PERCEPTION OF RESIDENTS ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DISSEMINATION OF NEWS AND INFORMATION DURING NIGERIA 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

This study sought the opinions of Enugu residents in Enugu State of Nigeria on the role of social media dissemination of news and information during the 2023 presidential election Nigeria. Anchored on the agenda setting theory of the media, the study aimed at examining the utilization of social media for political communication, particularly among the three leading political parties - All Peoples Congress, Labour Party and the People's Democratic Party. Among the specific objectives were to discover the kind of information available in the social media about the 2023 Presidential elections and to find out the effect of news and information about the 2023 general election in the social media on the residents of Enugu metropolis. The result of hypothesis testing showed that there is a statistical relationship between news and information about the 2023 presidential election in the social media and the voting behaviour of the residents of Enugu metropolis. Other findings of the study revealed that the kinds of information in the social media about the 2023 presidential election included information that influenced the choice of candidates, manifestoes of political parties, misleading contents and hoaxes; Facebook and Whatsapp were the commonest social media platforms where residents of Enugu metropolis sourced news and information on the 2023 presidential election. Among the recommendations is

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that the use of social media for electioneering campaign should be intensified so as to reach the heterogeneous audience that heavily depends on the social media for different kinds of news and information.

Keywords: social media, dissemination of news and information, elections

Introduction

The internet age is having a tremendous sway on virtually all fields of human endeavour. Generally, the media as an institution is viable in marketing ideas, products and services. In the face of this, the social media has gone a step further as a more effective tool for the sharing and marketing of ideas (Cabrera et al., 2017). To promote concept, ideas, products and services, both the private and the public sectors rely heavily on the social media to share well-orchestrated information to the public.

In political communication today, dependence on social networking has gained global prominence. This is well understood as it enables mass communication in the easiest form among content creators and consumers. In America, for example, Donald Trump made extensive use of the social media in his campaign to the degree that detractors had to queue into social networking sites to disseminate fake and harmful content against Trump, all in a bid to sway opinion. In American elections, Obama also made extensive use of the social media, using its impact in winning audience patronage. In Nigeria, the utilization of social media for political communication could be said to have gained unequalled momentum during the 2023 presidential election. It was also maximally applied by Goodluck Ebele Jonathan during the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria. Social media has, therefore, increasingly played key roles in influencing the outcome of elections (IseOlorunkanmi et al., 2023). While elections all over exert strong influence on the political landscape, their determination of social, economic and public policy development is undeniable. In politics, the introduction of social networking for sensitization, mobilization, education and garnering support has created new opportunities and challenging times for political actors and voters as well.

Considering the wave and sway which social media created, particularly in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria in respect to news and information dissemination, this study is disposed towards obtaining the perception of Enugu residents on the role of social media. This was

primarily informed in view of the huge campaign and electioneering that caused traffic in the social media, bringing mostly the teeming youths and general public to political sensitization, awareness and conscientization.

The specific objectives of the study were to discover the kind of information available in the social media about the 2023 presidential elections, find out the effect of news and information about the 2023 general election in the social media on the residents of Enugu metropolis, as well as to identify the components to social media platforms utilised by the residents of Enugu Metropolis for news and information in the 2023 presidential election. Hence, this paper formulated and tested one hypothesis which examined the statistical relationship between news and information about the 2023 presidential election in the social media and voter behaviour of residents in Enugu metropolis.

Social Media and Information Dissemination; Politics in Focus

Information and communication technologies have revolutionized the communication industry, causing a shift from the traditional system of communication to the digital era which is powered by the internet (Ekwunife et al., 2020). In the writing of Lamidi, Gana and Alafiatayo (2014), the application of ICT pursues new ways of meeting the needs and demands of communication consumers.

Social media comprise a variety of internet-enabled platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, among others. Each of the platforms has its own characteristics and functions. Social networking platforms are used to give out information on a large scale (Chukwu & Ekwunife, 2022). They enable users to interact and give feedback on content shared. Education is a basic function of networking sites and many persons do not just rely on the social media to receive information, but as well receive education and enlightenment on issues (Lamidi et al., 2014). Writing on the role of the social media and information dissemination, Rita, Antonio and Afonso (2023, p. 16) observed: "It can be seen as a pedagogical tool that stimulates the discovery and sharing of information, supporting the connection between users who share goals and interests".

In information dissemination, social media has the ability to communicate to a wide and diversified audience, breaking geographical barriers. Owing to this feature and more, its use and development have grown significantly within the last decades. Looking at the massive usage, Myspace garnered over 100 million users in a short period of its emergence in 2003, while Facebook alone commands over 2.4 billion users (Ortiz-Osina, 2019; Rita et al., 2023). The distinct characteristics of social media in the dissemination of news and information have today given rise to what are called netizens. These are citizens of the internet who live and have their existence and satisfaction in the digital world. In the view of Maes and Bischofberger (2015), the proliferation of these online platforms also comes with a polarization outcome on the users where views and counter views cause traffic in the digital world. This online polarization effect is highly visible in a world where political orientations are widening and politics becoming a more competitive phenomenon. Considering the inseparable relationship between media and politics, as shown by Ogbuoshi (2020) and Okunna and Omenugha (2012), the social media has become a veritable platform for political communication in the modern times.

While a wide range of content is communicated to the audience through the social media, the communication of politics is a fore in this study. As political parties create contents which seek to sell their candidates and share political information through the social media, different communication strategies, such as propaganda, are used to win the legitimacy of the people. There are competitive advantages which the use of social media for political communication has over the use of other media, namely: it is cheaper compared to mainstream advertising, works easily, allows politicians the power to decide to share contents with audience in the way they choose, among others. These usages enable online citizens to interact, share ideologies with different political messages which in many occasions could cause a sway in their political affiliation (Rita et al., 2023). Even passive users find themselves becoming active in the social media interactions as they are disposed to more easily find people of their likes and characteristics sharing ideas and ideologies. Suffice it to say that the social media is awash with opinion leaders who sample emotional messages to influence perception. Since these social media personalities are assumed to know better, they influence other users' interpretations of issues. Hence, this supports the view of Lee (2020, p. 2) that: "A person's attitude is influenced by their perceptions of relevance".

Looking at the ways in which social media communicates politics and wins legitimacy, Lee (2020) linked it to the desire to belong, the ease of use and perceived satisfaction. This implies that the need gratification which the social media users get is an inducement to their continuous use, thus justifying the uses and gratification theory of the media. Evaluating the effectiveness of social media in information dissemination as such information have wide reach, penetrate all crannies and break boundaries, social media is deemed strong for political campaign (Minshal, 2019). Political campaign in the social media spreads faster and easily. A correct utilization of social media for political communication has the capacity to gain the expected popularity.

Social Media and 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria remains remarkable for many reasons. Perhaps in the history of the nation's election, it was one that was unequalled in view of voter awareness, sensitization and active participation; all this was maximally achieved through the vehicle of social media (Nwokoma, 2023). Research shows that social media activism in Nigeria amounts to 32.9 million, and WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular platforms (Chukwu & Ekwunife, 2022). This significant role which social media has played in Nigeria is not confined to elections as evidence is seen in business and education, among others; but the role of social media in the political space of the recently concluded presidential election in Nigeria is noteworthy. The battle was prominent among the three leading political parties comprising the All Peoples Congress, Labour Party and the People's Democratic Party. Suffice it to say that, prior to the real election, the political exercise was already conducted and won on the social media. Before the main election, virtually everything about the election was done in the social media and the result of the election was predicted based on voters' perception. This perception was primarily informed, not just by the voters' attitudes in the real space but by the social media movements /campaign (IseOlorunkanmi et al., 2023)

It could be stated that the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was of immense significance, a significance popularized by the social media following the social media sensitization on the implication of the outcome. Social media was, thus, optimally used to educate, sensitize and enlighten voters on the need to assess factors such as insecurity, economic deprivation, tension

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and the general instability as they choose their preferred candidates. Through the social media, it could be argued that nobody missed out on the necessary political awareness towards choice-making. With the hope of the new media producing immediate transmission of election results, Nigerians hoped for a free, fair and credible election. The public trust for a transparent electoral process was secured through the role of the new media and social media platforms (Momoh, 2019). Assuredly, the 2023 political landscape in Nigeria was revolutionized as the digital era was leveraged on. To achieve this, a combination of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram, among others, was used as they provided the politicians and voters the interactive platform to share ideas, mobilize support and pursue objectives.

Unlike the era of traditional media, digital platforms made Nigerians in the 2023 presidential election to transit from passive citizens to, not just active participants, but active agents who sought changes to better their lot. Among the political parties, there was a clear and outstanding evidence of the Labour Party maximizing the social media to reach the teeming Nigerian youths, raising political awareness, sharing news and information, receiving feedback from active netizens and understanding the political terrain. Never before has the social media promoted political activism in Nigeria as in the 2023 presidential election (IseOlorunkanmi et al., 2023). During the 2023 electioneering campaigns, the social media on various platforms was heavily utilized by political parties to disseminate information rapidly, give news updates and keep citizens politically informed. They were able to do things by featuring news articles, videos and live broadcast, among other programmes. The information ecosystem was filled with political communication that the citizens had no gap left unfilled.

Nwokoma (2023) explained that 39.65% of registered voters were aged 18 to 34. It becomes evident that the youths are significantly represented, thus, making up 27.8% of the registered voters. One major consideration was how to reach this group which is highly impressionistic in nature. Political parties particularly used the social media to reach this population as earlier research shows that Nigerians who fall between the age range of 18 and 27 sourced their news from the social media via their smart devices. There is no gainsaying that virtual political rallies replaced rallies in real-time using the online medium to render voter education, electioneering campaign, and even monitor the election process.

The Labour Party's presidential candidate, Mr. Peter Obi, had his clips from numerous TV programmes circulated in the social media. His occasional appearance on Twitter, Instagram Live, and other digital platforms reverberated his idea of political activism. The same applied to the PDP presidential aspirants, His Excellency Atiku Abubakar, who together with his media aides regularly shared ideas of political influence on social media. Emphasizing the power of social media in this regard, Cambridge Analytica in 2015 and Archimedes in 2019 were accused of manipulating the opinions of the public through party activists and social media influencers. The effectiveness of social media in 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was enhanced as the menace of cross-posting across different digital platforms made it easier for one party to be heard or viewed on several platforms, thereby aiding visibility and reaching a heterogeneous audience simultaneously.

In the 2023 election in Nigeria, tik-tok played a prominent role for political communication. These have entertaining contents that caught people's attention and interest. Daily discussions were made on Twitter, featuring social media influencers and party activists who pursued the delegitimization of opponents to the glorification of their sponsors. Summarizing the impact of social media platforms on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, News Desk (2023, p. 2) wrote:

> ...WhatsApp remains the medium through which all social media contents really circulate widely through cross-carpeting and screenshots from other platforms... this is the application that facilitates the jump into offline spaces where non-smartphone users will begin debating and discussing news that has originated online.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds expression in the agenda setting theory developed by McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1960s. Researchers (Ekwunife, Chukwu, Agha, Ukeje & Anih, 2021; Okunna & Omenugha, 2012) explained the thought of Sandman et al. (1976) that while the mass media do

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not tell the people what to think, it tells them what to think about. This is captured in the role of the media in setting agenda for public discussion as posited by the agenda setting theory of the media. The media thus influences news and issues presented to the masses by conferring importance on the ones selected and presented by the media. Through the social media in particular, Nigerians were massively exposed to the 2023 presidential aspirant of the Labour Party which garnered mass followership with large population of the youths. Leaning maximally on the social media for campaign, the medium was used to give attention to the party and its presidential candidate, Mr. Peter Obi. Noting the pervasiveness of social media and the impact on information dissemination (Oberiri, 2016; Ekwunife, Ononiwu, Akpan & Sunday, 2020), the media conferred importance on the Labour Party candidate and he/the party was massively talked about by the people. This study is, therefore, anchored on the agenda setting theory of the media considering the role of social media in setting agenda for the public, regarding choice of candidate, choice of party, and acceptance of ideologies concerning the 2023 presidential elections.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey method to sample the views of 384 respondents which was derived using the Wimmer and Dominick online sample size calculator at a confidence level of 95%, and a margin of error set at 5%. The Wimmer and Dominick online sample size calculator is a tool designed to account for multiple factors such as the size of the population, the desired level of confidence, and the acceptable margin of error (Orihbhabor & Anyanwu, 2019). These factors were considered in determining the sample size. The survey method was considered suitable for the study as it afforded the researchers the ability to study a sample which was representative of the entire items studied. This provision, according to Ogbuoshi (2020), makes the survey method an ideal research method that provides for convenience and ease of study.

According to the National Population Commission (2016), the population of Enugu Metropolis is 722 664. Using an annual rate of 3.2 (UNDP), the projection formula was used to get the present population of Enugu Metropolis as 1,115, 793. This comprises Enugu north, Enugu south and Enugu East. Five research assistants were used to sample the instrument which was structured in

a Likert scale of four points. The mean method was used for the analysis of data and any mean value of up to 2.5 was accepted while anything less than that was rejected.

Table 1

Analysis of Demographic Data of the Sampled Population

Case	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18 – 21	51	14%
	22 – 25	60	17%
	26 – 29	77	21%
	30 – 33	83	23%
	34 –35	92	25%
	Total	**363**	**100%**
Occupation	Student	88	24%
	Business	191	53%
	Civil servant	21	6%
	Artisan	63	17%
	Total	**363**	**100%**
Education	PG	48	13%
	Degree	116	32%
	SSCE	134	37%
	FSLC	65	18%
	Total	**363**	**100%**

In Table 1 above, data showed that different age ranges within the scope of study were adequately represented with the age range of 34-35 having the highest frequency, with a percentage rate of 25. Generally, the age representations are indications that the sample was qualified to be used for the study. Among the sample, 53% of the four categories belonged to the business class. This shows that the area can also be described as a commerce-driven setting. Looking at the educational qualification of the respondents, degree and SSCE Level holders have the highest frequency with the percentage of 32 and 37 respectively. This indicates that the greater part of the respondents is literate and learned beyond basic education to supply answers to the research questions.

Table 2

Mean Responses of Respondents on the Kind of Information Available in the Social Media about the 2023 Presidential Election

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	DECISION
1	Social media furbished me with better information on the choice of political aspirants in the 2023 presidential election.	211	134	18	0	1282	3.53	Accepted
2	Voters were well informed about the manifestoes of political parties on social media platforms.	152	187	17	7	1210	3.33	Accepted
3	Sometimes, I get misleading and fake information on presidential candidates and their political parties.	233	100	22	8	1284	3.54	Accepted
4	Predictions about the result of the 2023 presidential election were in the social media and these influenced my view on the outcome.	79	242	32	10	1116	3.07	Accepted
5	There were more reliable news and information about the 2023 presidential election in the social media than the radio and television.	93	136	84	50	998	2.75	Accepted
	Grand Mean						**16.22**	

From Table 2 above, the grand mean of 16.22 is a sure indication that residents of Enugu metropolis received different kinds of news and information on the 2023 presidential election from the social media. Such news and information determined their choice of candidates and were perceived as reliable sources of information by the residents. The mean of 3.54 indicated that residents of Enugu metropolis were active social media users to identify misleading and fake news in the social media. In all, the kinds of news and information on the social media influenced the interpretation of political issues by Enugu residents.

Table 3

Mean Responses of Respondents on the Effect of News and Information in the Social Media on their Voting Behaviour in the 2023 Presidential Election

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	DECISION
6	I learnt much about the rules of election during the 2023 presidential election in the social media.	111	97	121	34	1011	2.79	Accepted
7	I was not influenced by the category of social media personalities that campaigned for the 2023 presidential election.	84	35	104	40	789	2.17	Rejected
8	News and information in the social media enabled me to shun voting apathy in the past 2023 presidential election.	113	125	66	59	1018	2.80	Accepted
9	News and information in the social media did not influence my behaviour during the 2023 election.	21	94	119	129	733	2.02	Rejected
10	I was more interested in the presidential election than other elections due to the bulk of news and information in the social media about the 2023 presidential election.	79	149	100	44	971	2.67	Accepted
	Grand Mean						**12.45**	

Table 3 shows that the residents of Enugu metropolis received enough political orientations through the social media which influenced their voting behaviour in the 2023 presidential election. Specific areas of voting behaviour that were influenced included voting apathy, choice of candidates and more interest in presidential election than other electoral positions. This implies that the voting behaviour of the residents of Enugu metropolis was influenced by the contents in the social media in such a way that would affect the general outcome of the election.

Table 4

Mean Responses of Respondents on the Commonest Social Media Platforms Utilized by the Residents of Enugu Metropolis for News and Information on the 2023 Presidential Elections

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	DECISION
11	I relied more on Facebook to get news and information on the 2023 presidential elections.	88	102	97	76	928	2.56	Accepted
12	Instagram was more useful to me in getting news and information on the 2023 presidential elections.	80	77	132	74	889	2.45	Rejected
13	Whatsapp was the commonest social media platform where I got news and information on the 2023 presidential election.	107	116	82	58	998	2.75	Accepted
14	I did not use YouTube regularly to source news and information on the 2023 presidential election.	61	147	71	84	911	2.51	Accepted
15	Apart from the social media platforms listed above, I did not make use of other platforms to source news and information on the 2023 presidential election.	166	175	18	4	1229	3.39	Accepted
	Grand Mean						**13.66**	

On the commonest social media used by the residents of Enugu metropolis to get news and information on the 2023 presidential election, Facebook and Whatsapp took the lead. This is understood considering the number of users on Facebook and Whatsapp. With this high number of users on Facebook and Whatsapp, it is indicative that a highly significant number of the residents of Enugu metropolis accessed news and information on the 2023 presidential election, and this would certainly affect election outcome.

Test of Hypothesis

H0: There is no statistical relationship between news and information about the 2023 presidential election in the social media and the voting behaviour of the residents of Enugu metropolis.

Here, a Chi-square (X^2) is used to test the hypothesis and data analysed. Thus;

$$X^2 = (f_o - f_e)^2/f_e$$

Where f_o = frequency of the observed data

f_e = frequency of the expected values

To calculate the expected frequency, we multiply the total column by the total row and divide by the grand total.

Table 6

Samples Collected

Response	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Sample 4	Sample 5	Totals
Agreement	208	89	238	115	228	**878**
Disagreement	155	144	125	348	144	**916**
Totals	**363**	**363**	**363**	**363**	**363**	**1815**

Source: 2023 field survey

Total in the first row	=	878
Total in the second row	=	916
Total in each column	=	1815

Thus, expected frequency (f_e) in the first row =

$363\text{x}878 / 1815 = 175.6$

And expected frequency (f_e) in the second column =

$\dfrac{167x235}{668} = 363\text{x}916/1815 = 183.2$

From Table 6 above, we can now set up the chi-square (X^2) table.

Table 7

Chi-Square (X^2) Table

Observed (f_o)	Expected (f_e)	($f_o - f_e$)	($f_o - f_e$)^2	($f_o - f_e$)^2/f_e
208	175.6	32.4	1049.76	5.89
89	175.6	-86.6	7499.56	42.71
238	175.6	62.4	3893.76	22.17
115	175.6	-60.6	3672.36	20.91
288	175.6	112.4	12633.76	71.95
155	183.2	-28.2	795.24	4.34
144	183.2	-39.2	1536.64	8.39
125	183.2	-58.2	3387.24	18.49
348	183.2	164.8	27159.04	148.25
144	183.2	-39.2	1536.64	8.39

Chi-Square (X^2) = summation of ($f_o - f_e$)^2/f_e

$\qquad$ = 351.49

To calculate the degree of freedom (df):

(Row – 1) (Column – 1)

i.e., (5 – 1) (2 – 1) = 4 x 1 = 4

Since 351.49 > 9.488 which is the value of alpha (0.05) in the probability level, it is, therefore, empirically supported and the null hypothesis (H$_0$) is rejected. Hence, there is statistical relationship between news and information about the 2023 presidential election in the social media and the voting behaviour of the residents of Enugu metropolis.

Discussion of Findings

From the findings gleaned in the study, the kinds of information in the social media about the 2023 presidential election included information that influenced choice of candidates, manifestoes of political parties, misleading contents and hoaxes. With a mean of 3.53, voters agreed that they were significantly furbished with relevant information about the presidential aspirants. These pieces of information enabled them to make informed choices regarding their voting. This role of the media in the 2023 election agrees with the agenda setting theory of the media which

researchers (Ekwunife et al, 2021; Okunna et al, 2012) explain as influencing people's opinions in a course like electioneering.

Hence, news and information in the social media significantly influenced voter behaviour among residents of Enugu metropolis during the 2023 election in areas such as voter apathy and choice of candidates. With a mean of 2.75, the agenda setting function of the media was further corroborated seeing that the predictions in the social media greatly influenced people's voting decisions.

Data in Table 4 showed that Facebook and Whatsapp were the commonest social media platforms where residents of Enugu metropolis sourced news and information on the 2023 presidential election, thus confirming the social media as the platform where a significant portion of the population relies on for information gathering and use. The mean value of 3.39 indicated that respondents did not make use of other media platforms aside social media. The respondents had more confidence in the social media than in the mainstream media which they perceived with very less credibility regarding election information. This implies that the social media is the people's medium which they rely heavily on for the expression of views and equal representation.

The result of hypothesis indicated that there is statistical relationship between news and information about the 2023 presidential election in the social media and the voting behaviour of the residents of Enugu metropolis. This is proven with the chi-square calculated value of 351.49 > 9.488 which is the value of alpha (0.05) in the probability level. This result further confirms the view of Cabrera et al. (2017) that the social media has gone a step further as a more effective tool for the sharing and marketing of ideas to promote concept, ideas, products and services, and to share well-orchestrated information to the public. The link between the result of hypothesis testing and the agenda setting theory can also be seen in the voting behaviour of the people which was greatly informed by the information which the media selectively presented during the presidential elections in Nigeria. IseOlorunkanmi et al. (2023) aptly caught this connect between news and information in the social media and the voting behaviour of voters when they observed that social media has increasingly played key roles in influencing the outcome of elections.

Conclusion

In the light of the above revelations, the study concludes that people's perception and voting behaviour in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria had a strong correlation with the information in the social media. Such information determined voters' apathy or willingness, and choice of candidates, among other voting decisions. Drawing from these discoveries, the study recommended that the use of social media for electioneering campaign should be intensified so as to reach the heterogeneous audience that heavily depends on the social media for different kinds of news and information as well as to utilize the social media for better grassroots campaign, mobilization and development. Social media should be effectively used to intensify voter education and everything about political communication. Campaigners are encouraged to utilize more of Facebook and Whatsapp for political communication since a higher number of social media users use those platforms effectively.

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