Original Article

Use of Social Media Campaign in Shaping Akure Residents' Opinions on Major Political Parties in 2023 Nigeria's Polls

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of social media campaigns on shaping the opinions of Akure residents during the 2023 elections. It focuses on how social media influences political discourse and decision-making. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, using a survey of 355 eligible Akure residents (social media users aged 18 and above) and a content analysis of 1,178 Facebook and X posts from APC, PDP, and Labour Party pages. Multi-stage cluster and convenience sampling were used for the survey. Posts from official party pages between September 28, 2022, and February 23, 2023, focusing on election-related themes, were selected using constructed and continuous week sampling to assess their influence on public opinion. The findings demonstrate that social media was pivotal in the 2023 political campaigns, with all parties actively using these platforms. The key themes promoted were the Economy and Education, with PDP and LP emphasizing consumption to production and job creation. The study shows that social media campaigns were critical in shaping public perceptions and influencing voter opinions. The conclusion highlights social media's significant capacity to affect candidate preferences, shape broader opinions, and drive changes in political behaviour. Based on these insights, it is recommended that political parties focus on making their social media campaigns more compelling and persuasive to engage voters better, complementing their use of traditional media.

INTRODUCTION

Larry Diamond, a prominent political scientist, articulates democracy as "a system of government in which power is vested in the people, who rule either directly or through elected representatives" (Diamond, 2019, p. 4). This definition underscores the principle of popular sovereignty, where political authority is derived from the consent and active participation of the citizenry. Within this framework, the media emerges as an indispensable pillar in sustaining democratic governance, providing mechanisms through which citizens engage with and influence political processes. The media's role in promoting transparency, accountability, and public participation is well-documented, with scholars emphasising its function as a "fourth estate" that monitors and critiques the activities of the government and other powerful institutions (Schudson, 2008). By providing accurate and reliable information about political, social, and economic issues, the media enables citizens to make informed decisions, thereby preventing the concentration of power and promoting an engaged and informed citizenry (Norris, 2017).

One of the core functions of the media in a democracy is to serve as a conduit for information, facilitating the flow of knowledge that citizens need to participate meaningfully in political life. This is particularly important in the context of electoral politics, where the media shapes public perceptions of candidates and policies (Mustapha & Omar, 2020). Media coverage of electoral campaigns informs voters about available choices and provides a platform for political debate and discussion (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). In this way, the media fosters the conditions necessary for democratic deliberation and participation.

In addition to its informational role, the media influences societal dynamics by shaping public opinion and setting the agenda for public discourse. The concept of agenda-setting, as articulated by McCombs & Shaw (1972), suggests that the media can determine which issues are perceived as important by the public. By focusing attention on particular topics, the media guides the political agenda. This function is especially potent in the digital age, where the proliferation of online news sources and social media platforms has expanded the media's reach (Chadwick, 2017). Social media, in particular, has transformed political communication, providing new avenues for public engagement and opinion formation (Allcott et al., 2024). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram enable political actors to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with voters (Vaccari, 2013). This shift has significant implications for campaign dynamics, with social media becoming critical for reaching and influencing large audiences. Studies show that social media can mobilise support, disseminate messages, and shape public opinion (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014).

However, the use of social media in political campaigns raises concerns about misinformation and echo chambers. The rapid spread of false or misleading information can distort perceptions and undermine democratic deliberation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Furthermore, social media users often connect with like-minded individuals, reinforcing existing beliefs and contributing to political polarisation (Bakshy et al., 2015). These

challenges highlight the need for a critical understanding of social media's role in political life.

In Nigeria, social media's influence on elections has grown, particularly in urban areas. The electoral process is marked by intense competition and public interest, with social media shaping voters' opinions and behaviours (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). These platforms offer spaces for political discourse, enabling citizens to share views and information about candidates and issues. Their broad reach allows political campaigns to target specific groups with tailored messages (Woolley & Howard, 2018). The real-time nature of social media enables quick responses to events, shaping narratives as they unfold—though this also heightens the risk of misinformation (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). In the 2023 Nigerian elections, social media is expected to play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion.

Given its growing significance in political campaigns, this study investigates how social media has shaped the opinions of Akure residents regarding major political parties in the 2023 elections. Through an analysis of social media content and its impact on voter behaviour, the study aims to deepen the understanding of digital communication in electoral processes. By examining the intersection of media, politics, and public opinion in a specific local context, this research will provide insights into the broader dynamics of democracy and governance in Nigeria.

Social media has profoundly altered campaigns and public opinion formation, becoming an essential source of information and a venue for political discourse (Awinia, 2021; Apuke & Tunka, 2018; Bello et al., 2021). However, it also poses risks. Studies by Bakshy et al. (2015) and Garimella (2018) show that social media can create echo chambers, distorting opinions by limiting exposure to diverse views. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) and Pennycook et al. (2018) highlight the dangers of misinformation, which can be amplified by social media's speed. These concerns underline the challenges of unregulated social media in politics.

Social media has also become a virtual public sphere for campaigns, transforming mobilisation and voter engagement (Bosch, 2016). Empirical studies, such as those by Apuke & Tunka (2018) and Bello et al. (2021), demonstrate its role in mobilising younger voters. Research by Okolo et al. (2017), Munir (2018), Olowokere & Audu-Bako (2019), Chan & Yi (2024), and Boateng (2020) shows a positive correlation between Facebook use and political image projection, reinforcing social media's credibility in shaping perceptions. Despite these insights, a significant gap remains in understanding how social media campaigns influenced public opinion during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria—particularly in Akure, where major political parties are deeply rooted.

Research Questions

The research questions of the study are as follows:

- To what extent did the major political parties use social media for campaigns in the 2023 Nigeria polls?

- What are the major campaign themes projected through social media by the three major political parties in the 2023 Nigeria polls?

- To what extent did campaigns on social media influence Akure Residents' opinion of the major political candidates in the 2023 Nigeria polls?

Hypothesis

HO$_1$: There is no significant relationship between the use of a social media campaign and Akure residents' opinions on major political parties in the 2023 Nigeria polls.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media is a multifaceted concept defined in various ways in both public and academic discourse. It generally refers to digital platforms that enable social interactions, combining text, graphics, images, and audio within a structured digital environment. This environment supports data

interaction for purposes ranging from personal communication to large-scale political engagement. Social media also integrates design elements that create virtual social spaces, facilitating interactions that bridge online and face-to-face communication. For example, Adaugo *et al*. (2015) define social media as a means for people to create, share, and exchange information in virtual communities. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) describe it as a cluster of internet-based applications built on Web 2.0, enabling content generation and exchange. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter allow for interactive communication among users, marking a departure from the passive consumption associated with traditional media (Sweetser & Laricsy, 2008). Boyd & Ellison (2007) explain it as web-based applications where users create profiles, connect with others, and engage as friends.

The role of social media has expanded significantly, becoming a powerful tool for driving social change and fostering political engagement (Dungse *et al.,* 2018). It has transformed citizens from passive consumers of political messages into active participants who can challenge prevailing narratives and present alternative viewpoints. In Nigeria, social media has revolutionised political culture, turning it from passive to participatory. Notably, the 2011 elections marked a significant period when both political actors and citizens employed social media platforms for political engagement (Fasola & Oyadeyi, 2021). Subsequent political events, such as the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign and the 2015 election campaign, highlighted social media's critical role in Nigerian politics. Bosch & Mutsvairo (2017) and Mutsvairo (2017) observed that the widespread adoption of social media platforms by citizens facilitated civic participation and engagement.

The influence of social media in political processes is undeniable. It has shifted dynamics from passive information reception to active sharing of viewpoints (Hölig & Hasebrink, 2016; Tang *et al*.,2021). While not the sole determinant of political

outcomes, social media is a crucial phenomenon in contemporary political campaigns (Bandipo, 2016). Social networks can influence political situations and decisions, as seen in the 2008 American presidential election, where Twitter's impact was significant (Hughes & Palen, 2009).

The information landscape has evolved through social networks, leading to the personalisation of information due to user interactions (DeVito, 2017). Recommendation systems, which analyse and filter information, play a role in this process (Adomavicius & Tuzhilin, 2005). However, these systems can also negatively impact political opinions and results, leading to adverse perceptions of social networks.

The 2023 general election in Nigeria saw a significant shift in dynamics due to the active involvement of social media. As of February 2023, 156 million Nigerians were active internet subscribers, with social media playing a crucial role in political engagement, from educating the public about Permanent Voters' Cards (PVCs) to facilitating public election monitoring and campaign awareness (Saaida & Alhouseini, 2023). Social media also encouraged voter participation and free expression of opinions (Kim, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting Theory, proposed by McCombs & Shaw (1972), emphasises the media's role in shaping public priorities by highlighting specific issues. The theory suggests that media filter reality and the frequency of coverage determines the perceived importance of topics (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; McQuail, 2010). It operates on two levels: the salience of an issue and the framing of that issue, both of which influence public perception (Ghanem, 1997; Weaver, 2007). This theory is particularly relevant during elections, where media focus on certain political issues can shape public opinion (Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). However, it has been criticised for its limited effect on those with

established opinions, as the media tends to reinforce rather than change these biases (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011; Wanta & Hu, 1994).

In contrast, the Two-Step Flow Theory, introduced by Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1944), argues that media influence on public opinion is mediated through "opinion leaders" rather than direct exposure. These leaders first engage with media content and then disseminate and interpret it within their social networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The theory suggests that opinion leaders have a significant impact on others' opinions (Mutz & Martin, 2001). With the rise of social media, this model has evolved into a multi-step process where information spreads rapidly through online communities (Bakshy *et al.,* 2011; Pew Research Center, 2011). Social media influencers now act as modern opinion leaders, shaping public perception by interpreting and sharing content with their followers (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Bakshy *et al.,* 2011; Wright & Hinson, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employed survey and content analysis methods to investigate social media's role in shaping opinions during the recent general election among Akure residents. A survey was conducted with 400 respondents, of which 355 were deemed suitable for analysis. The content analysis focused on 1,178 social media posts from Facebook and X pages of the APC, PDP, and Labour Party from September 28, 2022, to February 23, 2023, to evaluate how these posts influenced public opinion.

A multi-stage cluster sampling method was employed. Initially, Akure residents were divided into 15 district areas: Aponmu, Gbogi, Isikan, Ijomu, Obanla, Lisa, Oda, Odopetu, Aro, Uro, Oke-Aro, Oshodi, Owode, Isolo, and Imuagun, from which three districts were randomly selected. In the second stage, four populated and major streets from each selected district were purposively chosen, resulting in 12 streets. Respondents from these streets were then sampled using convenience

sampling, with each willing individual receiving a questionnaire.

Coding Procedure

Content analysis used both constructed week and continuous week sampling techniques to select posts from Facebook and X platforms of the political parties, within the campaign period. The posts were varied, including fliers, rallies, events, videos, banners, polls and surveys, quotes, advertisements, and re-posts on topics such as party policies and candidate profiles. These units were directly related to the reports on major political parties during the 2023 election. Variables were coded to assess the frequency and volume of social media posts and categorised into themes such as economy, security, Education, infrastructure and healthcare. Data were summarised in frequency tables to analyse the volume and themes of posts and their impact on opinion formation.

RESULTS

The demographic profile of respondents reveals a predominance of male participants (56%) and a significant representation of younger adults, with 44.5% aged between 18 and 28 years. Additionally, a substantial proportion of respondents (70%) possessed tertiary education, which enhances the reliability of the data by ensuring a more informed perspective on political engagement. The majority of respondents were single (46%), and social media usage was notably high, with 88.7% actively engaging on various platforms. Facebook (33.5%) and TikTok (25.4%) emerged as the most popular platforms among users, reflecting their widespread appeal for digital interactions. Importantly, all 355 respondents (100%) reported exposure to political campaign content on social media, underscoring the extensive use of these platforms by political parties during the 2023 elections. This highlights the growing significance of social media as a primary avenue for political engagement and outreach.

The distribution of exposure to political campaign content indicates that 37.2% of respondents

encountered APC campaign messages, followed by 28.7% who were exposed to Labour Party content and 23.4% to PDP messaging, with smaller percentages engaging with other parties. This pattern suggests that APC and the Labour Party maintained a particularly strong online presence during the election period. In terms of platform usage, Facebook (32.4%) and TikTok (19.7%) were the most common channels for encountering political campaign messages, followed by Twitter and Instagram. The prevalence of these platforms suggests their effectiveness in political communication, serving as crucial tools for voter outreach. The high level of exposure to political content on social media reinforces the role of digital platforms in shaping political discourse and ensuring sustained engagement with the electorate.

Table 1: Respondents' Rating of Political Parties' Social Media Usage

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Very Low	23	6.5
Low	50	14.1
Undecided	49	13.8
High	181	51
Very High	52	14.6
Total	355	100

The table shows that 51% of respondents rated political parties' use of social media as high, and 14.6% as very high. With a combined 65.6% positive rating, the data suggest that the majority of respondents viewed social media as an effective tool for political communication during the 2023 polls.

Table 2: Predominant Themes in Political Campaigns

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Economy	112	31.5
Job Creation	41	11.5
Health Care	22	6.2
Education	69	19.4
Security and Crime	47	13.2
Infrastructure Development	31	8.7
Societal Welfare	12	3.4
Environmental Policies	8	2.3
Others	13	3.8
Total	355	100

The table illustrates that the economy was the most predominant theme in political campaigns, highlighted by 31.5% of respondents. Other significant themes included education (19.4%) and security (13.2%). This reflects the priority of economic issues among voters, with political parties tailoring their messages to address these concerns.

Table 3: Political Parties Representing Selected Themes

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
APC	131	36.9
PDP	86	24.2
Labour Party	116	32.7
NNPP	7	2
Others	15	4.2
Total	**355**	**100**

The table shows that the APC and Labour Party were the most active in presenting themes on social media, with 36.9% and 32.7% of respondents respectively identifying them. This suggests that these parties were particularly effective in aligning their campaigns with voter concerns and maintaining a strong thematic presence online.

Table 4: Political Parties with the Most Compelling Social Media Presence

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
APC	127	35.8
PDP	83	23.4
Labour Party	135	38
NNPP	4	1.1
Others	6	1.7
Total	**355**	**100**

The data reveal that 38% of respondents found the Labour Party's themes to be the most compelling on social media, followed by APC (35.8%) and PDP (23.4%). The Labour Party's slight lead suggests its strong influence in shaping voters' perceptions through social media, with APC also maintaining a significant impact.

Table 5: Political Parties with the Most Persuasive Campaign Messages

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
APC	123	34.6
PDP	86	24.2
Labour Party	130	36.7
NNPP	7	2
Others	9	2.5
Total	**355**	**100**

The table indicates that the Labour Party was viewed by 36.7% of respondents as having the most compelling and persuasive campaign messages, closely followed by APC at 34.6%. This suggests that the Labour Party's communication strategies were particularly effective in resonating with the electorate, highlighting the critical role of persuasive messaging in political campaigns.

Table 6: Social Media Activity by Political Parties

Variable	APC (%)	PDP (%)	LP %
Total No of Post Examined	390(100)	390(100)	398(100)
Average No. of Post Per Week	72(18.5)	54(13.8)	70(17.7)

This table shows that the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and Labour Party (LP) had the most active social media presence, with an average of 72 and 70 posts per week, compared to the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which posts less frequently. The data highlights the importance of maintaining an active online presence, as a higher volume of posts can enhance visibility and engagement with potential voters.

Table 7: Political Campaign Themes by Party

Variable	APC	PDP	LP
Economy	65(23.9)	68(24.8)	78(30.6)
Security	53(19.5)	60(21.9)	56(21.9)
Health Care	34(12.5)	13(4.7)	11(4.3)
Education	70(25.7)	62(22.6)	78(30.5)
Infrastructure	40(14.7)	43(15.9)	32 (12.5)
Total	**272(100)**	**274(100)**	**255(100)**
Frequently Discussed Themes			
Consumption to Production	10(11.6)	39(31.)	45(31.0)
Poverty Alleviation	41(47.7)	50(40.3)	55(38)
Job Creation and Youth Empowerment	35(40.7)	35(28.2)	45(33.1)
Total	**86(100)**	**124(100)**	**145(100)**

The table shows that APC, PDP, and LP prioritised Economy and Education in their campaigns, with LP focusing slightly more. All parties addressed poverty alleviation, but PDP and LP emphasised consumption-to-production and job creation more, while APC concentrated on poverty alleviation and youth empowerment.

Table 8: Voter Behaviour Change Due to Social Media Campaigns

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	230	64.8
No	125	35.2
Total	**355**	**100**

This table indicates that 64.8% of respondents changed their choice of political candidates due to social media campaigns, while 35.2% did not. The significant influence of social media on voter decision-making highlights the power of digital campaigns in swaying public opinion and altering electoral outcomes.

Table 9: Nature of Influence of Political Campaign Messages

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Changed my mind on a candidate to vote for	78	22
Enhanced my support for the candidate I voted for	147	41.3
Made me to participate in the 2023 elections	95	26.8
Others, Please Specify	35	9.9
Total	**355**	**100**

The table shows that 41.3% of respondents felt that campaign messages reinforced their support for a candidate, while 22% changed their vote based on these messages. Additionally, 26.8% were motivated to participate in the elections because of the campaigns. This indicates that political messaging not only influences voting choices but also plays a crucial role in voter mobilisation and engagement.

Hypothesis

Table 10: Impact of Social Media Campaigns on Akure Residents' Opinions

Variables	Observed Freq.	Expected Freq.	Total Freq.	Df	x² Cal	x² Tab	Remark
Use of social media	355	377.5	355	1	110.727	2.915	Reject
Akure Residents' Opinion	355						
P<0.05;N=355							

This table presents the results of a chi-square test analysing the relationship between social media campaigns and opinion-shaping among Akure residents. The test result ($\chi^2 = 110.727$) significantly exceeds the critical value ($\chi^2 = 2.915$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between political social media campaigns and Akure residents' opinions about parties and candidates. Social media campaigns evidently play a pivotal role in influencing voters' perceptions, highlighting their importance in modern electoral strategies.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study underscore the central role of social media in political campaigns during the 2023 Nigerian elections. The data reveal that platforms such as Facebook and TikTok were extensively utilised by political parties to engage with voters, fostering interactive political communication. A significant proportion of respondents (65.6%) perceived political parties' social media engagement positively, indicating its effectiveness in mobilising public opinion. This aligns with Santos & Valenzuela (2021), who argue that the rapid dissemination of information via social media facilitates real-time discussions and accelerates opinion formation. The frequent and positive reception of social media-based political engagement suggests that digital platforms have become a critical mechanism for enhancing voter-candidate interactions, reinforcing the importance of social media as a campaign tool.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the widespread exposure of voters to political content on social media, highlighting its growing influence on electoral processes. The engagement of major political parties—APC, PDP, and Labour Party—was particularly notable on Facebook and TikTok, reflecting broader trends in digital civic participation. Bosch & Mutsvairo (2017) previously identified social media as a crucial vehicle for civic engagement, a notion supported by this study's findings. With 51.8% of respondents reporting frequent exposure to political content, social media

emerges as a dominant source of political information. This corroborates the conclusions of Adaugo *et al*. (2015), who argue that social media plays a fundamental role in virtual communities and information exchange. The overall positive perception of social media's impact on political communication further supports Ajero's assertion that digital platforms enhance public participation in political discourse.

The thematic focus of political campaigns also emerged as a key aspect of this study. Economic issues dominated campaign messaging, accounting for 31.5% of the discourse, underscoring voters' prioritisation of economic stability and growth. Other critical themes included education, security, job creation, and healthcare. Gordon (2018) emphasises the role of media in shaping political debates and providing a platform for candidates to articulate their qualifications and policy positions. The findings affirm this view, demonstrating that social media not only serves as an information conduit but also plays a role in setting the political agenda. Notably, the Labour Party led in issue-based campaigning, with 38% of its messages addressing pressing national concerns, followed by APC and PDP. This finding aligns with Berger et al's. (2009) assertion that media channels prioritise political issues and influence public perception. By strategically emphasising economic development and governance, political parties leveraged social media to steer voter conversations and shape electoral decision-making.

The study also highlights the significant influence of social media campaign messages on voters' choices. A substantial 64.8% of respondents reported that social media interactions played a pivotal role in shaping their candidate preferences. This is consistent with the findings of Dimitrova & Matthes (2018), Kofi Frimpong (2022), and Sulaiman *et al.* (2023), who established that digital media platforms enhance voter engagement and political mobilisation. Notably, 41.3% of respondents indicated that social media reinforced their support for a preferred candidate, while 22% acknowledged that campaign content influenced them to change their voting decision. These results affirm the applicability of the Two-Step Flow Theory, which posits that opinion leaders play a critical role in shaping public perception. The high levels of social media engagement suggest that digital influencers and political commentators contributed to amplifying campaign messages, thereby affecting voter behaviour. The ability of social media to facilitate real-time interaction between political actors and the electorate underscores its growing significance as a tool for political mobilisation.

Overall, the data reaffirm social media's transformative impact on electoral politics, particularly in facilitating widespread voter engagement and shaping political narratives. The study's findings align with Gil de Zúñiga & Chen (2019), who argue that social media accelerates opinion formation by enabling rapid dissemination of political content. The frequency of exposure to campaign messages, reported by 51.8% of respondents, highlights social media's dominance as a primary source of political information, consistent with Bosch & Mutsvairo (2017). Furthermore, the substantial percentage of voters who altered their political preferences due to social media interactions illustrates the evolving nature of digital electoral participation. As political campaigns increasingly migrate online, social media is poised to remain a key determinant of voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of social media's impact on political campaigns during the 2023 presidential election in Akure reveals its significant role in shaping voter engagement, political communication, and campaign strategies. The findings confirm that social media platforms, particularly Facebook and TikTok, were extensively utilised by political parties to reach and mobilise the electorate. The generally positive perception of social media

underscores its effectiveness as a medium for fostering political discourse, enhancing voter interaction, and influencing public opinion.

The study also highlights the centrality of economic issues in campaign messaging, alongside other key themes such as education, security, job creation, and healthcare. This thematic focus reflects political parties' strategic use of social media to address voter concerns and shape the electoral agenda. The Labour Party's leading role in effectively presenting campaign messages further underscores the importance of digital strategies in contemporary political communication. Additionally, the substantial influence of social media on voter decision-making suggests that campaign messages played a critical role in shaping political preferences. The varying degrees of impact reported by respondents highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of social media's role in electoral decision-making. Ultimately, the study reaffirms social media's growing influence as a dynamic tool for political mobilisation and public engagement in the democratic process.

Recommendations

- Enhanced Social Media Strategies: Political parties should continue to leverage social media platforms effectively, focusing on engaging content that resonates with the electorate's key concerns. Emphasising themes such as the economy, education, and healthcare can enhance voters' engagement and support.

- Targeted Campaign Themes: Political campaigns should tailor their messages to address the most pressing issues for voters. Given the prominence of economic concerns, parties should prioritise this theme while also addressing other significant issues such as security and job creation.

- Increased Engagement with Voters: Political parties should utilise social media to foster real-time interactions with voters. Engaging content

and active participation can strengthen voter relationships and influence public opinion more effectively.

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