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EVALUATION OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CAMPAIGN MESSAGES ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NASARAWA STATE AND FCT ABUJA

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ABSTRACT

The increasing role of social media in political campaigns has transformed electoral communication, influencing voter perception and engagement. This study evaluated public perception of campaign messages on social media during the 2023 presidential election in Nasarawa State and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. Using a survey research design, data were collected from a sample of 380 respondents, analyzing how campaign messages influenced voter participation, candidate preference, and the overall effectiveness of social media as a campaign tool. Findings revealed that while social media significantly shaped political discourse and mobilization, issues of misinformation, disinformation, and trust deficits in political messaging hindered its effectiveness. The study concluded that while social media has enhanced political participation, ethical challenges such as fake news and propaganda need to be addressed. It recommends that political actors should adhere to ethical campaign standards and that regulatory bodies should implement policies to curb misinformation. The study contributes to the growing discourse on digital political communication and its impact on democratic processes in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Social Media, Political Campaigns, Public Perception, Campaign Messages, Election*

INTRODUCTION

Political campaign messages serve as strategic communication tools designed to persuade voters and shape electoral outcomes. With the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, digital campaign strategies have gained prominence in Nigeria's electoral process. The 2023 presidential election witnessed an

unprecedented use of social media for voter mobilization, political advocacy, and campaign messaging by major political parties, including the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the Labour Party (LP).

Despite the advantages of social media in fostering political engagement, concerns have emerged regarding the credibility of campaign messages, misinformation, and the ethical implications of digital political communication. Scholars argue that campaign messages in Nigeria have often lacked substantive policy discussions, focusing instead on attacks, criticisms, and propaganda (Adekanbi, 2023; Rotimi, Williams, & Olatunji, 2023). This has led to voter skepticism and trust deficits in political communication.

Given these concerns, it is crucial to assess how voters in Nasarawa State and the FCT perceived campaign messages on social media during the 2023 election. Understanding voter perceptions will provide insights into the effectiveness of social media as a campaign tool and its influence on political participation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The growing adoption of social media for political campaigns has brought both opportunities and challenges. While the social media platforms offers an interactive platform for candidates and voters to engage, the prevalence of misinformation, propaganda, and trust issues has raised concerns about its effectiveness. Research has shown that political campaign messages in Nigeria often lack substantive discussions on governance and policy, instead relying on emotional and identity-based appeals (Ominabo, 2023; Peterside, 2023). This study investigated whether campaign messages on social media influenced voter participation and decision-making in Nasarawa State and the FCT. It examines the extent to which misinformation affected voter perception and whether social media platforms served as credible sources of campaign information.

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

This study is significant for political communicators, policymakers, and electoral stakeholders. It provides insights into how social media influences political engagement and voter education in Nigeria. Findings from this study can inform political parties on best practices for digital campaigns, emphasizing ethical messaging and fact-based communication. Additionally, the study has contributed to the broader field of political communication, offering empirical data on the intersection of social media and electoral processes in Nigeria.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- i To ascertain the extent of public perception of 2023 Presidential Election Campaign messages on the social media in Nasarawa State and FCT Abuja.
- ii To determine the effectiveness of the 2023 presidential election campaign messages on the social media in Nasarawa state and FCT Abuja
- iii To Investigate the challenges of 2023 presidential election campaign messages on the social media in Nasarawa state and FCT Abuja.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Opala *et al.* (2023) carried out a study on the Perception of the Influence of Social Media on the Mobilization of Electorate in the 2023 Presidential Election in Awka Metropolis.

The study looked at perceptions of social media's impact on voter turnout in the 2023 presidential elections in the city of Awka. 385 respondents were purposefully chosen from the whole population of the Awka metropolis for the survey research design. According to research, most people view social media contributions to 2023 political involvement procedures as having a progressive objective, while most people view political campaign messaging as little more than political propaganda. The investigation suggested that Nigerian politicians should make every effort to match their words with necessary deeds once in office and that, despite social media's obvious negative effects on politics and politicking, Nigerian politicians should vigorously embrace social media in subsequent elections due to its interactive potential.

Ezema and Ezema (2023) carried out a research study on Assessing the Impact of Social Media during the 2023 Presidential Election in Enugu Metropolis. The study investigated the impact of the social media during the 2023 Nigeria's presidential election in Enugu metropolis. The objectives were to ascertain the frequency of the use of smart phones and social media platforms to get information about the 2023 presidential election, verify the social media platforms often used by the Enugu residents for such information, determine the extent in which the Enugu residents believed in the information and find out if the information in the social media influenced their voting pattern. Public Sphere and Uses and Gratification theories formed the theoretical framework. The study adopted survey research design. Purposive sampling technique was used to administer copies of questionnaire on equal basis to the respondents who were social media literate in each layout.

Wimmer and Dominick Online sample size calculator helped us to get the sample size of 384 from the population of 993,663. They used 375 copies for the fifteen layouts while nine copies were not useful for the analysis. The researchers used multistage sampling technique to administer the copies of questionnaire. Only 38.67% of the Enugu metropolis residents got information from the social media platforms regularly about the election. The residents most often use Facebook and WhatsApp on a daily basis than others. Social media platform information influenced 61.60% of the residents in political participation. In conclusion, social media platforms are desirable for political mobilisation in urban cities. It also recommended that Government, organisations and associations should encourage the use social media platforms to sensitise electorates before and during elections in addition to interpersonal communication.

In another related study, Igbinedion and Ajisebiyawo (2023) examined the Influence of Social Media on Voters' Choices during the 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria. The paper is an assessment of how social media influence voters' decisions during the presidential elections held on February 25, 2023 among Nigerian voters. The paper adopted the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) to evaluate the impact of free flow of information on voter's decision making. The paper reported that social media platforms were powerful tools in the rapid dissemination of political information throughout the Nigeria's electoral process of 2023 acting as critical conduits for political discourse, enabling the swift transmission of information to a broader audience. The paper established association between the frequency of social media interactions involving political contents and voters' preferences during the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria.

The paper concluded that social media did not only booster voter participation but shaped electoral outcomes during the 2023 presidential elections and that the influence cut across distinct demographic, social, economic and cultural spectrum. It also recommended that as social media's role in politics continues to evolve, it is crucial for policymakers,

researchers, and social media platforms themselves to understand the mechanisms through which social media interactions influence voters. Promoting digital literacy, combating misinformation, and ensuring transparency in algorithmic processes are essential steps toward creating a healthier online political environment that empowers voters to make informed decisions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Social Judgment Theory. In 1961, Muzafar Sherif, Caroline Sherif and Carl Hovl published the first version of what would become known as the social Judgment theory. How people feel about a topic and how they interpret a message both play a role in how they react to it. Social judgment theory states that whether or not a message is accepted depends on the cognitive map and ego involvement of the recipient (SJT). According to the SJT, there are three distinct parts of the mind where an individual stores information about themselves and their perspectives. Among these are the options to accept or decline an offer and to hold off on making any firm promises (Asemah *et al.*, 2017). Since we have a great deal of leeway in deciding whether or not to act on the evidence presented to us, when we are persuaded, we evaluate whether or not we should accept it using our prior judgment categories. The recipient will benefit from either option they choose (Isah, 2022). The social judgment and engagement theory helps explain why individuals can have such divergent interpretations of the same message This means the theory can be used to explain how political campaign messages influence people's perceptions and their voting behavior.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the Researcher employed a survey design. According to Asemah, et al (2022) and Asemah, et al (2023), opine that a survey is an empirical study that uses a questionnaire to discover descriptive characteristics of a phenomenon. The survey method is considered highly appropriate. When working with a significantly large population.

The population of the study comprises of Nasarawa State and Federal Capital Territory (FCT). In Nasarawa State Keffi and Karu Local Government areas are purposely chosen while Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC) and Bwari Municipal Area Council were chosen in Federal Capital Territory (FCT) with respective populations of Keffi-142,900, Karu-333,800, AMAC-1,693,400 and Bwari-500,100 according to National Bureau of Statistic (2021), totaling 2,670,200 (Two million, Six Hundred and Seventy thousand, two hundred), which constitutes the study population.

However, this research will adopt the multi-stage sampling technique. Thus a multi-stage sampling technique was used by the researcher to choose her samples in stages until the required sample is gotten. The sample size for this research was determined by using Cochran's formula, $n_0 = \frac{z^2 \cdot p \cdot q}{e^2}$

Where:

n_0 = initial sample size

z = number of standard deviation

p = estimated proportion of the population

$q = 1 - p$

e = margin error

Substitute numbers in formula

$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2 \cdot (0.5) \cdot (0.5)}{0.05^2}$

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$$n_0 = \frac{(0.05)^2}{0.0025} \times 3.8416$$

$$n_0 = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$n_0 = 384.16$$

Adjust to finite Population

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{(n_0 - 1)}{N}}$$

Where:

- n= adjusted sample size
- N= population size (889,100)
- n₀= initial sample size
- n= $\frac{385}{1 + \frac{(384)}{(889100)}}$
- n= $\frac{385}{1 + 0.000432}$
- n= $\frac{385}{1.000432}$
- n= 384.83
- n= 385

The sample size statistically stands at 385, therefore, a total of 385 respondents were chosen as the sample size of the study.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: From what media did you receive political messages during the 2023 campaign?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage
Traditional media	18	15	33	6.6
New media	14	19	33	9.2
Social media	18	17	35	6.6
Local media	3	11	19	7.6
Total	88	92	380	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The data result from FCT and Nasarawa state indicate that 215 respondents out of 380 representing (56.6%) said it was from social media. With a distant margin new media has (19.2%), traditional media (16.6%) and local media (7.6%). respectively.

Table 2: In case you received political messages through the social media, how reliable was it

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage
Very reliable	10	14	24	30
Not so reliable	12	10	22	45.3
Very unreliable	16	12	28	20.5
Completely unreliable	0	3	6	4.2
Total	88	92	380	100

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Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Data from the FCT and Nasarawa state put together revealed that 172 respondents out of 380 representing (45.3%) says political messages from social media are not so reliable, closely followed by 30% indicating that it is very reliable. Also (20.5%) respondents say it very unreliable while 4.2%) say it is completely unreliable.

**Table 3: Which social media platforms did you access campaign messages?
(Select all that apply)**

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage
WhatsApp	61	64	125	32.9
Facebook	73	76	149	39.2
Instagram	15	23	38	9.9
YouTube	3	11	14	3.7
X formerly Twitter	10	14	24	6.3
Total	188	192	380	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The results of data collected from FCT and Nasarawa state indicated that (39.2%) of respondents accessed campaign messages in 2023 on Facebook, closely followed by WhatsApp with (32.9%). Others are Instagram (12.6%), X formerly Twitter (9.0%), X formerly Twitter 18 (9.4%), and YouTube (6.3%).

Table 4: What informed your choice of platforms?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
X and Facebook were mostly used by the leading Presidential candidates in the campaign	18	19	37	9.7
Instagram and YouTube show drama that comes with the campaign	18	19	37	9.7
WhatsApp, X, and Facebook provide opportunities to interface directly with the candidates	14	15	29	7.6
Social media channels simply dominate the campaign	18	19	37	9.7
Total	68	72	140	36.7

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Data from FCT and Nasarawa state indicated that (30.8%) believed that X and Facebook were mostly used by the leading presidential candidates in the campaign. Collected data also established the fact that social media channels simply dominated the campaign with (20.3%) while (33.9%) respondents appreciated WhatsApp, X and Facebook because it provides opportunities to interface directly with the candidates'. However, facts that Instagram and YouTube show/ drama that comes with the campaign were (15%)

Table 5: How would you rate the quality of campaign messages on social media during the election?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
Excellent	23	25	48	12.6

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Good	68	74	142	37.4
Fair	74	73	147	38.7
Poor	23	20	43	11.3
Total	188	192	380	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Data from FCT and Nasarawa state indicated a total of 147 (38.7%) said it was fair out of 380, 142 (37.4%) said it was good, 48 (12.6%) said it was excellent, while 43 (11.3%) said it was poor.

Table 6: Considering your choice above, how were you influenced by the campaign messages?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
Use of emotional appeal	5	10	15	3.9
Use of Misinformation	10	5	15	3.9
I followed the crowd because the candidate is popular in my area	5	10	15	3.9
The campaign messages are personal to me	14	7	21	5.5
Total	35	32	67	17.6

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Collated data from Nasarawa and FCT indicates that 201(52.9%) also said that - The campaign messages are personal to them, 76(20.0%) said that they Use of emotional appeal, 55 (14.5%) said it was Use of misinformation while 48 (12.62%) said they followed the crowd because the candidate is popular in their area.

Table 7: To what extent did campaign messages on social media influence your choice of candidate?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
To a large extent	5	10	15	3.9
To a minimal extent	10	7	17	4.4
To a negligible extent	5	5	10	2.6
To a little extent	10	12	22	5.7
Total	30	34	64	16.8

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The collated data from FCT and Nasarawa put together indicated that a total of 167 (43.9%) said that it was to a minimal extent, 101 (26.6%) said that it was to a large extent, 61 (16.1%) said it was to a little extent while 52 (13.4%) said it was negligible extent.

Table 8: Did campaign messages on social media increase your participation in the electioneering Process?

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Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
Yes	139	116	255	47.1
No	149	52	201	39.7
Not sure	7	52	59	13.7
Total	188	120	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Collated data from FCT and Nasarawa State put together indicated 179 (47.1%) said yes, 149 (39.7%) said no while 52 (13.7%) said not sure.

Table 9: What was the primary focus of campaign messages on social media during the election? (Select all that apply):

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
Facts	139	116	255	36.6
Attacks	116	139	255	30.55
Falsehood	88	52	140	23.2
Emotional appeals	37	52	89	9.75
Total	188	120	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Collated data from FCT and Nasarawa state indicated, 139 (36.6%) said the focus was on facts, 116 (30.55%) said it attacks, 88 (23.2%) said falsehood while 37 (9.75%) said it was emotional appeal.

Table 10: Do you think social media platform contribute to political campaign messages in Nigeria?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
Positively	241	102	343	63.45
Negatively	102	37	139	26.8
Woefully	37	52	89	9.8
Total	188	120	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

FCT and Nasarawa collated data indicates that 241 (63.45) said the contribution is positive, 102 (26.8%) said it is negative, while 37 (9.8%) said it is woeful.

Table 11: Do social media encourage misinformation during Presidential campaign of the 2023 election?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
Not at all	12	52	64	21.4
In some cases	88	102	190	61.5
At all times	12	37	49	15.5
In few instances	52	12	64	21.6
Total	188	120	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The overall data from FCT and Nasarawa state indicate that 245 (64,5%) respondents said social media encourage misinformation in some cases during presidential campaign of 2023 election, followed by 48 (12.4%) those who said in few instances, 47 (12.5%) those who said not at all and 40 (10. 5%) those who said at all times

Table 12: In what ways was the social media used for disinformation during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?

Variables	FCT	Nasarawa	Total	Percentage (%)
Using multimedia channels to show large crowd at rallies	52	48	100	26.3
Candidate quotes were fabricated to tarnish their image or boost their credentials	58	64	122	32.1
Deep fakes by using AI to generate false endorsements for a particular candidate	22	20	42	11.1
Social media influencers were paid to push false narratives for the candidates to sway public opinions	56	60	116	30.5
Total	188	192	380	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 12: The overall data collected from FCT and Nasarawa state indicates that 122 (32.1%) respondents said candidate quotes were fabricated to tarnish their image or boost their credentials, while 116 (30.5%) respondents stated that Social media influencers were paid to push false narratives for the candidates to sway public opinions. In the same vein, 100 (26.3%) said it was by Using multimedia channels to show large crowd at rallies and 42 (11.1%) said it was Deep fakes by using AI to generate false endorsements for a particular candidate

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal that social media was a primary platform for political communication, with a majority of respondents engaging with campaign messages. However, concerns over misinformation, attack-based rhetoric, and trust deficits significantly impacted how voters perceived these messages.

The findings align with previous studies indicating that social media is a powerful but flawed tool for political communication (Folarin, 2023; Ibrahim, 2023). While it enhances voter engagement and awareness, issues of disinformation and trust remain significant concerns. The dominance of attack-based messaging over policy discussions highlights the need for ethical campaign practices. The study also supports agenda-setting and framing theories, as political actors strategically shaped narratives to influence voter perception. However, the limited effect theory is also evident, as many voters remained skeptical despite the high volume of campaign messages. Key findings include:

- i. Though there was high level engagement with social media in which over 90% of respondents used social media to access campaign information. It was established 60% of respondents believed campaign messages focused more on criticisms and attacks than policy discussion which led to misinformation and attack based messaging.

- ii. It increases voter awareness and mobilization because despite skepticism, 68% of respondents agreed that social media increased their political awareness, and 50% felt it influenced their participation in the election.
- iii. Challenges of Misinformation, hate speech, and algorithm-driven echo chambers were significant issues affecting the credibility of campaign messages.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while social media played a crucial role in voter education and mobilization, the prevalence of misinformation and attack-based messaging limited their effectiveness. Political actors leveraged social media to shape electoral narratives, but the lack of ethical communication practices led to trust deficits among voters. Despite these challenges, social media remain a valuable tool for political engagement, particularly among young and educated voters. However, their full potential in fostering issue-based political discourse has yet to be realized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Political actors and parties should prioritize issue-based messaging over personal attacks and propaganda. Fact-checking organizations should collaborate with social media platforms to verify political content and curb misinformation. This will promote ethical campaign messaging
- ii. The government, through regulatory bodies, should implement policies to address misinformation while ensuring freedom of expression. Social media platforms should enforce stricter content moderation during election periods. This can be achieved through regulation and monitoring of Political Communication
- iii. Civil society organizations should engage in media literacy campaigns to help voters critically assess campaign messages. Electoral bodies like INEC should integrate social media awareness programs into voter education initiatives. This will enhance voters' education and digital literacy
- iv. Political campaigns should focus on constructive discourse, addressing economic policies, governance strategies, and national development. Also the encouragement of diverse political engagement in which Candidates can actively participate in town hall meetings and live discussions to directly engage voters beyond social media will enhance political communication process.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study has contributed to the growing body of research on digital political communication in Nigeria. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of social media as a campaign tool, providing valuable insights for political actors, policymakers, and researchers in mass communication and political science.

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