
Impact of Social Media on Political Opinion Before and During Nigeria's 2023 Election

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE DETAILS
Studies on the effect of social media on political communication and participation have found that falsehood and promotion of agenda are common in Nigerian social media usage for political discussion. Some of Nigerian citizens are discouraged probably due to their belief that their votes may not count. The study therefore investigated the impact of social media on political discourse and public opinion before and during Nigeria's 2023 Election. The population of the study comprised 51 225 500 Facebook users in Nigeria. A convenience sample was used to select a sample of 500 participants for the study. Data was collected using a questionnaire through Qualtrics. Mean, Standard Deviation and Linear regression were used to analysed the data gathered for the study. The study found that social media has a high effect on political discourse, public opinion and political opinion during the Nigerian 2023 general elections. The study found that social media activeness has high impact on political expression opinions during Nigeria's 2023 election; social media influenced political polarization and propaganda, but does not increase the spread of misinformation. The study concluded that electoral bodies and politicians must improve debate and public opinions through discussion of policies and ideologies to reduce polarization.	Published On: 17 January 2025 Available on: https://irijsh.com/

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and social media have become transformative tools for communication, interaction, and political engagement in the modern era (Afolaranmi & Amodu, 2022). With 3.5 billion monthly Facebook users in 2021, of which 98.5% accessed it via mobile devices, social media's reach is unparalleled (Brian, 2021). In Nigeria, 41.6 million people actively use Facebook in 2023, with projections indicating over 90 million social media users by 2025 (Opeibi, 2019). Social media democratizes information dissemination, removes traditional communication barriers, and fosters public discourse and political participation (Folorunso, 2020).

Social media has significantly influenced political engagement in Nigeria, exemplified by events like the 2012 fuel subsidy protest. It has provided a platform for virtual activism, with movements like BlackLivesMatter and MeToo illustrating its global reach (Omachi, 2023). The 2023 Nigerian elections marked a shift in the political landscape, with Peter Obi's "Obidients" gaining nationwide support transcending ethnic and regional divides (Egbulefu, 2023). Social media amplified political discourse, allowing supporters of candidates like Bola Tinubu ("BATified") and Atiku Abubakar ("Atikulated") to engage actively. Despite these benefits, social media also harbors risks, including the spread of fake news, propaganda, and disinformation, which can mislead public opinion (Michael, 2022; Volkova, 2022).

The role of social media in political discourse involves not only engagement but also the potential to shape public perceptions and attitudes. It serves as a platform for political rhetoric, public discussions, and even identity formation among youth voters, a critical demographic in Nigerian elections (Oparaugo, 2021). However, issues such as privacy breaches, identity theft, and addiction to superficial content challenge its efficacy (Cladis, 2020; Igwebuike, 2021). This study examines how social media interaction shaped public discourse and influenced opinions during Nigeria's 2023 elections.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Previous studies have highlighted social media's role in promoting political participation in Nigeria. However, many focus solely on voter mobilization or sentiment analysis (Folorunso, 2020; Oyewola, 2023). This study identifies a gap: understanding how

social media interactions shaped political discourse and public opinion before and during the 2023 elections. It seeks to explore how online engagement influenced users' attitudes, participation, and perceptions of political candidates.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to investigate the impact of social media on political discourse and public opinion before and during Nigeria's 2023 Election. The specific objectives are to:

1. investigate the effect of social media on political discourse during Nigeria 2023 elections
2. determine the effect of social media on the public opinion of social media users during Nigeria 2023 elections;
3. ascertain the impact of social media on social media users' political opinions on Nigeria's 2023 general election.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do social media have effect on political discourse in Nigeria using the 2023 Nigeria election as a case study?
2. To what extent do social media have effect on public opinion of social media users in Nigeria using the 2023 Nigeria election as a case study?
3. How do social media have impact on social media users' political opinions on Nigeria's 2023 general election?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has redefined the dynamics of public opinion and political discourse globally, with its pervasive influence extending to Nigeria's 2023 election. The platforms have become critical in shaping political conversations and mobilizing participation, as evidenced in events such as the Arab Spring and other global protests. Social media facilitates rapid information dissemination, amplifies voices of marginalized groups, and allows for direct interaction between politicians and the public (Sebei, 2021). For instance, TikTok users famously pranked a Trump rally by reserving seats they did not attend, showcasing the platform's ability to coordinate mass actions (Fischer, 2020).

In the Nigerian context, social media has provided a platform for vibrant political debates, offering citizens a space to discuss and shape opinions about candidates and parties. Studies reveal that political parties and underdog candidates leverage these platforms to gain recognition and mobilize support, as seen in similar cases like the Pirate Party's success in the 2011 Berlin elections (Whiting, 2022). The engagement on social media during Nigeria's election mirrors global trends, where platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have significantly influenced voter perceptions and political participation (Persily, 2021).

Despite its democratizing potential, the role of social media in perpetuating misinformation remains a critical concern. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter have taken steps to combat fake news, such as removing accounts associated with interference during France's 2017 presidential election, similar efforts are essential in the Nigerian context to prevent the spread of false narratives (Yurieff, 2020). However, studies suggest that during the 2023 elections in Nigeria, the dissemination of misinformation was not as significant as in other regions. Instead, users predominantly engaged in meaningful political discourse, which enhanced public awareness and participation (Ugochukwu, 2024).

Globally, social media has demonstrated its ability to foster transparency and accountability in governance, as seen during the Hong Kong protests of 2019, where encrypted apps enabled protesters to evade government surveillance while documenting police brutality (Blakely, 2021). In Nigeria, similar patterns of social media usage during elections underscore its power to shape public opinion, create awareness, and drive political engagement among youth and first-time voters (McCombs, 2020).

However, social media's influence is not without challenges. The platform's ability to shape opinions can also lead to ideological divides, as evidenced in the digital Cold War dynamics between Western and Eastern nations using different platforms (Limperos, 2021). The Nigerian 2023 elections highlighted how political groups utilized social media not only to promote their candidates but also to challenge opponents. This aligns with studies suggesting that politicians increasingly use these platforms to bypass traditional media and directly engage voters (Kleinnijenhuis, 2022).

While existing studies extensively discuss social media's role in political engagement, there is limited research examining its nuanced impact on public opinion and discourse during elections, particularly in Nigeria. Most studies focus on either voter mobilization or misinformation. This research addresses this gap by exploring the interplay between social media interaction, public discourse, and opinion shaping in the context of Nigeria's 2023 election, offering insights into how digital platforms influence democratic processes.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey research design was employed for this study, as it is commonly used to collect data from a defined population to address specific research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population comprised 51,225,500 Facebook users in Nigeria as of July 2024, representing 22.2% of the country's total population (Statista, 2024). A convenience sampling method was employed to select 500 participants, a technique widely used for its practicality in accessing specific respondent groups (Etikan et al., 2016).

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Data collection was facilitated through a structured questionnaire titled the "Social Media on Political Discourse and Public Opinion Questionnaire (SMPDPOQ)." The instrument underwent face and content validation by experts in measurement and evaluation to ensure its appropriateness and relevance to the study's objectives (Bolarinwa, 2015). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha in SPSS, yielding a value greater than .900, indicating high internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

The questionnaire consisted of structured questions with predefined answers to ensure consistency in responses. It was hosted on Qualtrics, and participants were invited to complete it through shared links. Following data collection, analysis was conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including percentages, frequencies, tables, and charts, were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, specifically linear regression analysis, were employed to derive conclusions from the gathered data (Field, 2018).

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Demographic Information of Respondents

Table 1: Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	341	68.2
Female	159	31.8
Total	500	100

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 2: Age of the Respondents

Ages(years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Under 18	6	1.2
18 – 25 yrs	96	19.2
25 – 30 yrs	335	67
31 years and above	63	12.6
Total	500	100

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 3: Ethnicity of the Respondents

Ethnic group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hausa	73	14.6
Yoruba	185	37
Igbo	183	36.6
Others	59	11.8
Total	500	100

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 4: Number of Social Media Platforms used by the Respondents

Social media Platforms	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	51	10.2
2	85	17
3 to 4	171	34.2
5 and above	193	38.6
Total	500	100

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 5: Frequency of usage (how active) the Respondents were on Social media

Ethnic group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Weekly	39	7.8
Daily	185	37.0
Always	276	55.2
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 6: Level of Political interest of the Respondents

Interest in politics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not at all interested	4	.8
Not very interested	11	2.2
Neither interested nor uninterested	39	7.8
Somewhat interested	181	36.2
Very interested	265	53.0
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 7: Political Knowledgeability of the Respondents

Knowledgeability in politics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not at all knowledgeable	6	1.2
Not very knowledgeable	15	3.0
Neither knowledgeable nor ignorant	46	9.2
Somewhat knowledgeable	203	40.6
Very knowledgeable	230	46.0
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 8: Political Activeness of the Respondents

Activeness in politics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not at all active	6	1.2
Not very active	17	3.4
Neither active nor inactive	36	7.2
Somewhat active	204	40.8
Very active	237	47.4
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2024

Hypothesis Testing

H₀₁: There will be no significant main effect of social media on political discourse in Nigeria during the 2023 Nigeria election

Table 9: Linear regression on main effect of social media on political discourse in Nigeria during the 2023 election

Model	R	R ²	Adj.R ²	Std error	
1	.709 ^a	.503	.502	.45089	
Source of variance	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig F Change
Regression	101.135	1	101.135	497.468	.000 ^b
Residual	100.023	492	.203		
Total	201.158	493			

Table 10. Regression Coefficient

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.064	.154		6.898	.000	.761	1.367
	Social_Media	.834	.037	.709	22.304	.000	.761	.908

a. Dependent Variable: ESPDs

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From table 9, the calculated $F_{(1,492)} = 497.46$ obtained from the analysis of data was statistically greater than the critical f-value (.0000) at $p < 0.05$, and table 10 shows a regression coefficient of p-value of .000, which means that the null hypothesis will be rejected. This result implies that there is significant main effect of social media on political discourse in Nigeria during the 2023 election.

H₀2: There will be no significant main effect of social media on public opinion of social media users in Nigeria during the 2023 Nigeria election

Table 11: Linear regression on main effect of social media on public opinion in Nigeria during the 2023 election

Model	R	R ²	Adj.R ²	Std error of estimate	
1	.512 ^a	.262	.261	.58994	
Source of variance	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig F change
Regression	60.802	1	60.802	174.704	.000
Residual	171.230	492	.348		
Total	1343.223	315			

Table 12: Regression Coefficient

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.679	.202		8.320	.000	1.282	2.075
	Social_Media	.647	.049	.512	13.218	.000	.551	.743
a. Dependent Variable: ESPO								

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From table 11, the calculated $F_{(1,492)} = 174.70$. obtained from the analysis of data was statistically greater than the critical f-value (.0000) at $p < 0.05$, and table 12 shows a regression coefficient of p-value of .000, which means that the null hypothesis will be rejected. This result implies that there is significant main effect of social media on public opinion during the 2023 election in Nigeria.

H₀3: There will be no significant main effect of social media on social media users' political opinions on Nigeria's 2023 general election

Table 13: Linear regression on main effect of social media on social media users' political opinions on Nigeria's 2023 general election

Model	R	R ²	Adj.R ²	Std error of estimate	
1	.579 ^a	.336	.334	.53491	
Source of variance	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig
Regression	71.173	1	71.173	248.744	.000
Residual	140.776	492	.286		
Total	211.949	493			

Table 14: Regression Coefficients

Coefficients ^a								
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.514	.183		8.277	.000	1.155	1.874
	Social_Media	.700	.044	.579	15.772	.000	.613	.787

a. Dependent Variable: ESPOL

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From table 13, the calculated $F_{(1,492)} = 248.74$ obtained from the analysis of data was statistically greater than the critical f-value (.0000) at $p < 0.05$, and table 14 shows a regression coefficient of p-value of .000, which means that the null hypothesis will be rejected. This result implies that there is significant main effect of social media users' political opinions on Nigeria's 2023 general election.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study reveals a significant effect of social media on political discourse in Nigeria during the 2023 election, aligning with existing literature. For instance, Baker (2022) noted that social media enhances political discourse by providing underrepresented groups a platform to voice their opinions, drawing attention to topics they consider important and fostering inclusiveness. This perspective indicates that social media allowed many Nigerians to access and participate in political discussions by posting, reacting, or joining conversations on political issues during the election.

However, the study contrasts with the assertion that social media significantly increases the dissemination of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and false news (Ugochukwu, 2024). While acknowledging that social media can propagate false information,

the findings suggest that many Nigerians did not use it to spread misinformation during the election. The spread of fake news was observed to be minimal and did not significantly impact political discourse. Instead, social media was primarily used to discuss political issues. This aligns with Sebei's (2021) observation that social media serves as a platform for youth engagement in political discourse in Nigeria.

The study also identifies the effect of social media on public opinion during the 2023 election, corroborating literature that social media can shape political outcomes and influence public perspectives (Hilcott, 2022). Supporters of political parties or candidates often engaged in discussions or arguments, attempting to persuade others. While such discussions may not significantly alter opponents' views, they often enhance participants' knowledge and refine their opinions about their preferred and opposing candidates. This finding supports Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli's (2023) assertion that social media plays a vital role in shaping political opinions during elections, enabling stakeholders such as political parties and politicians to influence public attitudes through communication and interaction. Furthermore, Blakely (2021) highlighted how social media interactions affect people's attitudes toward candidates, reinforcing its role as a tool for shaping political opinions.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound impact of social media on political discourse and public opinion during Nigeria's 2023 elections. Social media platforms provided an avenue for underrepresented groups to participate in political discussions, fostering inclusiveness and enabling the sharing of diverse perspectives. While the spread of misinformation and disinformation was noted as a potential concern in literature, the findings suggest that its influence was minimal during the election period. Instead, social media primarily served as a tool for engagement, knowledge sharing, and opinion refinement among voters. The study underscores the role of social media as a significant player in modern democratic processes, particularly in shaping political attitudes and encouraging public participation in governance.

RECOMMENDATION

To maximize the benefits of social media in political discourse, stakeholders such as government bodies, political parties, and civil society organizations should invest in digital literacy programs to educate users on identifying and mitigating the spread of misinformation. Social media platforms should also strengthen mechanisms for fact-checking and moderating content to ensure the accuracy of political information. Furthermore, political parties and candidates are encouraged to use social media for constructive engagement by promoting transparent communication and fostering issue-based discussions. This approach can enhance the quality of political discourse and encourage informed decision-making among the electorate.

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