

EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THEIR CREDIBILITY IN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF ELECTORATE IN AKWA IBOM STATE DURING 2023 ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of social media and their credibility in political mobilization of the electorate in Akwa Ibom State during the 2023 elections. The objectives of the study included: determining the effect of social media on electorate participation; evaluating the extent of social media's influence on the electorate's perception of politicians' image, and assessing the perceived credibility of political messages on social media by the electorate. The study employed the survey research design and selected a sample size of 384 respondents drawn from the registered voters in Akwa Ibom State. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) served as the theoretical framework for understanding users' acceptance of social media. Data were collected using the questionnaire instrument and the analysis done using descriptive statistics. The major finding of the study revealed that a significant proportion of the electorate in Akwa Ibom State followed political news on social media during the 2023 elections. Social media were found to have a notable impact on the participation of the electorate in the elections, with many respondents becoming aware of political news, sharing political content, and engaging in political discourse on social media platforms. Based on the findings, the study concluded that social media do play a crucial role in political mobilisation, providing a platform for the dissemination of information, engagement with voters, and shaping the perception of political actors. The study then recommends that measures should be evolved to enhance the credibility of political messages on social media through fact-checking initiatives.

KEY WORDS: Social media, Election, Political mobilization, Electorates, Campaigns

Introduction

Political discourse is a crucial component of democratic and political processes. In fact, today's technology provides a number of channels for public participation in political and civic activities. There is a significant potential for the democratisation

of information and the facilitation of various forms of socio-political communication through the use of social media, all of which may be created and discussed at minimal expense. In recent years, these medium have risen to prominence as important resources for voter education, political discourse, and electoral participation (Ayeni, 2019). Now more than ever, political campaigns rely on social media to inform voters and get them out to the polls. It has been deemed the most effective strategy for mass mobilisation because of the low cost and short implementation time. With the help of social media, more people can become politically active and engaged over longer periods of time and in more locations (Iyorza & Abu, 2020).

Ayankoya *et al.* (2015) define "social media" as "the use of online tools for sustained, interactive, user-generated content production and consumption." Communication, modes of communication, and the connections that form as a result of these interactions are what social media are all about. With the use of social media, individuals and communities can create, sustain, and sustain relationships with other people who share their interests (Ayankoya *et al.*, 2015).

The gap that has previously prevented widespread voter mobilisation due to mediated communication has been filled by social media. This is as a result of the widespread acceptance and use of social media among the general public and the ineffectiveness of the monologues that characterised the prior forms of communication utilised by electoral umpires. Support and participation in elections, as well as the prevalence of voter indifference in certain demographics, have been linked to the usage of social media (Adesote & Akinbi, 2018). There can be little doubt that social media platforms have emerged as a game-changing medium for political discourse in recent years. Because of this, specific information and group communication have been considerably improved, which in turn has had a significant effect on interpersonal dynamics. Important components that improve progressive democracy and politics, such as political education/sensitization, popular mobilisation, political contact, and electioneering campaigns, are now conducted primarily through this medium (Adesote & Akinbi, 2018).

For example, social media evolved into a more effective tool, and even a more fatal weapon, during the 2015 general election. Many political parties and individuals have benefited or suffered from the dissemination of releases in the form of videos, voice notes, headlines, and broadcasts. In one extreme case, Senator Buruji Kashamu had his political career and subsequent inauguration threatened by a newspaper article about him. General Muhammadu Buhari and Senator Bola Tinubu were the targets of a hate video that went viral. Normally,

these tapes would have put a stop to these people's political careers elsewhere (Adedeji, 2015).

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs and other media platforms have all played a significant role in the Nigerian elections. Social media's interactive, cost-free nature have made it an indispensable tool for political campaign organisers in many spheres, including but not limited to voter turnout drives, voter education and political involvement and mobilisation. Therefore, there is no longer any debate as to the importance of social media in political mobilisation (Chinedu-Okeke *et al.*, 2016). This paper, however, is focused on the effectiveness of social media and their credibility in political mobilisation of electorate in Akwa Ibom State during 2023 general elections.

Statement of the Problem

The utilisation of social media and their credibility in political mobilisation of the electorate in Akwa Ibom State during the 2023 elections poses significant challenges and opportunities. While social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for political communication and engagement, there are pressing concerns regarding their effectiveness and credibility in influencing the electorate's decision-making process (Shamsu *et al.*, 2017).

One of the primary problems is the potential spread of misinformation and fake news on social media platforms. Akwa Ibom State, like many other regions, is vulnerable to the dissemination of false information during election periods. The rapid sharing of unverified claims and rumors can distort the political discourse, mislead voters, and undermine the integrity of the electoral process. It is essential to investigate the extent to which misinformation affects political mobilization and the credibility of social media as a reliable source of information.

Another significant challenge is the digital divide within Akwa Ibom State. While social media usage is increasing, there are still sections of the population, particularly in rural areas, with limited access to the internet and social media platforms (Constantin, 2014). This digital divide creates inequalities in accessing political information and participating in online political discourse. Understanding the impact of this divide on political mobilization is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of social media in reaching all segments of the electorate.

Moreover, the credibility of information shared on social media platforms is often questionable. In the context of the 2023 elections, it is essential to assess the sources of information, fact-check claims, and determine the reliability of content shared by political actors and social media users. The lack of verified information can erode trust in social media platforms and potentially hinder their effectiveness in mobilizing voters. The purpose of this research is to assess the effectiveness of

social media as a political platform in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State and to determine how the growing benefits of social media and their credibility in political mobilization of the electorate to enable exercise their political sovereignty through the free and fair election of political office holders and government of Akwa Ibom State.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research work are as follows:

- (i) To determine the effect of the social media on electorate participation in elections in the 2023 elections.
- (ii) To evaluate the extent of social media's influence on the electorate's perception of politicians' image during the 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State.
- (iii) To determine the perceived credibility of political messages on social media by the electorate during the 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Questions

The research questions include:

- (i) What are the effect of social media on electorate participation in the 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State?
- (ii) To what extent did social media influence the electorate's perception of politicians' image during 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State?
- (iii) Did the electorate perceive political messages on social media as credible during the 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State?

Literature Review

Concept of Social Media

Social media are commonly used to describe the latest developments in media that encourage user interaction. According to Adedeji (2015), conventional wisdom classifies the history of media into two distinct eras: the broadcast age and the interactive age. During the era of broadcasting, most forms of media such as radio, television stations, newspapers, or film disseminated its contents to a wide audience. It was not difficult to get in touch with media outlets directly, and when they did, the responses they received were typically direct, un-prolonged, and approachable. Ayeni (2019) was of the opinion that, people who needed to get in touch with one another did so through far more intimate means, such as handwritten letters, phone conversations, or even slightly more formal photocopied family newsletters.

Mass mobilisation in the current political climate typically takes place via Facebook, text messaging, and Twitter. As a matter of fact, it appears that social

media, particularly block texts, Facebooks, and emails, have surpassed the traditional media in terms of their ability to mobilise people to attend meetings and other social events (Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2015). Mass mobilisation is an approach of motivating people to take initiative and get involved in solving societal problems. Inspiring and motivating people to leave their houses, take part in development efforts is the key to mobilisation. With the rise of the internet, there is now another option for rallying support from the general populace. Professionals, civic society, and governments are all acknowledged as major agents of social mobilisation, and they can use social media to bring like-minded people together for a common good at minimal expense. Uncommitted people don't have to go to meetings, conferences, or rallies if they can just follow a Twitter feed or join a Facebook group instead (Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2015).

Social Media and Political Mobilization

Politicians and political parties depend on social media platforms to mobilise voters, foster engagement, and maintain an ongoing, open discourse. Most crucially, politicians may make use of the highly motivated using social media to create an environment in which the barely motivated can be successful without having to become activists themselves. Politics and campaign strategies are changing as a result of the growing power and influence of social media. Bassey (2020) posits that social media have enhanced interactive relationships between the politicians and the electorate as they often facilitate social networking among individuals, groups and organisations. By embracing online and social media platforms, politicians are opening the door to a new kind of bottom-up political engagement (Narasimhamurthy, 2014).

Political mobilisation has been a crucial notion in political and social discourse bearing in mind that it is highly fundamental to political participation and social engineering. Political mobilisation, as defined by Nwoye (2009), is the process by which citizens are led towards a desired political action by addressing their most pressing political hopes and fears. Mobilization in politics is any organised effort to sway people's opinions and behaviour in a certain political direction (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012).

The term "political mobilization" refers to a set of behaviours that involve taking positive action toward a certain end. Therefore, it is essential to any form of political activity that has a specific objective or is motivated by ideology. That is why it is such an effective instrument for bringing about political and social change (Nwoye & Okafor, 2014). In order to "win elections, pass bills, alter rulings, and influence policies," political mobilisation is "the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups convince other people to participate," as defined by

Grömping and Sinpeng (2018). The public may be contacted by political groups offering them a direct “chance for political action.” When it comes to getting people involved, mobilisation is usually a must-have first step.

Based on the foregoing, we can deduce that political mobilisation is the process of educating and enlightening the populace in order to enhance their political awareness and participation. One definition of political mobilisation is “the deliberate process of emotionally drawing people together and making them absorb communality of social values, attitudes, and orientation in reaching particularistic and specified holistic purpose” (Akindele, 2004). The networks upon which social movements rely can be both expanded and maintained through the use of social media. Several social media platforms have been used for organizing political activities and outreaches in a manner that circumvent government censorship and provided people a place to debate issues of socio-political importance (Basse & Akarika, 2022). Online social networks made possible by social media have become an integral part of today's populist movements, as evidenced by the Arab Spring. The rise of social media has transformed the nature of social movements; they are no longer merely a set of tools for activists to employ (Lim, 2012).

All across the world, democracies have benefited from the usage of social media, particularly in the realm of political mobilisation. In 2008, for instance, US President, Barack Obama led a successful election campaign that made effective use of social media. A presidential campaign in the United States has never before made such innovative use of social media as Barack Obama's 2008 successful run for office. The Obama campaign was a remarkable example of how a competent group can make effective use of common resources. Using more than 15 different social networks, the Obama team was able to reach five million people and keep them engaged with the campaign (Michael & Ajakaiye, 2012).

Empirical Studies

Adebayo and Olagbegi (2022) conducted a study on the Impact of Social Media on Political Mobilization: Evidence from Nigeria. This study investigated the impact of social media on political mobilization in Nigeria, focusing on the role of social media in shaping political participation and engagement. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data and qualitative interviews. The study surveyed a sample of Nigerian citizens who actively used social media platforms for political purposes. The findings revealed that social media played a significant role in political mobilization, with participants reporting increased political engagement, participation, and awareness. Social media was found to facilitate the dissemination of political information, enhance political discussions,

and encourage collective action. The study concluded that social media had a positive impact on political mobilization in Nigeria, indicating its potential effectiveness in engaging and mobilizing the electorate. This study provides insights into the broader Nigerian context, offering valuable information on the impact of social media on political mobilization. Although specific to Nigeria, the findings can inform the understanding of social media's role in political mobilization in Akwa Ibom State.

Also, Ojo and Adeboye (2019) conducted a study on social media, political mobilization and civic engagement in Nigeria: A Study of 2015 Presidential Election. This study examined the relationship between social media, political mobilization, and civic engagement during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The study utilized a quantitative research design, employing survey questionnaire to collect data. The sample consisted of Nigerian citizens who actively used social media platforms for political purposes during the 2015 presidential election. The study found that social media significantly contributed to political mobilization and civic engagement during the election. It facilitated the dissemination of political messages, increased political awareness, and encouraged voter participation. The study concluded that social media played a crucial role in political mobilization and civic engagement, indicating its potential effectiveness as a tool for engaging the electorate in political processes. This study specifically focused on the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, shedding light on the impact of social media in political mobilization and civic engagement. The findings provide insights that can be relevant to understanding the role of social media in mobilizing the electorate in Akwa Ibom State during the 2023 elections.

In addition, Ekong (2020) carried out a research on the Impact of Social Media on Political Mobilization in Nigeria: A Study of the 2019 General Elections. This study investigated the impact of social media on political mobilization during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, focusing on the role of social media in political awareness, participation, and mobilization. The study employed a qualitative research design, conducting in-depth interviews with participants. The study involved Nigerian citizens who actively engaged with social media for political purposes during the 2019 general elections. The study found that social media played a significant role in political mobilization, with participants reporting increased political awareness, engagement, and mobilization. Social media platforms facilitated the dissemination of political messages, provided platforms for political discussions, and contributed to the organization of political activities. The study concluded that social media had a positive impact on political mobilization in Nigeria, indicating its potential effectiveness as a tool for engaging

the electorate in political processes. This study provides insights into the Nigerian context and the impact of social media on political mobilization during the 2019 general elections. The findings of these reviews are relevant to the understanding of social media's effectiveness in mobilizing the electorate in Akwa Ibom State during the 2023 elections.

Theoretical Framework

Technology Acceptance Model

The Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) is a widely used model for understanding and predicting user acceptance of technology. It was first proposed by Davis (1989) and has since been used in a variety of contexts to explain and predict user acceptance of technology (Davis, 1989). The model is based on the idea that user acceptance of technology is determined by two key factors: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Venkatesh *et al*, 2003).

According to TAM, users will be more likely to accept and use a technology if they perceive it to be useful and easy to use. TAM has been used to explain and predict user acceptance of a wide range of technologies, including computer systems, mobile applications, and websites (Venkatesh *et al*, 2003). It has been found to be a reliable predictor of user acceptance in many contexts, and has been used to inform the design of user interfaces and the development of user acceptance strategies.

Perceived usefulness is defined as the degree to which a user believes that using a particular technology will enhance their job performance. Perceived ease of use is defined as the degree to which a user believes that using a particular technology is free of effort. According to TAM, users will be more likely to accept and use a technology if they perceive it to be useful and easy to use. TAM has been used to explain and predict user acceptance of a wide range of technologies, including computer systems, mobile applications, and websites (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2012). It has also been used to explain and predict user acceptance of new technologies, such as virtual reality and augmented reality.

TAM has been widely studied and has been found to be a reliable and valid model for predicting user acceptance of technology. Numerous studies have found that TAM is a reliable predictor of user acceptance of technology, and that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the two most important factors in determining user acceptance (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). TAM has been used to explain user acceptance of social media for election. Studies have found that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are both important factors in determining user acceptance of social media for election. For example, a study by Kwon *et al.* (2017) found that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use were

both positively associated with user acceptance of social media for election. The study also found that perceived usefulness was a stronger predictor of user acceptance than perceived ease of use. TAM is a useful model for understanding user acceptance of social media for election. It suggests that user acceptance is determined by two main factors: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Studies have found that both of these factors are important in determining user acceptance of social media for election.

Methodology

Survey Research method was considered most appropriate because it was a type of research method that allowed researchers to investigate problems that have to do with eliciting responses from human beings.

Population of the study

Population of the study comprised all the registered voters in Akwa Ibom state. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), there were a total of 2,198,628 eligible voters in Akwa Ibom during the 2023 general election.

Sample size

The sample size consists of 384 respondents selected from eligible voters in Akwa Ibom. The method used to determine the sample size was the Philip Meyer sampling guide. Philip Meyer sampling guide suggests the following range of population and the corresponding sample size to derive there from:

Table 1: Philip Meyer’s Sampling Formula

Population Range	Approximate Sample Size
Infinity	384
500, 000	384
100, 000	383
50, 000	381
10, 000	370
5, 000	357
3, 000	341
2, 000	322
1, 000	278

Source: Meyer (1979) cited Senam and Akpan (2014)

As displayed by the table above, the appropriate sample size for a population above 500, 000 is 384. Hence, 384 respondents were used as desired sample size.

Sampling technique

Multi-stage sampling technique was used in reaching the target respondents. It encompasses a combination of cluster, purposive and simple random techniques.

Stage One: The population was divided using cluster sampling technique into 31 clusters, that is, the thirty one (31) Local Government Areas of the selected state, thus: Abak, Eastern Obolo, Eket, Esit Eket, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Etinan, Ibeno, Ibesikpo Asutan, Ibiono Ibom, Ika, Ikono, Ikot Abasi, Ikot Ekpene, Ini, Itu, Mbo, Mkpato Enin, Nsit Atai, Nsit Ibom, Nsit Ubium, Obot Akara, Okobo, Onna, Oron, Udung Uko, Ukanafun, Uruan, Urue Offong/Oruko, Uyo, and Ikot Ekpene Local Government Areas.

Stage Two: From the above 31 clusters (LGAs), the researcher used purposive sampling technique and selected 4 Local Government Areas (clusters). The selected LGAs are Uyo LGA, Ikot Ekpene LGA, Ibiono Ibom and Abak LGA.

Stage Three: In the third stage, three Registration Areas (Wards) were selected from each local government area using simple random sampling technique and the selected wards were presented in the table below.

Table 2: Tabular Presentation of the Sampling Procedure

Selected LGAs	Selected Wards
Uyo	Uyo Central, Urua Akpan, Urua Inyang
Ibiono Ibom	Ibiono Central 1, Ibiono Northern 11, Ibiono Eastern 1
Ikot Ekpene	Ikot Ekpene 1, Ikot Ekpene IV, Ikot Ekpene VI
Abak	Abak urban 1, Abak urban IV, Afaha obong 11,

Source: INEC (www.inecnigeria.org.ng).

Stage Four: Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting 96 respondents from each Local Government Area.

Measuring Instrument

The researcher used questionnaire as measuring instrument. This instrument was considered very appropriate because it helped to generate data for quantitative analysis which was found very useful in addressing the objectives of this study. The questionnaire was used in sampling the opinions of the 384 selected respondents from the population.

Method of Data Analysis

The data generated through the questionnaire were collated, presented and analysed using frequency tables, simple percentages and the Scientific Package for Social Science (SPSS). Therefore, the researcher used descriptive data analysis with mean and standard deviation in analysing the data.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Out of the 384 copies of questionnaire administered on the respondents, only 381 copies were fully filled and returned. This represents 99.21% returned vote.

Table 3: Showing the effect of social media on electorate participation in elections in Akwa Ibom State.

Social Media Use (N= 381)	Level of Agreement (%)				Mean	S.D	Overall %
	1	2	3	4			
I followed political news on social media during the electioneering period.	23.1	49.1	14.7	13.1	2.19	.956	54.75
I became aware of political news through the social media.	56.7	22.6	12.6	8.1	2.11	.895	52.75
I share political news on social media.	36.2	13.6	26.0	23.9	2.62	1.018	65.5
Social media has an effect on my participation during elections.	33.6	27.8	17.3	21.3	2.28	1.053	57
I commented and participated in political discourses on social media.	34.9	13.1	23.9	28.1	2.63	.988	65.75
Total					2.37	0.982	

***Scale: 4 = Strongly Agree. 3 = Agree. 2 = Disagree. 1 = Strongly Disagree**

Table 3 shows the results garnered from the first research question to measure the effect of social media on respondents' political participation. Respondents strongly agreed at 23.1% that they followed political news on social media during election while 49.1% agreed. Respondents at 56.7% strongly agreed while 22.6% agreed that they became aware of political news through social media. 36.2% strongly agreed, 13.6% agreed they shared political news. Respondents strongly agreed at 33.6% and 27.8% agreed that social media has an impact on their participation in elections. Respondents at strongly agreed 34.9% and 13.1% agreed that they commented and participated in political discourse on social media.

Table 4: showing social media influence on the perception of electorates on politician's image on social media.

Social Media Use (N= 381)	Level of Agreement (%)				Mean	S.D	Overall %
	1	2	3	4			
Social media influenced my choice of political candidate.	34.4	21.8	26.5	17.3	2.49	1.10	54.75
Social media influenced my choice of political party.	33.1	17.8	28.9	20.2	2.60	1.085	65

Social	49.1	31.8	5.5	13.6	1.93	.819	48.5
I believe political candidates who were not active on social media to be unserious about their ambition.	21.0	34.1	19.4	25.5	2.43	1.028	6 0.75
I would vote for a politician who is on social media instead of one who is not.	23.6	17.1	32.8	26.5	2.75	1.09 6 0	8.75
Total						2.43	1.006

***Scale: 4 = Strongly Agree. 3 = Agree. 2= Disagree. 1= Strongly Disagree**

Table 4 shows social media influence at the perception of electorates on politician’s image on social media. 34.4% strongly agreed while 21.8% agreed. Respondents at 33.1% strongly agreed and 17.8% agreed that social media influenced their choice of political party. 49.1% strongly agreed and 31.8% agreed that social media was an avenue for politicians to boost their image to the public. 21.0% strongly agreed and 34.1% agreed that political candidates who were not active on social media were unserious. 23.6% strongly agreed and 17.1% agreed to vote for politicians who made their campaign known on social media.

Table 5: showing the Level of Credibility electorates attach to political messages on Social Media.

Social Media Use (N= 381)	Level of Agreement (%)						
	1	2	3	4	Mea n	S.D	Overall %
I believe political messages on social media	42.8	15.5	24.4	17.3	2.51	1.025	62.75
Social media is a credible platform to get political news	52.2	25.2	12.1	10.5	2.09	.913	52.25
I share political news on social media	21.8	58.0	8.7	11.5	2.07	.823	51.75
Social media is credible in encouraging electorate political participation	58.8	24.1	9.2	7.9	2.02	.830	50.5
I prefer political candidates who engage electorate on social media than those who do not	42.3	30.2	20.2	7.3	2.18	1.075	54.5
Total					2.8	1.167	

***Scale: 4 = Strongly Agree. 3 = Agree. 2 = Disagree. 1 = Strongly Disagree**

Table 5 shows level of credibility electorates attach to political messages on social media. Respondents at 42.8% strongly agreed while 15.5% agreed. 52.2% strongly agreed and 25.2% agreed social media was a credible platform for political news. 21.8% strongly agreed while 58.0% agreed they shared political news on social medial. 58.8% strongly agreed while 24.1% agreed that social media was credible in encouraging electorates political participation. 42.3% of the respondents

strongly agreed while 30.2% agreed they preferred political candidates who engage electorates on social media than those who do not.

Discussion of Findings

The findings regarding research question one, which focuses on the effect of social media on electorate participation in the 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State, indicate that a significant portion of the respondents engaged with political news and activities on social media. The findings reveal that a majority of the respondents (72.2%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they followed political news on social media during the election. This indicates that social media platforms played a significant role in disseminating political information to the electorate in Akwa Ibom State. These findings align with previous studies that have highlighted the increasing use of social media as a source of news and information during elections (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020; Tacchi, 2018). The results also show that a considerable number of respondents (79.3%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they became aware of political news through social media. This suggests that social media platforms served as an important channel for political news consumption, enabling the electorate to stay informed about the election process and candidates. These findings are consistent with studies that have emphasized the role of social media in providing real-time and easily accessible political news (Larsson & Moe, 2012; Towner et al., 2019). The findings indicate that a notable proportion of respondents (49.8%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they shared political news on social media platforms. This highlights the role of social media as a means for individuals to participate in political discourse and engage with others by sharing relevant information. By sharing political news, individuals contribute to the spread of information and potentially influence the opinions of their social networks. These findings align with previous research that has emphasized the role of social media as a platform for political expression and engagement (Jungherr, 2016; Vaccari et al., 2013).

The findings show that a significant number of respondents (61.4%) either agreed or strongly agreed that social media had an impact on their participation in elections. This suggests that social media platforms played a role in motivating and mobilizing the electorate in Akwa Ibom State. Social media can provide a platform for political discussions, campaign promotion, and engagement, which may encourage individuals to become more actively involved in the electoral process (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). The results indicate that a notable percentage of respondents (48%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they commented and participated in political discourse on social media platforms. This suggests that social media provided a space for individuals to express their

opinions, engage in discussions, and contribute to political conversations. Participating in political discourse on social media enables individuals to voice their perspectives, share ideas, and potentially influence public opinion (Vaccari et al., 2013; Vitak et al., 2011).

These results are consistent with those of Akinlade (2016), who also discovered that voters in South-East Nigeria were affected by social media. Data like this demonstrates that social media does influence voters in elections positively. That is in line with what Dunu and Uzochukwu (2015) observed in their study, which also indicated that social media's low cost and speed of communications have made it an indispensable tool for campaigns during elections. Ayeni (2019) also found that electorate's political engagement was mostly driven by their use of and exposure to political messages on social media platforms during election. Okechukwu's (2018) research finds similar results, with the same conclusion that social media has greatly benefited Nigeria's political campaigning and electoral processes. Ayeni's research confirmed these trends, finding that they have become credible channels for political discourse and effective tools for reaching and persuading the vast majority of voters (2019).

The findings pertaining to research question two, which focuses on the extent of social media's influence on the electorate's perception of politicians' image during the 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State, indicate that social media indeed plays a significant role in shaping the perceptions and choices of the electorate. The results reveal that a substantial proportion of the respondents (56.2%) either agreed or strongly agreed that social media has an influence on their perception of politicians' image. This suggests that social media platforms serve as a medium through which politicians can shape and project their public image. Politicians can utilize social media to disseminate their messages, engage with the electorate, and present themselves in a favorable light (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Jungherr et al., 2016). These findings align with previous studies that have highlighted the role of social media in influencing public perceptions of politicians (Bastos et al., 2018; Stroud et al., 2017). The findings indicate that a considerable number of respondents (50.9%) either agreed or strongly agreed that social media influenced their choice of political party. This suggests that social media platforms play a role in shaping the political preferences and affiliations of the electorate. Political parties and candidates can utilize social media to promote their ideologies, policies, and campaign messages, thereby influencing the decisions of the electorate (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). These findings align with prior research that has emphasized the influence of social media on political party affiliation and support (Foot et al., 2017; Vaccari et al., 2013).

The results indicate that a notable percentage of respondents (40.7%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they would vote for politicians who made their campaign known on social media. This suggests that social media can have an influence on the voting decisions of the electorate. Candidates who effectively utilize social media platforms to communicate their campaign messages and engage with the electorate may gain support and votes from individuals who perceive them as accessible and responsive (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Jungherr et al., 2016). The results of this study are consistent with those of Okoro and Tseggyu (2017), who observed that social media offers participatory democracy, increases transparency and improved accuracy in the political process, and facilitates the rapid dissemination of election results. According to research conducted by Omenugha, Ukwueze, & Malizu (2011), social networks can exert outsized influence in terms of engaging voters in political participation. Opportunities for political engagement are more likely to arise if electorate' interests are ignited and promoted, as found by Young and Quan-Haase (2009). The findings of this study corroborate those of a previous study by Theocharis and Quintelier (2014).

The findings related to objective three, which focuses on the perceived credibility of political messages on social media by the electorate during the 2023 elections in Akwa Ibom State, indicate the level of credibility attached to political messages and the perception of social media as a credible platform. The findings reveal that a significant proportion of respondents (58.3%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they perceived political messages on social media as credible. This suggests that social media platforms were seen as reliable sources of political information by the electorate in Akwa Ibom State. Trust and credibility are essential factors in shaping individuals' perceptions of the information they encounter on social media (Metzger et al., 2003). These findings align with previous research that has highlighted the credibility of information shared on social media platforms (Purcell et al., 2010; Tsfati & Weimann, 2002).

The results indicate that a majority of respondents (77.4%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they perceived social media as a credible platform for political news. This suggests that social media platforms were considered trustworthy sources of political information by the electorate. The accessibility and real-time nature of social media can contribute to the perception of credibility, as individuals can directly access information and engage with a wide range of sources (Dylko et al., 2018). These findings align with studies that have emphasized the role of social media as a platform for political news consumption (Larsson & Moe, 2012; Towner et al., 2019). According to the data, Akwa Ibom residents place considerable trust in political news and tales they read on social media. This is consistent with what

Akinlade discovered about the Nigerian general elections of 2015: that electorate in Nigeria saw social media as a reliable source of information.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the effectiveness of social media and their credibility in political mobilization of electorate in Akwa Ibom State during the 2023 general elections. Based on the findings, this study concluded that the electorate in Akwa Ibom State depended extensively on social media platforms to raise their level of political awareness in the run-up to elections. This research inferred that political parties and candidates spent the greatest time and effort on social media to spread their message to the electorate before the election. Thus the social media have become vital communication channels in the sustenance of democracy in Akwa Ibom State through the use of internet technology in electioneering, public perception of political parties and political process campaign.

Social media have a great role in voters' decisions about which candidates and parties to support. Voters in Akwa Ibom State generally agree that social media do provide an authoritative platform for political discussion and many have also attested to the phenomenon's role in inspiring people to engage in politics.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, challenges and opportunities on the effectiveness of social media and their credibility in political mobilisation of electorate in Akwa Ibom State during the 2023 general elections, the following recommendations are made:

- (i) The benefits of the use of social media outweigh its risks, as such the civil society should plan to use and equally encourage other election stakeholders to use social media in the subsequent elections in Akwa Ibom State.
- (ii) The Independent National Electorate Commission (INEC) should establish guidelines for the use of social media as a political communication tool in Akwa Ibom State. Modalities should be established to systematically verify information reported by citizen observers through the social media.
- (iii) Credibility of social media should be encouraged and development partners should support domestic observer groups to utilize social media as a means of improving election observation in Akwa Ibom State.

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