligned with its objectives. Data collection was conducted using interview guides and questionnaires. The results were presented in tables, charts, and narrative formats. The findings reveal that social media hurt Nigeria's 2023 presidential election campaign. Studies reveal several challenges, including unreliable internet services, poor power supply, polarisation, and spreading false information. The study recommends the ethical use of social media platforms by candidates, their supporters, and all stakeholders to foster ethical practices and curb the dissemination of false and misleading information.

Keywords: Social Media; Presidential Campaign; Misinformation; Polarisation; Qualitative Research; Ethical Practices

1. Introduction

Since the advent of social media, political actors have increasingly relied on these platforms to garner votes and mobilise support. Political supporters have also embraced social media to promote their chosen candidates. Udoka (2015) argues that the rise of the internet has significantly enhanced the openness and equality of political participation. According to Fournieris (2022), traditional door-to-door canvassing has largely been supplanted by platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X(formally Twitter). For instance, in 2008, former President Barack Obama notably leveraged social media to engage with voters (Nwafor et al., 2023). This digital strategy marked a significant transformation in electoral campaigning. Barthel (2016) notes that, by the 2016 U.S. elections, social media had become the second most popular medium for reaching voters. Keane-Dawson (2024) highlights that social media has fundamentally altered U.S. politics, enabling incumbents, challengers, and commentators to address voters directly. Since then, platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube have shaped political movements (Nwafor et al., 2023). Gil de Zuniga et al. (2010) suggest that social media networks have significantly enhanced the public's sense of political efficacy and inclination to participate in political processes. These platforms facilitate the organisation and mobilisation of collective interests, making political figures more accountable and transparent due to the constant scrutiny they face online.

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In France, Fournieris (2022) asserts that social media networks have effectively enabled presidential election campaigns to reach diverse voter demographics. Tech Policy Press (2022) confirms that these platforms played a crucial role in the French 2022 election. Similarly, the 2024 South African election saw extensive use of social media by politicians to attract voters. Dabula (2024) notes that social networking sites significantly influenced voter perceptions, a sentiment echoed by Gerber and Strachan (2024), who highlight the role of platforms like X, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok in disseminating messages about political candidates during the 2024 South African election.

In Nigeria, the adoption of social media for electoral campaigns first gained substantial momentum during the 2011 general elections. Presidential candidate Goodluck Jonathan was one of the pioneering figures to strategically employ platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to connect with voters, signifying a transformative shift in Nigeria's political communication landscape (Abubakar & Ibraheem, 2020). This was the initial moment when social media emerged as a critical tool in shaping electoral discourse, providing political candidates with direct and interactive channels to engage with the electorate, particularly younger demographics.

Abubakar and Ibraheem (2020) observed that the 2011 general elections "marked the beginning of social media as an influential tool for political mobilisation and campaign strategy, laying the foundation for its expanded use in subsequent elections" (p. 35). The use of these platforms grew in subsequent elections, with political parties, candidates, and news outlets increasingly leveraging them to disseminate information, mobilise voter support, and enhance campaign strategies (Bassey et al., 2024). This integration of digital platforms revolutionised the nature of electoral campaigns, making them more interactive, dynamic, and accessible to a broader audience.

Despite the positive impacts of social media on political processes globally, it has also faced criticism for facilitating the spread of misinformation and fake news about political candidates, their parties, and their supporters. Dube (2024) points out that concerns over fake news persist among stakeholders in South Africa, as platforms like TikTok, Facebook, X, and WhatsApp are used to exacerbate political issues. Tandoc et al. (2018) argue that misinformation and disinformation remain significant challenges on social media, with false or misleading information potentially damaging a candidate's reputation and influencing voter decisions. Ferrara et al. (2016) observe that candidates and their supporters often employ bots and automated accounts to amplify their messages or undermine opponents, distorting online discourse and misrepresenting public sentiment. Kreiss (2019) concurs that the lack of effective regulation on social media platforms often leads to inconsistent policies and enforcement. Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate the shortcomings of social media use during the presidential campaign of the 2023 general elections in Abuja, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to explore the social media strategies used during the presidential campaign of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, with a specific focus on Abuja. The study aims to comprehensively analyse how these strategies shaped the electoral landscape and voter engagement. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- This study aims to identify and critically examine the challenges encountered by the residents of Abuja, Nigeria, in using social media platforms during the 2023 presidential election campaign.
- To evaluate the extent to which the limitations and deficiencies of social media usage influenced the overall success and reach of the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1. Social Media

Social media (SM) refers to various internet-based platforms and technologies like Facebook, X, and Instagram. These platforms enable users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and content within virtual networks. Jimada (2019) defines social media as "a dynamic online medium that has transformed our operations. Like traditional media, it provides opportunities to collect and disseminate news, communicate with audiences, and advocate for change. Unlike traditional media, social media allows these activities to occur in real-time through highly interactive global or regional networks."

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), as cited in Bassegy, Kente, Akpede, and Oganle (2024), describe social media as a collection of internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 technologies that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media also encompasses online communities' activities, practices, and behaviours in sharing information, knowledge, and opinions through conversational media. Applications are broadly categorised into forums and message boards, review and opinion sites, social networks, blogging and microblogging, bookmarking, and media-sharing platforms. These tools facilitate communication between organisations and their customers, customers themselves, and customers and organisations.

Wigley and Zang (2011) highlight that social media includes platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X, where users interact via computers or mobile devices. Palen (2008, as cited in Wigley & Zang, 2011) defines social media as encompassing blogs, social networking environments, person-to-person broadcasting, messaging, and other Web 2.0 applications. Dykeman (2008) views social media as platforms that enable users to share and discuss information through the internet and mobile-based tools.

Marchese (2007) contends that social media differs from traditional media in information discovery, distribution, and consumption methods. Boyd (2006) supports this view, asserting that social media centres around community. Heathfield (2013) describes social media as tools and platforms for publishing and interacting socially online, including user-generated content such as conversations, articles, images, recipes, and other daily shared materials. Edegoh, Asemah, and Ekanem (2013) argue that social media refers to platforms designed for social interaction, utilising highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques and encompassing a range of online technologies that facilitate communication and resource sharing (Greenhow, 2009; Edegoh et al., 2013).

Anvil Media, Inc. (2009, as cited in McClennan, 2006) describes social media as an overarching term that includes various activities integrating technology, social interaction, and creating text and images. The nature of this interaction and the presentation of information depend on diverse perspectives and the construction of shared meanings as individuals share their narratives and understandings. Typical forms of social media include weblogs (or blogs), microblogs, social networks, wikis, and media-sharing sites (Pascu et al., 2007; Asemah et al., 2013). While platforms like Facebook and Twitter are commonly associated with social media, the term also encompasses blogs, forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts, RSS feeds, search engine marketing, video sharing, wikis, professional networks, and microblogging sites (Wright & Hinson, 2009, as cited in Gordon, 2010).

2.1.2. Election Campaign

The term "political campaign," frequently used interchangeably with "election campaign" or simply "campaign," lacks a singular, comprehensive definition due to its evolving nature over time. Scholars across various disciplines, including media studies and political science, offer differing interpretations of the concept, contributing to the absence of a universally accepted definition (Bassegy et al., 2024). Despite these varied perspectives, the overarching aim of any political campaign is to "maximise the probability of victory" (Nickerson & Rogers, 2014, p. 57). This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on political campaigns by exploring their diverse interpretations and applications.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (2009) describe a campaign message as "a simple statement that will be repeated over and over throughout the campaign to persuade your target voters" (p. 24). Aduradola and Ojukwu (2013) describe the campaign message as "an important and potent tool that politicians use to express views and feelings to the public to reshape and redirect the electorate's opinions to align with theirs" (p. 106). For example, Chief Moshood Abiola's campaign message in Nigeria's 1993 presidential election was "Hope, Farewell to Poverty," while former President Goodluck Jonathan's 2011 campaign message was "A Breath of Fresh Air." These examples illustrate how campaign messages can effectively engage and persuade voters. According to the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (2009), effective campaign messages should be concise, truthful, and credible. They must also be persuasive and relevant to voters, highlighting contrasts and being transparent and emotionally resonant. Additionally, campaign messages should be targeted and conveyed repeatedly.

Olisa (2015) defines a political campaign as:

"An organised effort which seeks to influence the decision-making process within a specific group" (Olisa, 2015, p. 116).

In democratic contexts, this often refers to electoral campaigns where representatives are chosen, or referendums decided. High-profile political campaigns in modern politics typically focus on candidates for head of state or government positions, such as presidents or prime ministers. Olisa emphasises that the term "organised effort"

highlights modern campaigns' systematic, step-by-step nature, contrasting with the less structured campaigns described by Norris (2014). An effectively organised campaign is crucial, as a poor organisation can significantly diminish a candidate's chances of success.

Aduradola and Ojukwu (2013) further define political campaigns as:

"The mobilisation of forces by an organisation or individuals to influence others to effect an identified and desired political change" (Ojukwu, 2013, p. 106).

This definition underscores the campaign's role in mobilising support and shaping perceptions to position candidates as viable representatives.

Ginsberg (2009), as cited in Olujide, Adeyemi, and Gbadeyan (2011), characterises a political campaign as "organised efforts by a political party or candidate for public office to attract the support of voters in an election" (p. 180). Ginsberg identifies five essential elements of a political campaign: professional public relations, polling, broadcast media, direct mail, and the internet.

2.1.3. Challenges of Social Media in Political Campaigns in Nigeria

As a critical tool in political campaigns, social media offers significant advantages, notably in voter outreach, engagement, and cost-effective communication. However, these benefits come with considerable challenges, many evident during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. One of the foremost concerns is the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation. False or misleading content can rapidly spread across platforms, often to influence voter perceptions or damage the reputations of political candidates. According to Bradshaw and Howard (2018), misinformation in political campaigns can potentially undermine the integrity of democratic processes, distorting public discourse and influencing election outcomes unfairly.

Another significant challenge is the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, which limit exposure to diverse perspectives. Social media algorithms typically curate content that reinforces users' beliefs and contributes to political polarisation (Cinelli et al., 2021). During the 2023 elections, this phenomenon was evident in the aggressive, often hostile exchanges between supporters of opposing candidates, exacerbating political divisions and discouraging constructive debate (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Social media manipulation through automated bots and fake accounts further complicates the landscape. Ferrara et al. (2016) highlight how these tactics can artificially inflate the visibility of specific political messages or drown out dissenting voices, thus distorting public sentiment. The presence of bots also raises questions about the authenticity of online political engagement, which could have improved the legitimacy of conversations around electoral issues.

Privacy and data security concerns have also arisen due to the heavy reliance on social media for political campaigns. Political candidates frequently gather large amounts of personal data to tailor their messaging and advertisements. This raises ethical questions regarding data privacy and the potential misuse of personal information (Bennett & Lyon, 2019). Such practices may compromise individuals' privacy and breach their rights without adequate regulations. Foreign interference represents another pressing issue. As Howard et al. (2018) highlighted, foreign actors can exploit social media platforms to spread disinformation that attempts to manipulate public opinion and influence the outcomes of elections. The risks are compounded by cybersecurity vulnerabilities, where candidates' social media accounts are susceptible to hacking and manipulation. Crawford et al. (2016) argue that stronger digital protections are essential to safeguard the integrity of political campaigns.

Despite these obstacles, political candidates in Nigeria have adopted various strategies to mitigate the challenges posed by social media. These include implementing fact-checking initiatives to combat the spread of misinformation, as well as using targeted advertising and collaborations with micro-influencers to enhance digital outreach (Bassey et al., 2024). However, tackling these challenges requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders, including regulatory bodies and the electorate, to promote responsible social media usage and improve digital literacy (Bassey et al., 2024).

Despite these challenges, Nigerian political candidates have endeavoured to navigate the complex social media landscape. Initiatives such as fact-checking organisations and partnerships with digital influencers came as countermeasures to misinformation and targeted messaging (Bassey et al., 2024). However, addressing these issues requires collaboration among stakeholders, including regulatory authorities, to foster responsible social media use and improve digital literacy among voters (Bassey et al., 2024). While social media can potentially revolutionise political campaigns in Nigeria, its impact is twofold. The balance between its advantages and drawbacks is delicate, and the role

of social media in future elections will largely depend on how effectively these challenges are addressed. As Bassey et al. (2024) suggest, ensuring that social media enhances rather than undermines the democratic process is paramount for the future of Nigerian elections.

2.1.4. Review of Empirical Studies

In 2023, Daramola conducted a study entitled "Social Media and Voter Behaviour in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election." This research's primary objective was to investigate social media's impact on voter behaviour during the Nigerian presidential elections. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys to collect data on voter behaviour and attitudes alongside content analysis to examine the political discourse on social media platforms. This comprehensive methodology allowed the researcher to obtain quantitative and qualitative insights into the relationship between social media usage and voter engagement. The findings revealed that social media played a significant role in shaping voter behaviour during the 2023 elections. Candidates effectively used these platforms to influence voter preferences, and the information disseminated notably impacted the electorate's perceptions. The study concluded that social media emerged as a powerful tool in shaping political discourse and influencing candidate selection.

However, while Daramola's study provided a broad analysis of social media's impact on voter behaviour, it did not examine the specific strategies employed by candidates in their social media campaigns. The current research aims to explore these particular strategies presidential candidates use on social media platforms. This investigation seeks to address the existing gap in the literature and enhance the understanding of how targeted social media strategies can affect voter preferences and engagement.

Chioma (2023) conducted a research study titled "The Impact of Social Media on Political Discourse in Nigeria: A Longitudinal Analysis (2015-2023)." This study aimed to thoroughly examine how social media has influenced political discourse in Nigeria over an extended period, specifically from 2015 to 2023. The objective was to understand the evolving role of social media in shaping political discussions and influencing voter decisions throughout these years. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating content analysis, surveys, and expert interviews. This longitudinal design facilitated the tracking of changes over time, using Framing Theory to analyse how social media shapes political discourse. The findings revealed a significant increase in the influence of social media on political discourse in Nigeria, with its impact on voter choices becoming more pronounced between 2015 and 2023.

While Chioma's study offers valuable insights through its longitudinal analysis of social media's impact on political discourse in Nigeria, it does not explicitly address the influence of social media on voter preferences during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, particularly within the AMAC, Gwagwalada, and Kuje Area Councils in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This omission represents a notable gap that the current research aims to fill by focusing on candidates' specific social media strategies during the 2023 elections.

In 2024, Bassey, Kente, Akpede, and Ogande conducted a study titled "Social Media Campaign Techniques Employed by Presidential Candidates in the 2023 Nigerian Elections." The primary objective of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of various social media techniques in engaging voters to influence their preferences. The researchers employed a qualitative approach, combining content analysis with in-depth interviews. Data were gathered from various social media platforms used by the candidates and from interviews with campaign strategists and social media managers. The study was grounded in Technological Determinism Theory, which examines how technological advancements drive social change. This theoretical framework provided valuable insights into how social media tools affected electoral campaigns and voter engagement. The findings indicated that social media was highly effective in reaching and mobilising voters, mainly through strategic visual content, hashtags, and viral campaigns. Integrating social media into campaign strategies significantly improved voter engagement and played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the candidates.

While Bassey et al. focused on the techniques employed in social media campaigns, they needed to specifically examine how these strategies influenced voter preferences and decision-making processes. Therefore, the current research aims to investigate how social media strategies impacted voter preferences during the 2023 elections.

Okonkwo (2020) conducted a study entitled "The Role of Social Media in Nigerian Elections: A Study of the 2019 General Elections." The research's primary objective was to investigate social media's impact on voter behaviour and candidate campaigns during the 2019 Nigerian General Elections. The study used a mixed-methods approach that incorporated surveys, interviews, and content analysis of social media interactions. This methodology enabled the researcher to gather data on voter behaviour, candidate engagement on social media, and the nature of online political discourse. The

findings underscored that social media played a crucial role in political communication during the 2019 elections. Candidates effectively used these platforms to engage with voters and influence their decisions.

While Okonkwo's study offered significant insights into the role of social media in the 2019 Nigerian General Elections context, it did not specifically address the relationship between social media and voter preferences during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. Therefore, the current research aims to examine how social media strategies shaped voter preferences in the 2023 election.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of conspiracy theory. During Nigeria's 2023 elections, a proliferation of conspiracy theories accompanied the electoral process from its inception (Chen, 2021). The digital age, characterised by expansive and unregulated media, has facilitated the widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories, raising concerns about the influence of misinformation on public opinion and political issues. A conspiracy theory explains an event or situation as covert actions by powerful and often malevolent groups, typically with political motives (Jaron & Stef, 2021; Ted, 1994). This definition suggests that conspiracy theories involve the belief that significant secrets are being withheld from the public.

Conspiracy theories aim to explain events or practices through the lens of secretive actors abusing their power to further their objectives (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Social media platforms like Facebook play a crucial role in amplifying rumours among like-minded partisan groups but are less effective at correcting misinformation (Shin et al., 2016). Misleading posts often garner more engagement than accurate information, particularly evident in Facebook content related to politicians (Sharma et al., 2017).

The endorsement of misinformation and conspiracy theories is frequently driven by individuals' psychological need for consistency and control (Festinger, 1957; Kunda, 1990). When people encounter disjointed or unresolved events, they are more likely to accept explanations that align with a compelling narrative that fits their pre-existing beliefs. Research indicates that partisan ideology significantly influences the motivated reasoning behind conspiracy theory endorsement; both liberals and conservatives tend to support theories that reinforce their existing viewpoints (Miller et al., 2015). Consequently, this theoretical framework is pertinent to this study.

3. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to investigate the social media strategies employed during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaign. This methodology integrates quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to comprehensively understand how these strategies influenced voter behaviour and political engagement. Combining these two approaches, the research aims to capture general trends (quantitative) and in-depth perspectives (qualitative) on the subject, offering a well-rounded analysis of the phenomenon.

The research adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, facilitating the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), this design allows for integrating various data types, ensuring that the study leverages the strengths of both methodologies. The quantitative data from surveys will reveal general trends in social media usage, while qualitative data from interviews will provide a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by political actors. This design is particularly suited for the study as it enables a nuanced analysis of how social media influenced voter behaviour during the 2023 presidential campaign in Nigeria.

3.1. Population of The Study and Sampling Technique

The study's population comprises residents from the six Area Councils in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja: Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), Gwagwalada, Kuje, Abaji, Bwari, and Kwali. According to Macrotrends (2024), the population of Abuja is approximately 4,026,000. A cluster sampling technique was employed to ensure a representative sample, dividing the population into six distinct clusters based on the Area Councils. The Cochran formula (Cochran, 1977) was used to calculate a sample size of 385 respondents for the quantitative component of the study, guaranteeing a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Respondents were selected proportionally from each of the six councils.

The formula for calculating the sample size is as follows:

$$N_0 = \frac{Z^2 P \cdot (1-P)}{e^2}$$

Where:

n_0 = required sample size,

Z = Z-value (1.96 for a 95% confidence level),

p = estimated proportion of the population (0.5 is used for maximum variability),

e = margin of error (commonly set at 0.05).

With a 95% confidence level and 5% margin error, the calculation would be as follows:

$$Z = 1.96$$

$$P = 0.5$$

$$e = 0.05$$

Substituting these values into the formula:

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96^2) \cdot (0.5) \cdot (1-0.5)}{(0.05^2)} = \frac{3.8416 \cdot 0.5 \cdot 0.5}{0.0025} = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025} \approx 384.16$$

Thus, a sample size of 385 respondents was deemed appropriate for the quantitative survey, distributed proportionally across the six Area Councils, resulting in approximately 64 respondents from each council. For the qualitative component, interviews were conducted with 18 participants selected through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015). These participants included individuals with significant involvement in the 2023 presidential campaign, such as campaign staff, social media influencers, local leaders, party leaders and voters actively engaged in online political discussions. Their inclusion was crucial for gaining in-depth insights into the specific social media strategies deployed during the campaign.

3.2. Data Collection

The data collection process was organised into two phases: quantitative and qualitative. In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire was developed using a five-point Likert scale to assess respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of various social media strategies employed during the campaign. This questionnaire was administered to 385 respondents across the six Area Councils in Abuja, ensuring comprehensive coverage of diverse demographic groups. The quantitative data aimed to capture widespread patterns of social media usage and its perceived influence on voter decision-making.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 carefully selected participants. Each interview lasted between 20 and 25 minutes and featured open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences with social media campaigns and the strategies they encountered or employed. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling respondents to provide detailed accounts of their experiences. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and non-verbal cues were noted to enrich the qualitative analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations. Responses to the Likert scale questions were assessed using mean deviation, applying a criteria mean of 3.00 to determine the significance of findings. These descriptive methods helped identify general patterns in social media usage during the campaign.

Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). This involved transcription, coding, and the identification of key themes. Themes such as the influence of social media influencers, targeted advertisements, and voter mobilisation through platforms like Twitter and Facebook were highlighted. This method facilitated a deeper understanding of the nuances of social media strategies and their perceived effectiveness in the 2023 presidential election.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines established by the American Psychological Association (2020) were strictly followed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure their voluntary participation. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, with interviewees assigned anonymous identifiers (e.g.,

Participant 1, Participant 2, 3.....18). Sensitive data were securely stored, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

Of the 385 questionnaires administered, 365 were returned and deemed valid for analysis. This represents a response rate of approximately 98%. The distribution and percentage representation of the returned questionnaires are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

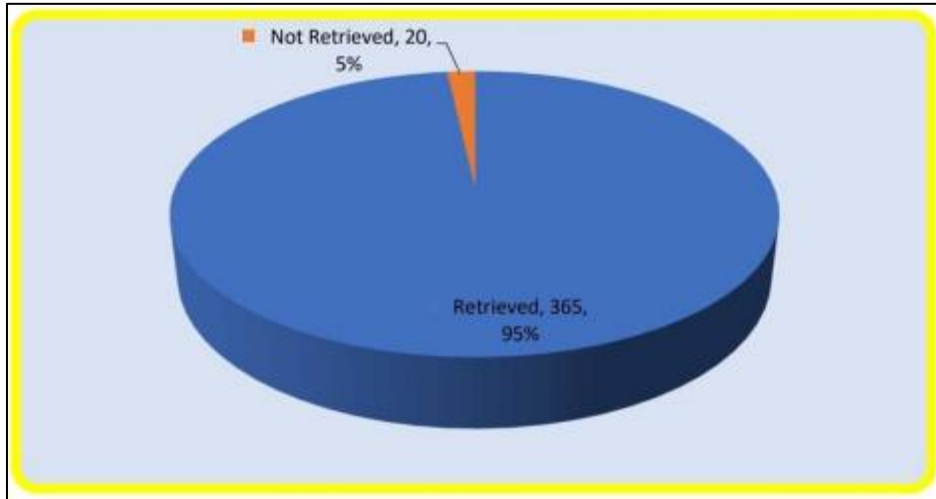


Figure 1 Analysis of Response Rate

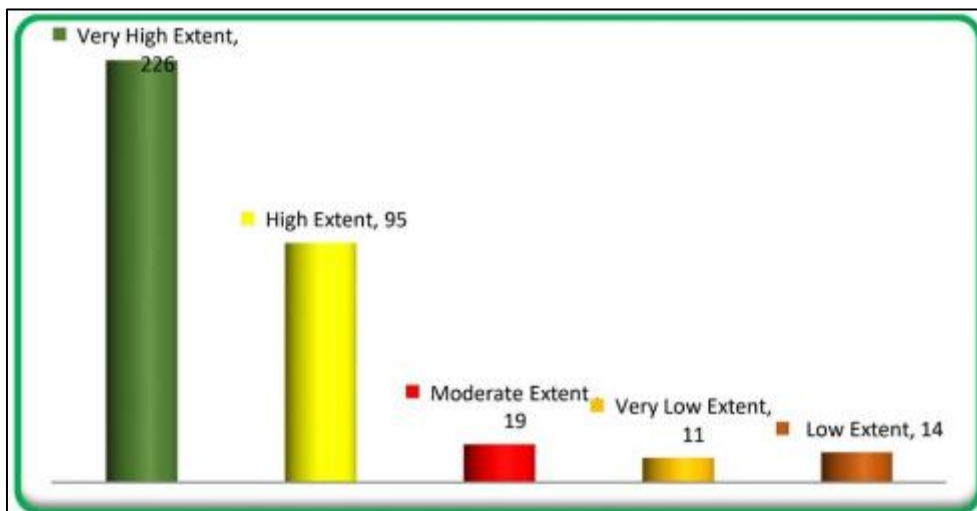


Figure 2 The Impact of Limitations and Deficiencies in Social Media Usage on the Success and Reach of the 2023 Presidential Election Campaigns in Nigeria

The data presented in Figure 2 highlights that with effective regulation, social media is likely to succeed in hindering political campaigns in Nigeria. The lack of regulation on these platforms poses considerable risks, such as the dissemination of misinformation, heightened political polarisation, and a decline in public trust in political processes. This situation emphasises the pressing need for comprehensive regulatory measures to tackle these issues and lessen the adverse effects of social media on political campaigning.

4.1. Section A: Quantitative Data

Table 1 Challenges to using Social Media in the 2023 Presidential Election Campaign among Residents Of Abuja, Nigeria

Options	AS	A	U	SD	D	Total	Mean Rating	Decision
The spread of misinformation on social media significantly impacted the presidential campaign.	304	42	2	11	6	365	4.5	Accepted
Unreliable internet services limited the effective use of social media during the 2023 campaign.	294	57	8	2	4	365	4.5	Accepted
Social media polarisation presented considerable challenges during the 2023 presidential campaign.	306	39	4	7	9	365	4.5	Accepted
The rapid spread of harmful viral content about candidates negatively affected the campaign.	292	47	9	4	13	365	4.5	Accepted
The deployment of political propaganda by candidates on social media influenced the effectiveness of their campaigns.	289	62	0	6	8	365	4.5	Accepted
Content shared on social media contributed to political divisions among voters.	303	41	3	9	9	365	4.5	Accepted

Field Survey, (2024).

4.2. Section B: Qualitative Data

This study examined the challenges faced by participants in leveraging social media to influence voter choices during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. A significant theme that emerged was the widespread misinformation on social media. One participant, who managed social media for a presidential candidate, remarked, "Photoshopped scenes and old images were used on social media to create ethnic biases against their candidate. For instance, a manipulated photograph falsely depicted our vice-presidential candidate, Kashim Shettima, as a member of the Islamist militant group Boko Haram. However, fact-checking revealed that the image showed Shettima dining with nomadic Fulani parents whose children he had enrolled in schools in 2017." (Participant 1, Male, Age: 25).

This statement highlights the substantial issue of misinformation that plagued the election (Smith & Johnson, 2023).

Another participant noted, "Social media was used to disseminate disinformation about our candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu." (Participant 2, Male, Age: 31)

This statement further illustrates the struggle against false narratives undermining political figures and their campaigns.

Many respondents expressed challenges in effectively understanding how to use various social media platforms for political messaging. One participant shared:

"Finding time was a major problem. Understanding how to use different social media platforms effectively was also hard. Many people know how to use social media, but using it correctly to share political messages without getting into legal trouble is tricky. During the 2023 presidential election, I struggled with finding enough time to read and manage all the political posts on social media." (Participant 3, Male, Age: 29).

A corroborating participant stated:

"Using social media today can be tricky because it is always changing. There are many rules and things to be careful about. For example, knowing what to write and share can be a big challenge. If you post something you should not have, it is hard to fix it once it is out there. Even if you try to take it back, other people can still see and share it." (Participant 4, Male, Age: 27).

Technical difficulties were another primary concern among respondents. Participants 5 and 11 noted, "The biggest problems with using social media during the 2023 presidential election were bad internet connections, frequent power

outages, and the spread of fake information about the candidates." (Participant 5, Male, Age: 35) (Participant 11, Female, Age: 24). These infrastructural challenges severely hindered effective communication and engagement with potential voters.

Another respondent highlighted the struggle to maintain professional communication on social media:

"From my experience talking with people on social media, I found that spending a lot of time interacting with them can sometimes lead to unprofessional behaviour. Nowadays, many people find it hard to keep their communication professional." (Participant 6, Male, Age: 40) & (Participant 10, Female, Age: 38).

This sentiment points to the difficulties in managing personal and political discourse online.

Participants also voiced concerns regarding the need for a clear regulatory framework for political activities on social media. One individual remarked, "The rules for using social media in political activities are unclear. Because of this, many people have to make their own choices instead of following specific laws. There are also problems like poor internet connection, frequent power cuts, and the high cost of data and internet tools. These issues made it very hard to use social media effectively during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election campaign." (Participant 7, Male, Age: 33) & (Participant 12, Female, Age: 30).

From the data collected through in-depth and key informant interviews, all respondents expressed concerns about the misuse of social media to spread false information about political candidates. The prevailing sentiment was that social media, due to its open and difficult-to-regulate nature, poses significant challenges in preventing the dissemination of fake and unsubstantiated information. It can be deduced that social media exacerbated pre-existing social cleavages, including ethnicity, region, and religion, thus complicating the candidates' efforts to engage with voters effectively.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings from this research highlight the profound impact of social media strategies during the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaign. It became evident that while social media platforms served as crucial tools for political engagement, they also introduced several challenges that significantly influenced voter perceptions and campaign dynamics, with both positive and negative consequences.

One of the most prominent trends observed was the extensive use of social media to spread misinformation and disinformation. Respondents consistently pointed out that manipulated content, such as fake news and doctored images, was strategically employed to stoke ethnic and religious tensions. This observation expands on Daramola's (2023) study, which recognised the influence of social media on voter behaviour. While Daramola emphasised its potential for positive engagement, this research uncovers a darker side, where the spread of false information played a central role in shaping electoral outcomes. This aligns with the work of Tandoc et al. (2018), who identified misinformation as a persistent issue in politically charged environments. The findings further support the theoretical framework of conspiracy theory, which argues that rapidly disseminating misleading content via social media can exacerbate societal divisions and increase polarisation (Shin et al., 2016).

Another significant finding was the role of unreliable internet services and poor infrastructure in undermining the effectiveness of digital campaigns. Respondents frequently cited challenges such as power outages and unstable internet connections, which hindered candidates' ability to engage with voters in real-time. This finding mirrors Bassey et al.'s (2024) conclusions, which observed that inadequate digital infrastructure often impedes the efficiency of social media campaigns, particularly in developing regions. Rural areas and communities with limited access to technology were disproportionately affected, creating a digital divide that likely influenced voter engagement. These infrastructural shortcomings add complexity to the political process, as regions with poor internet access were disadvantaged in participating in digital political discussions.

The rapid spread of harmful content also emerged as a key concern. Respondents noted that social media allowed for the swift dissemination of accurate and false information, making it difficult for candidates to maintain control over their campaign narratives. This finding reflects Chioma's (2023) study, which documented the growing influence of social media on political discourse as the election approached. Unlike Chioma's broader analysis of social media's role from 2015 to 2023, this research looks deeper into the tactics used during the 2023 presidential campaign. The unregulated nature of social media platforms enabled the fast spread of misinformation, supporting Kreiss's (2019) observation that digital platforms facilitate the rapid and often uncontrollable proliferation of content. This dynamic

presents a significant challenge for political candidates, as it disrupts their ability to deliver consistent messages that shape voter perceptions in unpredictable ways.

The lack of a clear regulatory framework for social media use during the 2023 campaign was another critical issue raised by respondents. Candidates and their teams were forced to navigate the complexities of social media without established guidelines or enforcement mechanisms, resulting in legal and ethical dilemmas. This finding is consistent with Bassey et al.'s (2024) observation that the absence of comprehensive regulation is a significant limitation in the effective use of social media for political purposes. In line with the conspiracy theory framework, this study suggests that unregulated digital environments can magnify the spread of false narratives and conspiracy theories, further complicating the political landscape (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

In conclusion, the findings underscore the dual role of social media as both a powerful tool for political engagement and a platform fraught with significant challenges. The 2023 presidential campaign in Nigeria, particularly in Abuja, was influenced by strategic social media use but was also hindered by the spread of misinformation, inadequate internet infrastructure, and the absence of clear regulatory guidelines. These insights emphasise the need for more structured and regulated approaches to social media use in future political campaigns, particularly in regions with underdeveloped digital infrastructure. Without such measures, the risks posed by misinformation and other digital disruptions may continue to undermine the democratic process.

6. Conclusion

This research has conclusively established that social media usage during the 2023 presidential campaign in Abuja, Nigeria, significantly undermined the electoral process's integrity. The evidence reveals that social media's impact was largely negative, driven by inadequate infrastructure, heightened political polarisation, and the rampant spread of misinformation. These results emphasise the critical need for robust regulatory measures to address the adverse effects of social media on future electoral campaigns.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the challenges associated with social media strategies used during the 2023 presidential campaign in Nigeria. These recommendations are designed to be both practical and enforceable by regulatory bodies.

Establishment of a Comprehensive Legal and Regulatory Framework for Social Media in Electoral Campaigns: To mitigate the pervasive issues of misinformation, disinformation, and unethical digital practices observed during the 2023 presidential election, it is imperative for the Nigerian government, through the National Assembly, to enact a comprehensive regulatory framework governing the use of social media during electoral processes. This legal structure should target key challenges such as spreading fake news, cyberbullying, and manipulating public opinion through bots and automated accounts. The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) should be empowered to oversee the implementation and enforcement of these regulations, ensuring that they are aligned with global standards and practices. In addition, collaboration with social media platforms, civil society organisations, and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) will be essential to monitor and address violations, with penalties for non-compliance to ensure that electoral campaigns are conducted with integrity. Such a regulatory framework must also mandate transparency in political advertising, obliging campaign teams to disclose funding sources and the authenticity of online content to reduce manipulation of voters.

- **Strengthening Digital Infrastructure and Promoting Nationwide Digital Literacy:**

To effectively harness the potential of social media for political engagement, the Nigerian government must prioritise improving digital and energy infrastructure across the country, with particular attention to underserved and rural areas. In collaboration with the private sector, the Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy should lead efforts to expand broadband coverage and ensure reliable electricity supply to support continuous internet connectivity. This would eliminate the digital divide and allow for equal participation in political discourse across all regions. Again, a robust nationwide public education initiative should be implemented to enhance digital literacy. Spearheaded by the National Orientation Agency (NOA) in partnership with educational institutions, civil society, and media organisations, this campaign aimed to equip citizens with the skills to evaluate online information critically, recognise misinformation, and responsibly engage on social media platforms. Enhancing the electorate's digital literacy is critical in mitigating the risks of disseminating false information and manipulating public opinion. This initiative creates a more informed and engaged populace by equipping voters with the skills to assess the information presented

to them critically. Consequently, these efforts significantly foster transparency and fairness within electoral processes. When voters can make informed decisions grounded in accurate information rather than being influenced by misleading narratives, the integrity of elections is preserved. Ultimately, promoting digital literacy represents a vital step towards safeguarding democratic participation and maintaining the legitimacy of electoral systems.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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