

**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON VOTER'S DECISION-MAKING DURING THE 2023
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Social media have been viewed variously as developmental to democratic deepening on one hand and as instrumental to grooming anarchy on the other hand. In other words, there have been a sustained debate among shades of opinion on the actual role social media play in electoral politics and democratic sustainability the world over. Whereas social media have acted as catalyst for popular mobilization for political engagement it has also created platforms for mobilizing its teeming audience for rebellion and disruption of democratic order at some points such as Nigeria's experience with the infamous EndSars Protests of 2020. Therefore, this paper is an assessment of how social media influenced voters' decisions during the presidential elections held on February 25 2023 among Nigerian voters. The paper adopted the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) to evaluate the impact of free flow of information on voter's decision making. The paper believes that social media platforms were powerful tools in the rapid dissemination of political information throughout the Nigeria's electoral process of 2023 acting as critical conduits for political discourse, enabling the swift transmission of information to a broader audience. The paper has navigated between the frequency of social media interactions involving political contents and voters' preferences during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. The paper has therefore, concluded that social media did not only boost voter participation, but shaped electoral outcomes during the 2023 presidential elections and that the influence cut across distinct demographic, social, economic and cultural spectrums. It therefore, recommends that as social media's role in politics continues to evolve, it is crucial for policymakers, researchers, and social media platforms themselves to understand the mechanisms through which social media interactions influence voters. Promoting digital literacy, combating misinformation, and ensuring transparency in algorithmic processes are essential steps toward creating a healthier online political environment that empowers voters to make informed decisions.

Keywords: - *Democracy, Electoral Participation, Social Media, Voters' Decision-making Voting Behaviour*

Introduction

In recent years of democratic processes, the rapid proliferation of social media platforms has revolutionized the way people engage with information, communicate, and express their opinions. This transformation has extended to the political landscape, where social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for political communication, engagement, and mobilization. The intersection of social media and politics has redefined the way political campaigns are conducted, voter preferences are shaped, and ultimately, how citizens exercise their electoral rights. In an era where Social Media platforms are used to spread political information to help voters' decision-making process, the political parties have to enlarge their electoral strategy to these platforms. This decision came to gain new voters by persuading online information seekers with their ideologies and not lose potential voters with the fake news overload that appears during an electoral period.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has a complex political history characterized by democratic transitions, military rule, and socioeconomic challenges. The 2023 presidential elections marked another significant milestone in the country's democratic trajectory, as citizens exercised their constitutional rights to elect leaders who will shape the nation's future. In recent years, the influence of social media on political processes has become increasingly significant, with the potential to shape voters' choices and impact election outcomes. The 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria was a crucial juncture in the nation's political landscape, and understanding the role of social media in shaping voters' choices is of paramount importance. This paper is a discourse of the influence of social media engagement on voters' choices during the presidential elections in Nigeria. Despite the recognition of social media's

potential to shape political opinions and electoral outcomes, the mechanisms through which this influence occurs and its implications for the democratic process remain insufficiently understood.

The role of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, has grown exponentially in political discourse. These platforms have emerged as powerful tools for political communication, enabling candidates and parties to reach a wide audience instantly. However, the impact of social media on voters' decision-making processes remains relatively unexplored, particularly within the context of country such as Nigeria. While social media offers numerous benefits, it also introduces challenges and potential negative consequences. The spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and online manipulation are concerns that need to be addressed. Additionally, the digital divide in Nigeria could mean that certain segments of the population might be excluded from this digital discourse, potentially skewing election results. Elections Mangers and Experts decried the wrong application of messages in social media platforms among users before, during and after 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Studies like Ibrahim (2023); Aragba-Akpore (2023); Salako (2023) reported how Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections campaign turned the use of social media in dissemination of political information into dangerous weapons; many feared that the outcome of the elections could make or mar Nigeria's growing democracy. The leading political parties and their supporters took advantage of the social media to not only sensitize the populace on their manifestos but also turn 2023 elections into bizarre of inflammatory speeches complemented with propaganda capable of disrupting the electoral processes and Nigeria's nascent democracy.

It is widely held notion that social media have the possibility of being misused greatly during election because the crowd-source technique used by many social media practitioners are from local communities who are sometimes with partisan interests and biases. Similarly, the platforms are often used to give false information, abuse, and incite violence, thus, social media advantage in promotion of democracy and electoral harmony became more of a contentious discourse. It is in the light of this contention that this aimed to address the questions "to what extent and in what ways do social media engagement influence voters' choices during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria?".

Literature Review

In today's political societies, social media has become an essential component of public conversation and communication. The rapid development of social media has changed the way people identify groups of people who share similar interests, the nature of information, the available news sources, and the ability to seek and share ideas (Stieglitz and DangXuan, 2012).

Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social media as "a web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." This definition emphasizes the interactive nature of social media platforms and their role in enabling users to connect, communicate, and share information within their networks. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) characterized social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content." This definition focuses on the participatory nature of social media platforms, where users actively contribute content and engage with others' content.

Typical examples of social media platforms, as defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.61), include applications like Facebook, Twitter (X), Whatsapp, Flickr, 2go, and Youtube, as well as interactive features on these platforms like retweeting on Twitter, commenting on Facebook, and sharing on Whatsapp. These instruments are referred to as media since they are tools that may also be employed for information storage and transmission. Unlike traditional media such as television and radio, however, most social media platforms allow its users to communicate and share information freely, as well as express their opinions on the World Wide Web at their leisure.

According to Campbell, Pitt, Parent, and Berthon (2011, p. 102), it is much more about what people do with technology than the technology itself, because rather than simply retrieving information, users are now creating and consuming it, and thus adding value to the websites that allow them to do so. Web 2.0 has progressed from merely retrieving information to interaction, interoperability, and collaboration (Campbell et al. 2011). Sinclair and Vogus (2011) described social media as a broad term that describes software tools that create user generated content that

can be shared." However, some basic features are required for a website to meet the requirements of a social network website: the site must contain user profiles, content, a method for users to connect with one another and post comments on each other's pages, and join virtual groups based on common interests such as fashion or politics (Gross and Acquisti, 2005).

Jenkins et al. (2009) highlighted the idea of "spreadability" and defined social media as platforms that enable "a process where content is passed along social networks for widespread sharing." This definition underscores the role of social media in facilitating the rapid distribution and sharing of information through interconnected networks. Hinton and Hjorth (2013) approached social media as platforms that "enable social interactions and user-generated content, and can take many different forms, including text, images, videos, and links." This definition emphasizes the diverse types of content that users can create and share on social media, contributing to the formation of a digital culture.

Baym (2015) provided a comprehensive view of social media, describing it as "a set of platforms tied to the social web, where users create and exchange content and engage in person-to-person communication." This definition highlights the broader context of the "social web" and the interconnectedness of various digital platforms. These definitions showcase the evolving nature of social media and its various dimensions, ranging from communication and networking to content sharing and participation. Scholars continue to refine their understanding of social media as the digital landscape continues to evolve, leading to new perspectives and insights.

The evolution of social media has been a dynamic and transformative journey that has significantly impacted the way we communicate, connect, and share information. Social media first appeared in the late 1980s, when entertainment channels such as talk radio, television talk shows, and tabloid newspapers began to play major political roles, giving rise to the infotainment genre. The distinction between news and entertainment is blurred by infotainment, which favours dramatic, scandal-driven tales above hard news (Jebril, Albaek, and deVreese, 2013).

Politicians used social media to get around the mainstream media's control of the news agenda. At this early stage, the infotainment emphasis of social media provided political leaders and candidates with a friendlier arena for presenting themselves to the public than hard news channels (Moy, Xenos, and Hess, 2009). During the 1992 presidential campaign in the United States, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton notably appeared on Arsenio Hall's television talk show while wearing sunglasses and playing the saxophone, creating a warm, personal image that established the tone for his campaign (Diamond, McKay, and Silverman, 1993). The fusion of politics and entertainment drew viewers who were previously uninterested in current affairs (Williams and DelliCarpini, 2011). It also fueled the rise of celebrity politicians and laid the groundwork for a "reality TV" president like Donald Trump decades later. Political analysts and academicians speculated on the emergence of a "social media populism" that would engage disenfranchised voters and allow the public to play a more active part in political discourse. Social media had the ability to improve people's access to political information, facilitate broader political debate, and encourage engagement.

Initially, the public reacted favourably to more accessible communication channels, dialing into political talk shows and attending online town hall meetings (Owen, 2018). However, the new political media system emerged haphazardly, with no guiding ideas or aims, undermining social media's true populist potential. It was greatly influenced by business interests and individuals already in positions of power in politics and the news media. As the novelty of the first wave of new media faded, public enthusiasm gave way to ambivalence and cynicism (Davis and Owen, 1998).

The next stage in the evolution of new media occurred in tandem with the application of emerging digital communications technology to politics, which enabled the creation of wholly new channels and content delivery systems. The digital environment and the platforms it supports have had a significant impact on the political media system. Beginning in the mid-1990s, new political media platforms rapidly evolved from the rudimentary "brochureware" website used by Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992 to include interactive features, discussion boards, blogs, online fundraising platforms, volunteer recruitment sites, and meet-ups. The general population got more involved in the creation and dissemination of political information. Citizen journalists were there at events that professional journalists were unable to cover. Non-elites shared their thoughts on current events

with lawmakers and peers. Members of the public were also in charge of filming and posting footage that may go viral and change the course of events (Wallsten, 2010).

The new media patterns developed during the 2008 campaign in the U.S have permeated government and politics more broadly. Social media have become a widespread influence in politics, changing the communication dynamics between politicians, journalists, and the general public. They have created more opportunities for real-time political speech and discussion. According to research, people's access to social media networks improves their sense of political efficacy and proclivity to participate in politics (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2010). However, there has been pushback when social media debate has been too scathing, with people blocking content or leaving social media networks (Linder, 2016). People may use social media to efficiently organise and leverage their collective power. As a result of their ongoing scrutiny on social media, political leaders are held more accountable.

Simultaneously, legacy media organisations have begun to rely on parts of new media. Newspapers, in particular, have faced financial difficulties as a result of unfavourable financial market conditions, decreased advertising income, and competition from an increasing number of news sources. The size of traditional newsrooms has also decreased significantly (Owen, 2017). Legacy news organisations have reduced investigative teams, and only about one-third of reporters cover politics (Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016). "When newspapers can't even cover daily journalism, how are they going to invest in long-term, expensive investigative reporting?" (Alicia Shepard, 2012), a former media ombudsman and media literacy champion.

Nonetheless, journalists working at legacy organisations continue to do a disproportionate amount of real news gathering and investigative reporting. As a source of news, mainstream journalists have come to rely largely on new media content. These developments have had a significant impact on the form and quality of news content, as well as the manner of political reporting, which has grown more strongly infused with infotainment and quotes from X feeds. In the digital age, social media have become an integral part of modern society, shaping how we communicate, share information, and connect with others. From the early days of platforms like Friendster and MySpace to the current dominance of giants like Facebook, X, and Instagram, the landscape of social media has undergone significant transformations. Here, we delve into the various types of social media platforms that have emerged, highlighting their unique features, purposes, and societal implications.

Social Networking Sites: Social networking sites are the cornerstone of the social media ecosystem. They facilitate connections between individuals, enabling them to build online profiles, connect with friends, and share personal updates (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Platforms like Facebook, X, and LinkedIn fall under this category. Facebook, with over 2.8 billion monthly active users, enables users to share posts, photos, and videos, fostering social interaction among friends and family. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is tailored for professional networking and career development (Vitak, Crouse & LaRose, 2011).

Microblogging Platforms: Microblogging platforms offer users a way to share short, concise updates with their followers. X, with its 280-character limit per tweet, exemplifies this genre. X serves as a global conversation hub, where users share news, opinions, and engage in discussions on a wide range of topics. Its real-time nature has made it a valuable tool for breaking news and viral trends (Java et al. 2007).

Media Sharing Platforms: Media sharing platforms focus on multimedia content, particularly photos and videos. The platforms revolve around visual content, enabling users to upload, share, and discover images and videos. Instagram, known for its visually appealing feeds, enables users to share photos and short videos, often enhanced with filters and captions. The platform's emphasis on visual aesthetics has led to the rise of influencers and content creators who leverage the platform for brand partnerships and creative expression. YouTube, the world's largest video-sharing platform, are prominent examples. These platforms have given rise to influencers and content creators who capitalize on their creative outputs (Abishek& Anand, 2017).

Professional Networking Platforms: Professional networking platforms cater to career-oriented individuals seeking to connect with colleagues, industry peers, and potential employers. LinkedIn, mentioned earlier, is the most notable platform in this category. It enables users to showcase their professional achievements, connect with like-minded individuals, and access job opportunities (Vitak et al. 2011).

Discussion Forums and Community Boards: Discussion forums and community boards provide spaces for users to engage in focused conversations around specific interests or topics. Reddit, a prime example, is divided into numerous "subreddits," each dedicated to a particular subject. Users can submit posts, comment on others' content, and participate in discussions, fostering a sense of community around shared passions (Gilbert, Karahalios & Sandvig, 2008).

Video Sharing and Live Streaming Platforms: Beyond traditional media sharing, video sharing platforms like TikTok and live streaming platforms like Twitch have gained immense popularity. TikTok, with its short-form video format, has captured the attention of younger audiences, while Twitch allows gamers and creators to livestream their activities (Hamilton, Garretson & Kerne, 2014).

Location-Based Social Networks: Location-based social networks leverage geolocation data to connect users based on their physical proximity. Foursquare and Yelp, for instance, allows users to check in at various venues, share recommendations, and explore their surroundings virtually. These platforms blend online interactions with real-world experiences (Licoppe & Inada, 2006).

Live Streaming Platforms: Live streaming platforms enable real-time broadcasting of video content. Twitch, originally focused on gaming but expanded to other areas, lets users stream themselves playing video games, creating art, or engaging in discussions. Live streaming fosters immediate interactions between content creators and their audiences (Oeldorf-Hirsch, Sundar & Sreenivasan, 2016).

Niche and Specialized Platforms: Niche and specialized platforms cater to specific interests, communities, or industries. Strava, for example, targets athletes and fitness enthusiasts, allowing them to track and share their workouts (Isakovic, 2023). Goodreads focuses on book lovers, enabling them to review and discuss literature. These platforms create tight-knit communities around shared passions (Insider, 2021).

The diverse array of social media platforms reflects the multifaceted nature of human communication and interaction. Each platform type serves distinct purposes, catering to different aspects of our lives – from personal connections to professional networking, content consumption to creation, and everything in between. As these platforms continue to evolve and new ones emerge, it is crucial to critically examine their impact on society, privacy, mental health, and the ways in which they shape our digital experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). The theory provides a comprehensive framework to understand the motivations behind individuals' consumption of social media content. This theory posits that people actively choose and use media to fulfill specific needs and derive gratifications from these interactions. By exploring the applicability of the Uses and Gratifications Theory to social media, we can gain insights into the complex relationship between individuals, their motivations, and the digital platforms they engage with. The Uses and Gratifications Theory was initially developed in the 1940s and 1950s as an alternative to the traditional "effects" models of communication. Instead of focusing solely on how media content influences audiences, UGT shifts the focus towards the audience's active role in selecting and interpreting media content based on their psychological and social needs. Researchers like Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) refined the theory over the years, suggesting that individuals use media to satisfy specific needs, including cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension release needs.

While the Uses and Gratifications Theory provides valuable insights into why individuals engage with social media, it is not without its limitations. Critics argue that the theory doesn't fully account for unconscious motivations and overlooks the role of media producers in shaping content. Additionally, UGT assumes a rational decision-making process in media consumption, which may not always hold true in the face of impulsive or habitual behaviours. In an increasingly interconnected world, the Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a lens through which to examine the multifaceted reasons for individuals' engagement with social media. Whether driven by cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, or tension release needs, users actively choose and shape their online experiences. By understanding the underlying motivations and gratifications, researchers, content creators, and marketers can tailor their strategies to better align with the evolving desires of social media users. As technology continues to advance,

the Uses and Gratifications Theory will likely remain a valuable tool for deciphering the intricate relationship between individuals, media, and the ever-expanding digital landscape. Applying the Uses and Gratification Theory as theoretical framework. Social media platforms, with their diverse content and interactive features, have provided fertile ground for the application of UGT. Individuals engage with social media for various reasons, aligning with the theory's core principles of seeking specific gratifications. One primary cognitive need met by social media is the acquisition of information. Users turn to platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to stay informed about current events, industry trends, or even personal updates from friends and family. The abundance of user-generated content empowers individuals to curate their information sources, thus enabling the satisfaction of their cognitive needs (Li & Chen, 2018).

The social integrative aspect of UGT is vividly seen in the role of social media in maintaining and fostering relationships. Platforms like Facebook facilitate connection and communication among geographically distant friends and family members (Joinson, 2008). Similarly, X allows users to follow celebrities and thought leaders, creating a sense of para-social interaction. These interactions address users' social needs for companionship, belonging, and affiliation. Tension release needs, another component of UGT, are fulfilled as users turn to social media for entertainment and diversion. Platforms like Instagram offer a scrollable stream of images, providing a quick break from the demands of daily life. The bite-sized nature of social media content makes it an easily accessible source of relaxation and distraction and this explained how many voters especially the young and first time voters during the Nigerian 2023 presidential elections found reprieve in relying on social media contents for information during the run-up to the elections while it also significantly influenced their choices of candidates in the election, notably in the presidential elections held on February 25.

Impact Of Social Media Interactions on Voters' Decision-Making During The 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria

The digital age has brought about significant changes in the way political information is disseminated and consumed, with social media platforms playing a pivotal role in shaping political discourse. The article on the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria underscored the pivotal role of social media platforms in shaping the formation and dissemination of political information. The high percentage of respondents encountering political content on these platforms highlights their relevance as a primary source of political news and discussions. Additionally, the engagement rate in political discourse demonstrates the interactive nature of social media, enabling citizens to actively participate in political discussions.

A 2015 study by Demos, a UK-based market research firm, revealed that Twitter was ten times more active during the 2015 election period in Nigeria than in normal times. Social media users tweeted over 12.4 million tweets about the elections over the period and 216,000 Facebook users interacted with content on popular public pages related to the elections (Luckscheiter, 2022). The same scenario unfolded in the build-up to the 2023 general elections. The three major presidential candidates – Peter Obi, Atiku Abubakar, and Bola Ahmed Tinubu – significantly increased their followership on Facebook and Twitter in the last six months of the elections. Hashtags directly related to candidates trend on local Twitter and Facebook almost daily.

Citizens use social media platforms to give daily reports and updates regarding election circumstances. In recent times, ordinary Nigerians have monitored electoral situations in real-time across the country.

They have tagged relevant bodies such as Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), security agencies, news channels, international organisations, etc. via social media platforms to take action. During the 2023 presidential elections, INEC, security agencies and other relevant organisations were instantly responding to queries made by ordinary citizens on social media platforms. This has positioned social media as an important instrument in the hands of citizens to ensure electoral integrity in the country. These trends highlight the significance of social media in electoral politics in Nigeria. Social media platforms have democratized the dissemination of political information, allowing candidates to reach a wider audience beyond traditional media. Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have facilitated real-time updates, direct communication with candidates, and the sharing of campaign materials.

The positive perception of social media's impact on political awareness aligns with the notion that these platforms provide a democratized space for political engagement, allowing individuals to access a wide range of perspectives and engage in meaningful discussions. Ufuophu-Biri & Ojoboh (2017) for example note that through the use of the social media, many authoritarian and sit-tight political regimes have been ousted and replaced with more democratic ones as evident in the 'political tsunami' that swept through some African countries in the wake of the 2011/2012 popular Arab spring. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) equally asserted that the social media have actuated a situation where people can easily ventilate their opinions about government; empowered citizens to perform check and balancing roles on public officers; made it possible and easy for the ordinary citizens to demand probity, transparency and accountability in government; and encouraged a higher level of political participation among users, otherwise called 'netizens'.

However, concerns about the spread of misinformation are indicative of the challenges posed by the rapid sharing of unverified or biased information on social media platforms. This affirms the conclusion of previous studies like Fenton & Barassi (2011), Okoro & Nwafor (2013) and Apuke & Appollos (2017) that online communication tools promote subtle political cynicism and other harmful political outcomes. The influence of social media on Nigerian elections raises questions about its impact on democratic processes. On one hand, social media can enhance citizen engagement, foster transparency, and encourage accountability by providing a platform for citizens to voice their opinions and concerns directly to political actors. It can also serve as a tool for monitoring electoral malpractices and disseminating real-time information.

Social media's role in spreading misinformation, promoting polarization, and facilitating online harassment can erode the foundations of a healthy democracy. The speed at which false information can spread on social media challenges the ability of traditional fact-checking mechanisms to keep up, potentially swaying public opinion before corrections can be made. While social media platforms have facilitated the rapid spread of information, they have also become conduits for misinformation and disinformation. False stories, doctored images, and misleading narratives can quickly gain traction, impacting voter perceptions and electoral outcomes. The absence of stringent fact-checking mechanisms on social media has exacerbated the spread of such content.

However, social media's role in shaping political awareness and influencing decision-making is a critical aspect to consider. The high percentage of respondents encountering political content on social media suggests that these platforms have become an integral source of political information. However, the quality, accuracy, and diversity of information shared on these platforms can be contentious issues. The potential for echo chambers and misinformation remains, posing challenges to informed decision making. What this paper has shown is that social media platforms provide a unique space for the formation of political information. Citizens use these platforms to access a wide range of perspectives, breaking down traditional information gatekeepers. Social media allows for the rapid sharing of news articles, opinion pieces, and user-generated content, enabling users to engage with political discourse in real-time. The diversity of content sources on platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram contributes to a more inclusive political conversation. This paper's position aligned with existing researches that has highlighted the growing role of social media platforms in political communication and engagement. Scholars have pointed out how these platforms democratize information dissemination, allowing ordinary citizens to contribute to political discourse. For example, Erubami (2020) asserted that online platforms have positively contributed to the growth of democracy by facilitating the unrestricted flow of political information at reduced cost and without needless censorship. Inadvertently, the social media have also stimulated public interest in the activities of government, political parties, groups and individual politicians; enhanced public understanding of political events; provided a citizens-government interaction and feedback mechanism; as well as enhanced citizens' capacity to hold public officers accountable for their actions and inaction. Evidently, the information power shift made possible by the social media remains one of the notable contributions of online communication media to politics and democracy in Nigeria.

As Bachmann and de Zuñiga (2013) argued, political knowledge and political participation in politics are at the core of democratic process. The quality of democracy people is measure by the level of political knowledge gained from political participation and associate by previous research, this study found that young people have greater political knowledge expose by social media (Holt and Strömbäck, 2013). Correlation between social media and

political knowledge found that there is a positive correlation coefficient indicates that an increase in the first variable would correspond to an increase in the second variable, thus implying a direct relationship between the variables. It can be concluded that greater exposure on social media, necessarily increased their political knowledge.

The view expressed in this paper shed light on the substantial presence of political content on social media platforms during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. The paper suggested that a significant portion of the electorate encountered political news, opinions, and discussions on these platforms, and a noteworthy percentage actively engaged in political dialogues. As social media's influence on political processes continues to evolve, policymakers, researchers, and citizens alike must consider the opportunities and challenges that these platforms present. Efforts to promote digital literacy, combat misinformation, and ensure diverse and balanced political discourse are crucial in harnessing the positive aspects of social media while mitigating potential drawbacks.

Thus, as Olowokere and Audu-Bako (2019) aptly captured it, social media are now used to inform and mobilize voters by various stakeholders during elections. It is therefore not surprising that the 2023 presidential elections witnessed an unprecedented level of social media engagement and interaction among voters. This digital era has redefined the dynamics of political communication, giving rise to questions about the extent to which these interactions impact voters' attitudes, preferences, and decision making. The frequency of social media interactions related to political content has exhibited a positive correlation with substantial changes in voters' attitudes and preferences.

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms over the past two decades has revolutionized communication, transcending geographical boundaries and offering a virtual space for individuals to express their thoughts, opinions, and beliefs. This shift has had a profound impact on political engagement, as citizens now have the means to access and participate in political discussions with unprecedented ease. During the 2023 general election, digital landscape played host to a deluge of political content, ranging from policy discussions to candidate endorsements, thereby setting the stage for a correlation between social media interactions and shifts in voter attitudes and decision making.

Several mechanisms contributed to the association between the frequency of social media interactions related to political content and changes in voters' attitudes during the 2023 presidential elections. Firstly, the sheer volume of political content available on social media platforms provides voters with a diverse range of perspectives, enabling them to engage with narratives that resonate with their existing beliefs or challenge their viewpoints. This exposure to a broader spectrum of ideas prompts individuals to re-evaluate their stances and consider alternative perspectives, leading to potential shifts in their attitudes. Secondly, the interactive nature of social media enables voters to engage directly with political figures, parties, and fellow citizens, fostering a sense of community and shared identity. This engagement creates a feedback loop where voters not only consume content but actively contribute to the discourse, thus reinforcing their commitment to their evolving attitudes. Furthermore, the real-time nature of social media allows for instant reactions and responses to political events, creating a dynamic environment that influences the way voters perceive unfolding events.

This paper provided valuable insights into the complex relationship between social media interactions and voters' attitudes, preferences, and decision making in the context of the 2023 General Elections. The paper underscores the significant influence that social media wields over political discourse and its potential to shape electoral outcomes. Political discussions on social media can quickly escalate and shape public sentiment. During the 2023 Nigerian general elections, for instance, hashtags like #NigeriaDecides trended globally on Twitter, reflecting both domestic and international interest in the electoral process. This not only amplified political conversations but also enabled citizens to voice concerns, opinions and grievances directly to political candidates.

What is evident is that social media played a pivotal role in increased youth participation in the discourse and campaigns. Socio-economic problems, including incessant university strikes and high youth unemployment, apparently contributed to their engagement. Young people made up around 76% of newly registered voters, with 40% of that number identifying as students (Akinmoju, 2023). Given this, political campaigns utilizing social media strategies have successfully reached and engaged younger voters who are more active on these platforms. The effect is that we are beginning to see more of the youth participating in the electoral process. This is significant in a country where a considerable portion of the population consists of young people.

Irede (2022) also suggests a connection between Nigeria's youth-led #EndSARS movement and the mobilisation in support of the Labour Party's presidential candidate Peter Obi, referred to as the #Obidient movement. To his backers, Obi presented an opportunity for a new kind of governance with more transparency and accountability. Both the #EndSARS and #Obidient movements were dominated by mostly young middle-class Nigerians from urban areas. According to results released by the INEC, the Labour Party won the popular vote in the presidential elections in Nigeria's biggest city Lagos, and in the capital Abuja. The Lagos result was particularly surprising because it's Tinubu's stronghold, and violence prevented many from voting. The effect of the #Obidient wave extended beyond the presidential elections, as around 40 individuals were elected to the National Assembly under the Labour Party. This includes the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) senator, IretiKingibe. She defeated the Peoples Democratic Party's Philip Aduda, who represented the FCT in the National Assembly for two decades (Suleiman, 2023). The Labour Party had no seats in the previous National Assembly.

Furthermore, the viral nature of trending topics, hashtags, and posts can amplify certain narratives and influence public discourse. The "bandwagon effect" and "spiral of silence" are psychological phenomena that can contribute to the belief in social media's impact on electoral outcomes. The bandwagon effect suggests that people tend to align with perceived majority opinions, while the spiral of silence theory posits that individuals are more likely to voice their opinions if they believe they align with prevailing societal views. On social media, the prominence of certain political messages can create an illusion of overwhelming consensus, leading users to adopt or reinforce those views. The growing digital economy is contributing to the gradual shift of economic power to young people, which can eventually translate to political power. This is occurring alongside high youth emigration rates, but there is still an opportunity to cultivate a new crop of political leaders.

Conclusion

In the rapidly evolving landscape of modern politics, the role of social media has become increasingly significant, shaping the way information is disseminated and influencing individuals' decisions. The 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria marked a pivotal moment in the intersection of technology, communication, and democracy. This paper delved into the intricate relationship between social media and voters' decision-making during these elections, uncovering insights that shed light on the evolving dynamics of political participation and decision making. The position of this paper illuminated the profound influence of social media platforms in expediting the spread of political information during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. The digital landscape has revolutionized the speed at which information travels, transcending geographical barriers and enabling real-time updates to reach a vast audience. Through various social media channels, political candidates and parties were able to directly engage with citizens, creating an avenue for dialogue that was hitherto unparalleled. This transformation in information dissemination has redefined the contours of political communication, empowering voters with instant access to diverse viewpoints and encouraging a more informed electorate.

Central to this research adventure was the revelation of a positive correlation between the frequency of social media interactions centered on political content and the shifts in voters' attitudes and preferences during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. As users engaged with political posts, shared perspectives, and participated in online discussions, a subtle yet impactful transformation occurred in their cognitive landscapes. The digital conversations, facilitated by the interactive nature of social media, led to a greater awareness of the nuances within the political landscape. This, in turn, prompted individuals to critically evaluate their stances, reassess their priorities, and even modify their voting preferences based on the evolving discourse. The paper's findings underscored the malleability of voters' decisions in response to the ongoing narrative construction within the social media realm.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy implications of this research is the notion that the burgeoning influence of social media on voters' choices can catalyze a more vibrant and participatory democratic process in Nigeria. The digital sphere has become an arena for the exchange of ideas, a platform where citizens can engage in constructive debates, challenge conventional wisdom, and hold political actors accountable. The paper portrayed a future where political campaigns are not only waged on traditional platforms but are also intricately interwoven with the digital

tapestry of social media networks. In doing so, the democratic process could evolve into a more dynamic, inclusive, and representative entity, reflective of the diverse voices and perspectives that constitute the Nigerian populace.

In conclusion, this paper embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the symbiotic relationship between social media and voters' decision-making during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. By harnessing the User Gratification theory, the study unveiled the transformative impact of social media platforms on the dissemination of political information, the fluidity of voters' attitudes, and the democratization of the electoral process. As Nigeria continues its democratic journey, the insights gleaned from this research underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of the role of social media in shaping political narratives and, consequently, influencing the trajectory of the nation's democracy.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that as social media's role in politics continues to evolve, it is crucial for policymakers, researchers, and social media platforms themselves to understand the mechanisms through which social media interactions influence voters. Promoting digital literacy, combating misinformation, and ensuring transparency in algorithmic processes are essential steps toward creating a healthier online political environment that empowers voters to make informed decisions.

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