

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN VOTER'S MOBILIZATION IN NIGERIA'S 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS'.

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 Nigeria general elections have presented to scholars, analysts and observers with several issues, dynamics and developments to digest. Arguably, top among the issues is the power/influence of social media in the process of voter's mobilization. Social media has continued to break many age-old social barriers, and at the same time building bridges for the consolidation of intra and inter group relationship and consciousness. Nothing could have amplified this development better than the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria witnessed a huge engagement of the people in pre-election, during election and post-election periods, which heightened tensions and created serious uncertainty in the outcome of the elections. Prior to the 2023 general elections, a lot of Nigerians appeared to have lost interest in the electoral process, yet there appeared to be level of engagement in the electoral process by the citizens especially through the social media. Although, some other factors may have accounted for the level of voter's mobilization witnessed in the 2023 general elections, the role of social media deserved a systematic evaluation. Hence, this paper examines the role of social media in voter's mobilization in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. This paper will be anchored on the theory of cognitive mobilization as propounded by Russell Dalton in 1984 as it theoretical framework of analysis. Qualitative research design will be adopted, and through the use of secondary sources, relevant data relating to the objectives of the paper will be generated, and analyzed using content analysis method. The paper found that social media was very instrumental to mobilizing the youth population in Nigeria to participate in the electoral process. Thus, the paper recommends an improved use of social media by candidates for political offices and political officeholder in communicating with the people as it provides for effective and efficient connection between them and the people.

Keywords: *social media, voter's mobilization, election*

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the Internet in 1983, communication has evolved through different methods. The older methods of communication were cave paintings, smoke signals, symbols, carrier pigeons, and telegraph (Time, 2021), while the latest and contemporary methods are radio and television, as well as internet powered social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Youtube, etc. Social media are the most recent and rapidly growing phenomenon in the context of Communication. Social media, which is multi-dimensionally connected with abundant hyperlinks, has presented users new ways to receive, process and circulate news and information. The structure of a social media is very much different, for it allow people to communicate news and information in very different way. Social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social networks are now considered as politically transformative communication technologies as classical media such as newspaper, radio and television. There is prediction that social media will transform democracy allowing citizens and politician to communicate, connect and interact in ways never before (Narasimhamurthy, 2014). Increasingly, politician and elected officials are realizing the power of

social media for communicating political information and interacting with citizens.

Social Media has rapidly grown in importance as a forum for political activism in its different forms. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube provide new ways to stimulate citizen engagement in political life, where elections and electoral campaigns have a central role. Personal communication via social media brings politicians and parties closer to their potential voters. It allows politicians to communicate faster and reach citizens in a more targeted manner and vice versa, without the intermediate role of mass media. Reactions, feedback, conversations and debates are generated online as well as support and participation for offline events. Messages posted to personal networks are multiplied when shared, which allow new audiences to be reached. This is the unique characteristics that underlines the potency of social media in the election process.

Election has become a critical index with which the degree of democratic culture domiciled in a country can be measured or gauged. Literally speaking, election denotes the process by which a group of people consciously and collectively identify through voting an

individual or group of individual to wield the collective power of the people. In other words, election is a process that revolves around the people; not an individual but a group of individuals. This is the character that makes election an important element of every democracy. As Mefin (2008) asserts, the founding pillars of any democratic political system, whether considered fragile or established, remain undoubtedly elections. Election possesses huge implication for people, given what Wojtasik (2013) refers to as functions of election which include: delegation of political representation; selection of the political elite; legitimization of those in power; control over authorities; ensuring political accountability; creation of political programmes; and recreation of the image of public opinion. All these functions of election have serious implications on the people positively or negatively, which points to the fact that election intrinsically revolves around the people ideally demands that people get involved in the processes leading to the emergence of an individual or group of individuals as representatives of the people. This is where and when voter's mobilization becomes critical in the conduct of election in a democratic society.

Mobilization is seen as the process of engaging and motivating a wide range of partners and allies towards achieving specific objectives. This process traditionally occurs through face-to-face approach until recently with the emergence of mass media and specifically the social media. Social media has changed traditional mobilization structures, including how members of movements are recruited, how communication takes place, how members interact, and what type of protest activities members engage in (McKeon & Gitomer, 2019). Social media has increased the speed and interactivity of communication and has transformed the landscape of political protest. Today, virtual protest influences institutional politics by creating symbolic change, highlighting economic disparities, identifying targets of blame, and keeping the issues in the news and in the broader political conversation. McKeon and Gitomer (2019) point out that social media serves as a tactical tool (a means to disseminate information, coordinate action, and publicize the cause) as well as an emotional conduit (a place to develop identity, share emotions, and symbolically construct a sense of togetherness among activists). The use of social media makes it impossible to separate communication from organization because people

mobilize in both virtual and physical space (Gerbaudo, 2012; Schradie, 2014).

In the buildup to 2023 general elections, Nigeria witnessed surge in the social media discourse of the dynamics and possible outcome of the election. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, etc created a populist identity and a sense of solidarity, which allows people to develop a common sense of indignation, anger, and frustration as well as a perception of shared victimhood and conquerors on the other hand. There was an awakening of the consciousness of social media users especially the youths towards the election. For instance, in the build-up to the election, a particular candidate for the presidential election was frequently described as social media candidate. Critics of this particular candidate boosted that the large chunk of the people on social media who support this candidate would not turn up on election-day to actually vote for him. The 2023 general elections have come and gone, and winner have been declared by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), aggrieved parties have approached the court with different prayers. While many have continued to express their displeasure with the outcome of the election, some others

are still basking in euphoria of being on the winning side.

Regardless of the outcome of the election presently, one thing that seem clear to everyone who followed the election is that social media appeared to have played significant role in the mobilization of voters before, during and after the election. In this regard, this paper is concerned with the role of social media in mobilizing the electorates in the southeast Nigeria. The national statistics shows that Nigeria currently has 122.5 million internet users in Nigeria at the start of 2023, which stood at 55.4 percent. The report further showed that Nigeria was home to 31.60 million social media users in January equating to 14.3 percent of the total population. And a total of 193.9 million cellular mobile connections were active in Nigeria in early 2023, with this figure equivalent to 87.7 percent of the total population (Kemp, 2023). Given the statistics of internet and social media users in Nigeria, it would be logical to expect the impact of social media on the people towards the election to be significant. Hence, in this paper, we shall be examining the role of social media on voter's mobilization in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

In this section, the paper examines

the two major concepts contained in this discourse. The concepts are social media and voter's mobilization. Understanding these concepts would help us set a proper pedestal upon which the paper's discussion would proceed.

Social Media

Generally, media denotes a communication outlets or tools used to store and deliver information or data. Thus, social media would necessarily imply a kind of media. Broadly speaking, Davis (2019) defined social media as the set of interactive Internet Applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content. Examples of social media platforms are numerous and varied, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Friendster, Wikipedia, dating sites, Craigslist, recipe sharing sites (e.g. allrecipes.com), YouTube, and Instagram. All social media platforms share the above-mentioned characteristics but are unique from one another in many respects. They often vary in their architectures, structures, norms, and user bases.

Other scholars have also lent their voices in conceptualization of social media in a variety of ways. For Boyd and Ellison (2008), social media is a platform to create profiles, make

explicit and traverse relationships. They are websites which allow profile creation and visibility of relationships between users Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) identified social media as set of functionalities or building blocks. According to them, it entails web- based applications which provide functionality for sharing, relationships, group, conversation and profiles. Kapoor et al., (2017) also stated that it is a set of information technologies which facilitate interactions and networking.



Figure 1: Different Types of social media Icon

A taxonomy of social media results into 6 distinctive categories: Blogs, Social Networking Sites, Collaboration Projects, Content Communities, Virtual Social Worlds, and Virtual Game Worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Similarly, Wolf, Sims and Yang, (2018) asserts that one of the approaches to identify social media is to describe the functionalities of a given platform and application in terms of essential social properties. Thus, Kietzmann et al., (2011) specify seven functional building blocks of social media which are present greater or lesser extent any social media application and which can be substituted and enhanced through integration of several applications (Figure 1).

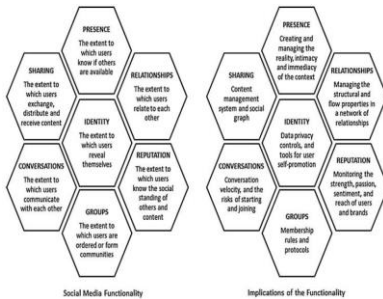


Figure 2 - Building Blocks of Social Media Source: Kietzmann (2011)

Identity refers to the representation of the user in the virtual world. It could be descriptive and personal as a profile on Facebook, listing birthday, hobbies, family relationships etc., or could be as vague as an imaginary pseudonym.

Conversations allows users to interact with each other in a broadcast or dialogue manner synchronously in real time or

asynchronously with time lapse between statements.

Sharing refers to activities through which existing content is spread (and possibly enhanced) through the social graph. Hereby the social connections might not be necessary be made explicit, for example publicly sharing on Facebook or posting on Twitter does not rely on existing connections: on the contrary in the example of Twitter “sharing” often precedes connections (expressed through “following”).

Presence allows users to know where other community members are (on/off-line and actual/virtual location).

Relationships allows community members to visualize their networks in many ways ranging from “likes” and “followers-followed” to virtual representation of real-life relationships. These social-graph abstractions can be uni- and bi-directional and allow strong and weak ties. For example, “following” on Twitter is not necessarily reciprocal, whereas a connection on LinkedIn requires both parties to accept the connection and both to indicate the nature of their relationship (e.g. colleagues).

Groups refers both to membership groups where users can articulate

their affiliations with, or interest in, a specific subject and groups utilized by users to manage their relationships.

Reputation allows users to qualify the content provided by another user and establish trust-levels between community members.

Characteristics of social media

Social media can be identified through various features as already pointed out. However, Kasturi and Vardhan (2014) have outlined some key characteristics of social media as follows:

Free web space: The social media websites provide the users or the so-called audience with free web space to upload their personalized content.

Unique web address: The audiences are provided with a personalized unique web address to have a unique identity, which makes them to share their content in real time. It remains intact till the time they maintain their online account.

Possibility of building profiles: With the possibility of building personalized profiles, the social media enables an individual to have access to the likeminded people to interact with each other. It is also possible to conceal the profile from

pirates and making it accessible to only a desired group of people.

Virtual connections with friends and relatives: Social media websites have become the platform for virtual meetings. People, who are miles away from each other, can get in touch virtually with each other through such website enabled chat engines. The websites even make it possible to share valuable files, photos and multimedia content with each other.

Real time content upload facility: Through social media, it is possible for the audience to have a chance to upload their personalized content or other files as the services are open round the clock 24x7 for all 365 days in a year.

Feedback: With the online social networks, feedback, the key element in the communication process becomes vital. Feedback is immediate like in face-to-face communication through new media or social media communication, provided the responder is also online, at the time when the sender initiates the dialogue.

Time stamp: Each post in the social media has a time stamp indicating if the post is either fresh or stale. Depending on the freshness of the post, the responder may either

choose to respond or not to respond.

Key Roles Played by social media

Social media has wide-ranging functions which are very imperative in a person's day to day life, such that life without social media has turned unimaginable. Some of the key functions provided by the social media platforms today are as follows:

Communication: Nevertheless, social media is of most recent origin, it turned to be one of the most effective communication tools in the history of communication. The entire organizations can turn to be a single social community which is more aptly known as town square. With the more interactive technology involved in this form of communication, the feel through this way of communication is rather very lively and gives a feel of face-to-face communication. It has an added advantage of the ability of very easily monitoring change initiatives. Social media is not only the media of extroverts, but also of introverts. They have the freedom of communicating at an ease without directly facing the responder, unlike in face-to-face communication or the so-called interpersonal communication.

Collaboration: Collaboration is off the charts. Today, it's very common

that almost all Netizens get themselves involved in social media chats, blogging and hangouts of google talk etc. One person initiates communication by his posts with or without the support of multimedia content and it is circulated among a closed or open group of Netizens. People keep on adding the comments to the post which further processes the communication. The comments can be considered as the feedback to make the conversation adynamic one. The entire process turns to be innovative and collaborative.

Education: social media has become an effective tool for educating the masses. The entire organization of community is made a global classroom on the social media platform. Virtual classes around the world are made possible through social media. People in nooks and corners of the world can attend an online lecture delivered by a resourceful person from a remote location. Even the audience can pose their doubts and get them clarified. Such a facility is more similar to that of a live class room environment. This type of education has an added advantage. Simultaneously, the entire thing can be recorded, to revise at a later stage. The world's best resources can be made available to all the desired people with the involvement of technology

in social media.

Monitoring: Monitoring is another crucial function of the social media. It gives a clear picture of the situation in the real time. For example, google analytics gives the clear picture of the number of visitors at any given time. Such type of monitoring facilities not only makes the team leaders to have virtual access to the situation, but also enables them to change the strategy in accordance to the situation. Setbacks are easier to spot, and losses can be cut, adjustments can be made, or reinforcements can be sent in. Social media functions in a similar vein just like the central nervous system of human body and paves the leaders a way to respond, accordingly.

Entertainment: social media is the new media that offers the audience a great entertainment. It enables the user to get all sorts of multimedia content, thereby dispelling all the limitations which otherwise are possessed by each of the traditional media. It has all good qualities of each and every conventional media embedded in it and more advanced features added to it.

Voter's Mobilization

Voter's mobilization entails the process of empowering the eligible voters to participate in the voting or

electoral process. This is usually done through various means such as education, outreach, and peer-to-peer contact (Kupferberg, 2023). Voter mobilization in the broadest sense would be best described as electoral mobilization. And speaking of electoral mobilization, it refers to the processes or activities that are connected with encouraging people to actively support and participate in election process. In this sense, electoral mobilization is a people-oriented process, aimed at resuscitating and energizing their interests and willingness to get involved in the electoral process. This explains why Huntington (2015) stated that political mobilization is a change in the attitudes, values, and expectation of people. It is understood to be a consequence of literacy, education, increased communication, mass media exposure and urbanization. Thus, Bappayo, Abubakar and Kirrfi (2021) submit that political mobilization encapsulates the sensitization of the citizenry, increase and improvements in their political consciousness to effect change in a political process. Relatedly, Mustapha (2016) conceptualization of political mobilization to mean simultaneous engagement of large masses of people in activities that have a predominantly social or collective objective. This entails that electoral

mobilization is effectively necessary in situations where the people share social or collective objective, which in this case is political power. Presidential elections in Nigeria are often rife with stiff contestations among different groups in Nigeria who jostle to emerge top over others in having access to the most decorated political office in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of cognitive mobilization as propounded by Russell Dalton in 1984

The Cognitive Mobilization theory is propounded by Russell Dalton in 1984. The theory attributes the process that causes education and political participation to determine political awareness to psychological forces inherent in human nature. Converse (1964) maintains that political elite have higher level of political sophistication than the political masses because of the mobilizing effect of political involvement. Campbell (1960) is of the view that rising education level in society would gradually increase the ideological consciousness of the citizens, especially at the lower level where lack of education may be more incapacitating. In their low information rationality thesis, Popkin and Dimock (1999), are of the view that citizens with low level of information tend to be less keen in participating in politics whereas

those with high information rationality are more keen in political issues such as public debate on policy, voting in elections, standing for political position and canvassing for votes.

Cognitive mobilization involves two separate developments. First, the public's ability to process political information has increased through the higher levels of education and political sophistication among the electorate. Second, the cost of acquiring political information has decreased such as through the expansion of mass media. Thus, cognitive mobilization means that citizens now possess the political skill and resources that better prepare them to deal with the complexities of politics and reach their own political decisions without reliance on affective, habitual party cues or other surrogates (Inglehart, 1988)

The basic assumptions of cognitive mobilization theory employed in this study are as follow:

- Education is a key indicator and determinant in measuring political knowledge and participation because of its cognitive mobilizing impact on mental capabilities of the citizens in dealing with politics (Adamson, 2006; Jacobs 2006).
- Access to political education

increases engagement in politics by developing the citizens' cognitive skill which in turn enables them to process complex information about political system, and to enhance feeling of civic duty (Denny & Doyle, 2008).

- Citizens with low information rationality tend to exhibit political apathy where as those with high information rationality have the propensity to actively engage in politics.
- Rising education level in society would gradually increase the ideological consciousness of the citizens especially at the lower level where lack of education may be more incapacitating.
- Cognitively mobilized publics are more issue oriented in their participation in such activities as voting and less inclined to be led by the elite.

Application of Theory

This paper which evaluates the role of social media in voter's mobilization in 2023 general elections aligns itself with the assumptions of cognitive mobilization theory of political literacy and participation, which is one of the major strands of thought within the spectrum of mobilization theory. Cognitive mobilization theory is a process through which

people receive cognitive cues to make decisions on voting and participation in various political activities owing to skills and knowledge derived from political education (Dalton, 1984). The social media has demonstrated the capacity to transmit an unlimited knowledge content to its users especially as it concerns politics and elections in particular. The 2023 general election witnessed a high flow information on every issue of the election in pre-election, during election and post-election periods. It shows the capacity to equip and help the citizens become politically sophisticated, having the skills and resources necessary to become politically engaged with little dependence on political elites. This paper therefore considers the social media an effective tool for cognitive mobilization. Through this lens, the paper shall examine the role of social media in mobilizing voters in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

METHODS

The paper adopts the Case Study research design. This design is adopted because it provides with the

tool to carry out an in-depth examination of the people of southeast in relation to the 2023 general elections. Relying secondary sources of data collection, relevant data relating to the objective of the paper was generated, and analyzed using content analysis method.

The Role of social media in Voter’s Mobilization in 2023 General Elections

Influence of social media in sociopolitical affairs is not a new thing in global and national political discourse. In Nigeria, the role of social media in politics, especially voter’s mobilization is increasingly becoming very prominent and impactful. Much as a lot things about the conduct of elections in Nigeria like logistical problems and manipulations remained same, the electioneering particularly voter’s mobilization through the social became more pronounced and instrumental. The EU Election Observation shows that the 2023 general elections saw social media play an even more pivotal role in electioneering. Candidates and their supporters used social media to shape narratives and boost the appeal of their messaging to a wide audience.

Statistics of top presidential candidates

Monitoring period - 1 January, 2023 to 23 February, 2023



Figure 3: Statistics of Tweets from Top Presidential Candidates

Source: EU Election Observation Mission (2023)

The correlation between social media activities and 2023 general election outcomes can be highlighted with different parameters. Amidst some contestable grounds, the All Progressives Congress (APC) was declared the winner of the presidential election, even though its candidate made fewer social media posts compared to that of the other major parties; the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), Labour Party (LP), and New Nigeria People’s Party (NNPP). This development would prompt the argument that despite how compelling social media conversations may be, only a fraction of Nigerians take part in social media discourse. But when critically evaluated in line with the report of Statista and the EU which

show that only 31.6 million of 221 million Nigerians use social media platforms, and most of these users are young, we can largely attribute the increased level of youth mobilization in the 2023 general to social media influence. This also explains why youths make up Nigerians who applied for voter cards in 2022 ahead of the 2023 general elections.

How Presidential Candidates Used Social Media

Of all the 18 presidential candidates, nine used social media. An analysis of 1,089 posts by the presidential candidates showed that they mostly used Facebook and Twitter. Their posts included videos of campaign rallies, press statements, encouragement, manifestoes and smear campaigns. There were also accounts dedicated to promoting parties and candidates. The EU report identified 946 of them and found that the accounts of these supporters saw higher activity than those of the candidates. For example, Labour Party supporter Aisha Yesufu posted an average of 22 videos per week on YouTube and had about 5,619,278 views. This is much more than Labour Party did.

Figure 4: Statistics of Public Engagements of Social Media Post from Top Political Parties and Support Groups

Party		Number of subscribers	Activity (Video)	Total Views
APC	Official Page	1.3K	90	343.5K
Support Group	ABNIR ENTERTAINMENT	82.5K	57	4.2M
LP	Official Page	1.5K	31	28.6K
Support Group	Aisha Yesufu	39.5K	856	5.6M
	TakeBackNaijaTV	1.2K	32	65.7K
	Obident TV	2.4K	28	39.8K
NNPP	Official Page	5.7K	112	437.9K
Support Group	Tijanni Gandu TV	24.9K	92	2.6M
	NNPP TV Kano	935K	100	80.4K
	Hausa Arab Rapper TV	30.5K	60	9.6K
	Muradi Hausa TV	192	37	9.6K
PDP	Official Page	2.7K	122	332K

Source: EU Election Observation Mission (2023)

Increased Registration, Decreased Votes

The report of conventional media as well as the election organizers based on the number of votes successfully cast during the election, the turnout of voters for the 2023 presidential election is a new record in Nigeria’s long history of political apathy, with 93 million registered voters – the highest in any election – and 87 million collected PVCs. With a 29 per cent turnout rate, the 2023 election might also be the lowest turnout of voters in Africa (John, 2023). The 2023 presidential election was the keenest and also the worst in voter’s turnout in the history of balloting in Nigeria, if the result announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission,

INEC, is anything to go by. Tinubu won in 12 states to beat Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the PDP, who came second with 6,984,520 votes and also won in 12 states. The Labour Party, LP, Candidate, Mr. Peter Obi, polled 6,101,533 votes to place a close third. He also won 11 states and the FCT. Former Governor of Kano State and New Nigeria Peoples Party, NNPP, Candidate, Senator Rabiun Kwankwaso, came fourth with 1,496,687 votes. With 25.3 million voters or 27 per cent of the 93.469 million registered voters taking part, the February 25 poll also recorded the worst voters' turnout ever. This outcome of the 2023 general elections is being disputed in election tribunals, with accusations of electoral fraud and mismanagement. Particularly, INEC struggled with the electronic transmission of votes, triggering distrust in the transparency and fairness of the polls. Albeit, given the voters' turnout in past polls, the 2023 turnout of 25,286,616 voters is the least turnout in presidential contests in Nigeria. Before the election, it was projected that fewer than 30 million voters would take part in the polls even though 93.469 million voters were registered. The projection was based on the inability of millions of voters to collect their Permanent Voters' Cards, PVCs, INEC's non-removal of names of dead voters between 2019 and 2023 from the

list; fears of insecurity; and hardship arising from scarcity of naira (Ndujihe, 2023). There were also anecdotal reports of voter suppression due to: the INEC's inefficiencies; officials not showing up; targeted disenfranchisement; cancelled votes because of violence or overvoting; and problems cleaning up the voters register to reflect deaths and emigration. This contributed to the record-low official turnout, with only 27% of registered voters accredited during the presidential polls.

The run-up to 2023 general elections saw increased youth participation in the discourse and campaigns largely on the social media. Socio-economic problems, including incessant university strikes and high youth unemployment, apparently ignited to their increased engagement. Young people made up around 76% of newly registered voters, with 40% of that number identifying as students. Analysts suggested a connection between Nigeria's youth-led #EndSARS movement and the social media generated mobilization 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 arising from

messages and views about him which was spread through the social media. Both the #EndSARS and #Obidient movements were dominated by mostly young middle-class Nigerians from urban areas are dominant in the Nigeria social media space (Tayo, 2023).

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-elect, Ireti Kingibe. She defeated the People's Democratic Party's Philip Aduda, who represented the FCT in the National Assembly for two decades. The Labour Party had no seats in the previous National Assembly.

Recognition of the youth voting bloc became apparent in the three weeks between the presidential and state elections. After shunning invitations to debates during campaigning, incumbent Lagos State Governor

Babajide Sanwo-Olu ramped up his public engagements online and in person. The threat of losing power only became real after Tinubu lost in Lagos – a result partly attributed to the state's strong showing of urban youth. Other candidates also made overtures to young people elsewhere in the country. Interestingly, these youths were described as social media noise makers during campaigns, and were said to have little or no real voting presence or value.

Nigerian youth led the charge in demanding electoral accountability. They helped document the entire voting process by posting social media updates. Young people also made sure to 'defend' their votes, with some remaining at polling units until the early hours of the following morning to monitor the collation process. Some youth groups launched parallel collation projects to verify the INEC's declared results.

During the elections, young Nigerians played diverse roles. They were victims and perpetrators of electoral violence and drove both divisive rhetoric and calls for unity. In addition to differences based on religion, geography, ethnicity and class, stark divisions along political lines emerged during the polls. The #Obidient movement had a counter #JagabanArmy movement

supporting Ahmed Bola Tinubu of the APC, and the #Atikulated movement in support of Atiku Abubakar of the PDP.

How Social Media Worked in Voter's Mobilization

Characteristically, it takes a small army of social media professionals to give candidates and parties a voice on online; social media advisors and consultants are at the top of the pile but they all work with content creators and influencers. Particularly, we saw that the candidates and their parties have separate social media advisors and consultants and had different fortunes in terms of followership. Some consultants come with their own teams and campaign plan. But they all work in silos, independent of others. Chukwu (2023) observed that while social media was abuzz with election campaigns and discussions, it got little attention in most campaign budgets. Chukwu also reported that only a drop of PDP's budget went to social media, while the APC's media campaign budget was about ₦1.5 billion, most of it went to traditional media - television, radio, and print media - while only about ₦200 million went to social media channels. But with the outcome of the 2023 general elections, this will significantly change in the future considering the success of the Labour Party's campaign (Chukwu,

2023). The party's presidential candidate, Peter Obi, was declared third, and it was the first time a third-force candidate showed such potential. He received the most votes in online polls including one by Bloomberg. Strategists link his performance to his party's social media campaign.

As the 2023 general elections approached, Ibrahim (2023) observed that there were renewed sophistication and organisation in the push for disinformation. Key players are focused on glorifying or delegitimizing political candidates and undermining the credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). At the same time online organisation remains largely informal, in part by design, with political parties driving disinformation behind the scenes through *unofficial* party accounts or hired influencers. In addition to the use of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, TikTok, with its predominantly video content that can bridge educational divides, is playing an increasingly important role. So too are Twitter Spaces, which are recorded and then shared, as podcasts, across social media platforms in ways that increase listenership.

Cross-platform posting remains critical to understanding Nigeria's

digital ecosystem, as screen grabs or content from one platform can be shared across all others, broadening the reach beyond the number of direct users. Content also moves from online forums into offline spaces, with soldiers of mouth spreading online content through streets talks, in motor parks and at newspaper stands. This makes curbing disinformation very challenging in Nigeria. But at the same time, these networks for the flow of information can also promote democracy. Civic awareness of the continuous voters' registration process and the importance of participating has largely been driven by a sustained online campaign in the run-up to 2023, while the platforms can be used to fact check and hold elected and aspiring officials to account. Finding a balance that accentuates these positives and diminishes the negative aspects must be a priority as the elections approach.

In previous elections, text and pictures were dominant, but in 2023, the emphasis has been more on the real time livestreaming of audio and video content on social media platforms. One of the innovations this year is the organisation of political song challenges, such as the one coordinated by Dauda Rara, a prominent northern political musician, and it is called '*Jagaban*

Shine Gaba'. The challenge encouraged citizens to mime a song with creative videos and upload it on TikTok. Rara and his team of judges reviewed the entries and awarded 12 cars, 30 iPhones and selected a further 50 individuals to receive N100,000 (\$220) each (Ibrahim, 2023). Other political actors have also been promoting challenges that favour their candidates by offering gifts or rewards to those who generate the most viral contents. Coupled with the TikTok's fairly lax community guidelines and limited enforcement, these challenges can be used to push disinformation "without those responsible being penalized" in the view of one user. TikTok content also reaches individuals without an account through cross-posting, meaning that it can reach Nigerians with limited literacy, when it comes to written text. It is much cheaper to send out jingles on TikTok, which previously had to be placed on radio and TV channels, and with phone sharing and cross-platform posting, the audience reached can still be significant. WhatsApp remains utilized to coordinate the organisation of elections, to circulate audio and visuals, and it has the largest reach in terms of the direct number of users. Voice notes remains critical, especially in local languages, with content regularly played and replayed to an audience

that has no direct online access. Other closed network platforms like Telegram are also becoming increasingly influential. These closed spaces are also used to help organise campaign rallies and other large gatherings, both online and offline. The latter is a concern, given that separatist groups, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), have Telegram channels through which they talk directly to supporters, spread disinformation, recruit adherents and plan offline activities.

For all social media platforms, the line between the online and offline remains blurred. For example, during this election campaign cycle, a letter on the official INEC letterhead, and purportedly signed by the INEC spokesperson, was released claiming to commence the investigation of the APC presidential candidate on drug related charges. However, this letter was a forgery that originated on WhatsApp, moved quickly across social media, and was read out on national broadcast platforms such as Arise TV. There was never any investigation, nor was the statement issued by INEC, but in a rush to break the news, and possibly influenced by media partisanship, it became a mainstream story. The example given is an outlier, but social media, more regularly, serves

as a source of content inspiration for mainstream media. It is common to find issues trending on Twitter being discussed on morning or evening debate shows, as this is what the audience is looking to hear. In that sense, media houses are bringing the online into the conventional media and into peoples' homes. And when they invite so-called 'political consultants' as experts into their studios, they invite disinformation specialists. These individuals are often paid to peddle half-truths, promote conspiracy theories or attempt to legitimize false information flowing online.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The social media has shown to be effective for information dissemination and mobilization, as it allows users to find common ground with others online, while bridging barrier the of distance. The social media has become a powerful instrument for propagating sociopolitical agenda. The hope and enthusiasm of the people, particularly the youths ahead 2023 general elections were largely raised through the social media outlets/tools like Twitter, WhatsApp, Tiktok and Facebook. Many who were in doubt at the beginning of the process now understood that social media has come to stay, and will definitely be a powerful instrument for voter

mobilization in subsequent elections. It is therefore important to provide facilities that will aid internet penetration in the hinterlands to facilitate the use of social media in those areas. The also

recommend that political officeholders should maximize the potential of social media building and maintaining effective and efficient communication system with the people.

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