



USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL STRATEGIES IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

By

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Abstract

This research paper examines the increasing role of social media and digital strategies in political campaigns. It explores the impact of these platforms on the political landscape, including their ability to shape public opinions, mobilize supporters, and facilitate direct communication between candidates and voters. Using the survey research method, the study found that social media use in political engagement and campaigns impacted the voters in the area of coming out to vote, campaigning for political candidates, registering and collecting their PVC as well as discussion on political issues. The study also found that politicians utilized digital strategies such as targeted ads, personalized messaging, digital analytics and others in engaging and convincing voters. However, the study found some ethical issues with social media use for political campaigns. These included invasion of privacy, overflooded ads, and dissemination of misinformation and attack campaigns. Based on the findings, the study recommends among others that social media handlers should ensure that the contents of their political campaigns are issue-based and devoid of misinformation, unwarranted attacks and properly presented.

Keywords: Social Media, Digital Strategies and Political Campaigns

Introduction

Political campaigns are essential in the electioneering process in modern democracies. The electoral process in all democracies in the world is often populated by a myriad of political campaigns which serve as a window through which the electorates see the policies, plans and visions of political parties and their electorates.

Political campaigning techniques have shifted significantly in recent years, with social media and internet platforms playing an increasingly crucial role. The surge in internet and social media usage is driving this transition, allowing politicians to reach a larger audience than ever before.

The increasing adoption of internet and mobile phones in Nigeria, like in most African nations, has sparked hopes that these new technology may aid in the consolidation of budding democracies. Despite the inherent lack of

socioeconomic infrastructure, the Sub-Saharan Africa has had some of the world's highest growth rates in mobile phone and internet penetration over the last decade.

According to the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, NBS (2023), there are 222.5 million active telephone subscribers as at the end of 2022. In the same vein, NBS (2023) says that Nigeria's internet user has increased to 154.8 million in the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2022. These technologies are now key social links, and they have enhanced election quality by making them more efficient and transparent, resulting in increasingly peaceful elections in Nigeria and across the continent.

The proliferation of the social media and digital strategies in the communication of political campaigns has given rise to serious academic and research enquiries. Scholars like Bimber (2014), Foot & Schneider (2006), Hermans & Vergeer (2013) observes that the use of digital media by political candidates in elections has been a subject of extensive research by political communication scholars in the United States and Europe, and to a much lesser extent other parts of the world.

As more citizens get access to digital resources, experts have sought to determine what transformative implications they may be having on how politicians communicate information, engage citizens, and mobilize voter support.

It is against this backdrop that this study aims to investigate the use of social media and digital strategies in political campaigns, particularly their role in constructing political narratives, mobilizing supporters, and promoting direct voter interaction.

Research Objectives

The following constitutes the objectives of this study:

1. To determine the impact of the use of social media have on the engagement and participation of voters in political campaigns
2. To know the digital strategies used to reach and convince voters
3. To find out the ethical considerations and challenges which arise with the use of social media and digital strategies in political campaigns

Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Narratives

The success or failure of every political campaign is dependent on its talkability and political narratives among electorates and electioneering stakeholders. How well people receive the political campaign communications and how much of the campaign premises are being discussed by the public goes to a great extent to determine how successful that campaign would be.

The content of political campaigns are mainly ideas that the political party and its candidate wants to share with the electorates and aimed at getting the electorates to agree with their ideas and support them to gain political power either in the executive or legislature. Trent and Friedenber (2004) observes that political campaign communication encapsulates three important areas in political campaigns: providing reasons for voters to retain faith in the political system; providing citizens the freedom to select their leaders; and providing the opportunity to evaluate how their interests can be best served while conferring legitimacy on those elected to govern.

Politicians may influence political narratives and manage their messaging thanks to the direct access social media platforms give them to the general population. Political candidates can access a huge audience of potential supporters, magnify their campaign's messaging, and immediately address criticism or false information about their campaigns by utilizing social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

An informed and engaged populace is necessary for democratic governance. This suggests that the population must be well informed and exposed to political campaigns in order to be better informed and to engage in the political process in a country. The social media is a key factor in determining a country's political culture because it aids in the establishment of political ideas and attitudes. All the organizations that a person belongs to, as well as social categories like ethnicity and income level, as well as more significant historical occurrences and political concerns, have an impact on their political beliefs.

Since the former president Obama mobilized online support from Americans and won the election in 2008 as a result of his use of social media for his political campaigns, it has become clear that social media has a significant impact on socialization in both overt and covert ways. In democracies and cultures undergoing transition all over the world, social media has taken over as the most popular source of information about election campaigns.

Electioneering campaigns are frequently a high point for political communications in terms of the sheer volume of information available to citizens via the media on subjects - political parties and leaders. Concerns about political bias in the media are at the centre of disputes regarding the media's roles and responsibilities during election season. Behind these worries is the premise that there may be unforeseen consequences for public opinion, political behaviour, and, eventually, electoral outcomes.

More so, the new technologies offer various platforms where information and other socio-political communication can be constructed and discussed. This has made the medium become a formidable one; the mobilizing structure of the social media and all resources necessary for popular mobilization, which in this case is contained in social media as the fastest and easiest means to mobilize.

It is therefore little wonder Friedman (2007) argues that the political theatre for most successful electioneering campaigns in today's world is located in the social media and most electoral battles nowadays are fought and won through the social media. Edegoh and Samson (2014) corroborates this when he noted that "access to social media is easy and could be done anywhere, in one's office, home, while waiting in the car, in the comfort of people's bedroom etc, using smart phones, laptops and other forms of communication device at the disposal of people".

Social Media and Political Mobilization

Political campaigns can use social media to mobilize supporters effectively. It enables candidates to interact with their supporters in real time, coordinate grassroots initiatives, and develop a feeling of community. Empirical research has found that political campaigns that effectively use social media channels have higher voter turnout, particularly among the younger generation.

Politicians and political parties rely on social media to create support, inspire involvement, and maintain an open and ongoing dialogue. Most importantly, social media allows highly motivated people to quickly create a condition in which less motivated people can be successful without becoming activists themselves, thereby creating an environment suitable for politicians to exploit.

The expanding public and political influence of social media has begun to alter the political process and campaign strategies. Politicians are now using social media and the Internet and in turn are permitting a new arena of grassroots politics (Narasimhamurthy, 2014).

Political involvement and social engineering both depend on political mobilization, which has been a key concept in political and social debate. By focusing on their most urgent political needs and expectations, political mobilization is the process of engaging people in a desired political action. A social action known as political mobilization tries to increase political awareness and understanding in a specific political direction.

Political mobilization is an action- and goal-driven behaviour. Thus, it is essential to all political activity that aspires to a certain end or pursues an ideologically driven course of action. This is why it is extremely useful as a tool for social and political change (Nwoye, & Okafor, 2014).

Political mobilization is the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups urge others to become active in politics in order to win elections, create legislation, change court rulings, and influence policy. Political organizations may contact people and give them a specific opportunity for political involvement. In the majority of cases, mobilization is required before any participation can take place.

On the basis of the aforementioned, we can describe political mobilization as the process of enlightening the public and increasing their cognition, political consciousness, and effectiveness. Political mobilization is, thus, the intentional process of bringing people together on an emotional level and causing them to internalize a sense of social cohesion in terms of their beliefs, attitudes, and goals in order to realize a predetermined, overarching objective.

Social media can be seen as both a technological advancement and a platform for building and maintaining the networks that support social movements. The Arab uprisings serve as an example of how social media and online social networks have evolved into essential components of today's populist movements. Social media are not simply neutral tools to be used or adopted by social movements, but rather influence how activists form and shape the social movements (Lim, 2012).

Social media has aided democracies all around the world, particularly in engaging the public in political efforts. For example, in 2008, US President Barack Obama used social media to run a highly successful election campaign. In the United States, Barack Obama's election as president in 2008 showcased the remarkable use of social media in a political campaign. The Obama campaign was a stunning example of a talented team utilizing

publicly available technologies. The Obama campaign actively participated in over 15 social networks, with over 5 million active supporters on these platforms.

Empirical Studies

Scholars have conducted a number of studies on social media use in political campaigns and political mobilizations. Aleyomi and Ajakaiye (2012) in their study on the impact of social media on citizens' mobilization and participation in Nigeria's 2011 general elections found out that INEC used the social media platforms to respond to more than 4000 queries in 2011 elections, and the active involvement and interactivity that ensued between politicians, political parties and other groups during the 2011 election. The study revealed that by December 2010, Goodluck Jonathan had already won more than 300,000 fans on his Facebook page.

They further found that the 2011 elections demonstrated the extent to which the social media have penetrated the urban, populace in Nigeria. The benefits of the penetration of social media in Nigeria came to light during the 2011 elections. Nigerian citizens of all ages, education levels and from different parts of the country used and were mobilized through the use of social media to participate in the 2011 general elections. Furthermore, Aleyomi and Ajakaiye's research confirmed the heavy use of social networking sites like: Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, BBM, YouTube, and others in the 2011 election; the results revealed that Facebook and Twitter were heavily used to mobilize the people.

Related study that supports this claim is Okoro's study in 2013 on social media and political participation in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections: the lapses and the lessons. The study argues that the four key stakeholders in the Nigerian electoral process (the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), politicians/political parties, the electorate, and Civil Society Organizations) made extensive use of social media during the 2011 elections. Each of these stakeholders used the social media to achieve a number of interrelated objectives. The study found that INEC used social media basically to broadcast messages on the elections and receive feedbacks from the public on their experience with the process. Politicians/political parties used the social media to reach out to the voters and canvass for support. The electorates used social media to report, their experiences and receive election related information, while the CSOs used the social media to mobilize and educate the electorate as well as to cover and report their observation of the electoral process.

Shirky (2011) asserts that “one of the most revolutionary aspects of the use of social media in mobilizing is that it trivializes the need for elite support. Through the use of social media, individuals are able to connect with each other and organize at an incredible low cost.

Indeed, social media have emerged as the new influencer in social, economic and political settings. Research *has* shown that increasing use of social media for political communication has led to declining newspaper readership and television viewership in many countries (Australian Media and Communication Authority 2007).

The research findings of Bartlett, Krasodomski-Jones, Daniel, Fisher, and Jespersen (2015) who used a unique data gathering software to gather more than 13,6 million tweets over the period 18 March - 22 April 2015, tweets posted by 1.38 million unique users associated with the Nigerian Presidential and State elections held in March - April 2015. Also, they identified 15 news pages which were Facebook pages of popular official news websites. These produced 28,767 posts and received a total of 3,818,580 likes, 1,593,938 comments and 1,224,187 shares. Under these circumstances, the social media may likely continue to dominate political communication, and to serve as a tool for gathering and disseminating political messages.

Edegoh and Asemah (2014) conducted a study on social media use among students of private universities in Anambra State, Nigeria in which they surveyed 600 students using the questionnaire to find out the most frequently visited social medium by students, among others. Finding of their study revealed that the most visited social medium by students of privately owned universities in Anambra State is Facebook 291(50%). They also reported that other social media used by the students they investigated include Wikipedia 150 (26%), YouTube 53 (9%), Twitter 35 (6%), and Myspace 41(7%).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the diffusion of innovation theory. The Diffusion of Innovation theory explains how new ideas, products, or technologies spread and are adopted by different groups of people within a society or social system. This theory was postulated by Everett Rogers in his book “Diffusion of Innovations” published in 1962. The theory identifies various stages through which an innovation spreads and the types of individuals or groups that are more likely to adopt it. While the theory itself doesn't specifically focus on media, it can be applied to media-related innovations as well. The Diffusion of Innovation theory can be applied to media-related

innovations such as social media platforms, streaming services, new communication technologies, and digital content delivery methods. Different groups of users within a society will adopt these innovations at different rates based on their characteristics, needs, and attitudes toward technology.

In relation to this study, this theory explains how social media and digital strategies can be used for political campaigns and voter engagement as well as the attitude of people towards such usage.

Methodology

The survey research method was adopted for this study while the online survey questionnaire was used as instrument for collection of data. According to Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekharefo & Okpanachi (2012), survey is used in research when dealing with a very large population. The population of the study consists of residents in Asaba, Delta State. According to the 2006 National Population Census, the population of Asaba stands at 149,603. However, since this population census was conducted 17 years ago, it is expected that the population has increased. In this case, the use of an annual increase rate of 2.28% adopted by the UNDP was used to calculate the new projected population to include 208,098. In determining the sample size, the researcher adopted the Taro Yamane's sample size formula to arrive at a sample size of 399 respondents. The researchers used the multistage sampling technique to get respondents for the survey.



Presentation of Results and Discussion of Findings

Fig. 1: Impact of the use of social media on the engagement and participation of voters in political campaigns?

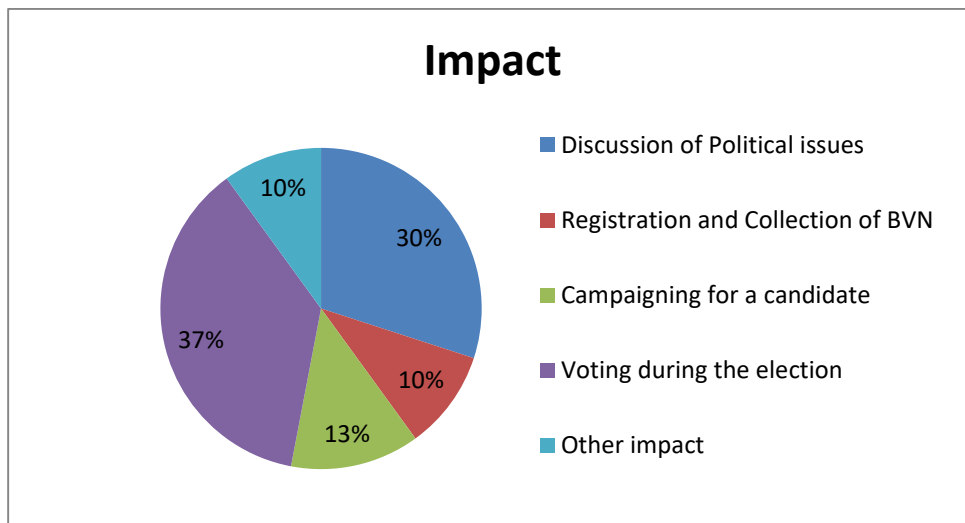


Fig. 2: Digital strategies used to reach and convince voters

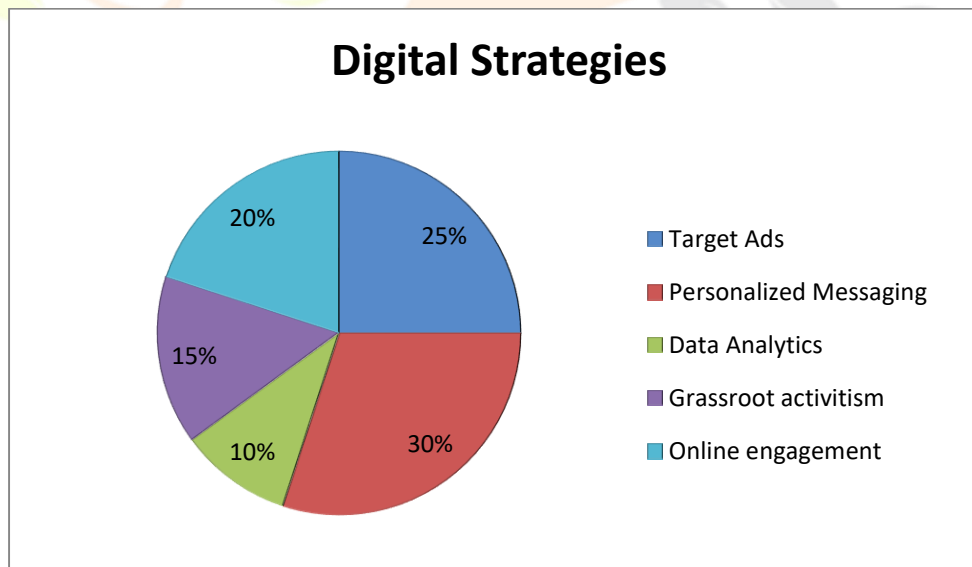
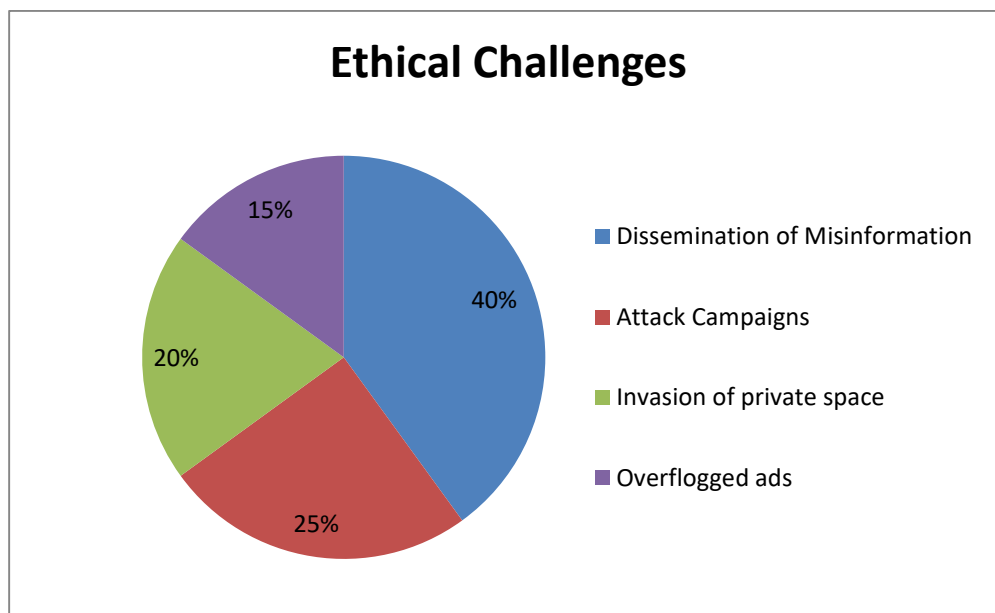


Fig. 3: Ethical challenges of the use of social media and digital strategies for political campaigns



The results of this study show that the use of social media by politicians during political campaigns has a number of impacts on voters. It was found that majority of the respondents (37%) agree that social media use in political campaigns influenced them to vote during elections. This implies that social media use in political campaigns influences higher political engagement and participation through voting. However, other impacts include discussion of political issues, campaigning for candidates, registration and collection of BVN and other impacts.

The study found that politicians make use of several digital strategies to reach and convince voters. Political campaigns exist mainly to create avenues for politicians and political parties to engage with electorates or voters. Politicians need constant and effective voter engagement in order to build a formidable followership, support structure and of course win their elections. To do this, the study found that politicians depend on some digital strategies which include target Ads, personalized messaging, data analytics, grassroots activism and online engagement. Majority of the respondents (30%) opined that personalized messaging was the most used digital strategies.

The emergence of big data and advanced analytics has transformed how political campaigns adapt their messages. Social media networks collect large amounts of user data, which campaigns utilize to produce tailored messages that resonate with specific demographic groupings. Candidates can improve their campaign performance by fine-tuning their messaging.

Social media enables candidates to mobilize grassroots support more efficiently. It facilitates the creation of online communities, where volunteers can engage and coordinate campaign activities. These digital initiatives can generate enthusiasm, enabling supporters to champion their candidate's ideals and enhance their campaign reach beyond traditional campaign boundaries.

Furthermore, the study reviewed that majority of the respondents (40%) opined that the use of social media for political campaigns has raised serious ethical challenge bothering on dissemination of misinformation. Other ethical challenges included attack campaigns (25%), invasion of private space (20%) and overflogged ads (15%). The proliferation of social media platforms has also led to the rapid dissemination of disinformation and fake news. Political campaigns, as well as external actors, may exploit these platforms to spread false narratives and manipulate public opinion. Mitigating the risks of misinformation and ensuring accurate information dissemination present ongoing challenges for political campaigns.

The Nigerian social media political campaigns have also been marred by continuous attack campaigns against political opposition candidates, parties and supporters. This defeats the essence of political campaigns which is to promote a candidate and his missions with the aim of engaging with voters and convincing them to vote. While such attacks are targeted at defaming the reputations of the opposition, it does in a way present the campaigner as lacking vision and sportsmanship. Respondents believe that time spent attacking others could have been used to promote one's ideals.

More so, while social media empowers political campaigns to reach a broader audience, concerns have arisen regarding the invasion of privacy. Political campaigns must navigate ethically ambiguous waters, ensuring that they do not overstep bounds when leveraging personal data for targeted messaging or voter outreach.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The use of social media and digital strategies in political campaigns has become essential for connecting with constituents, shaping political narratives, and mobilizing supporters. Social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for politicians to engage directly with voters, facilitate grassroots activism, and tailor their messages to specific demographic groups. However, these advantages are accompanied by challenges such as disinformation and privacy concerns. Going forward, political campaigns must navigate these issues effectively

and ethically to realize the full potential of social media and digital strategies in shaping the political landscape. Based on the research findings, the study recommends that social media handlers should ensure that the contents of their political campaigns are issue-based and devoid of misinformation, unwarranted attacks and properly presented. Also, political campaigns through targeted ads and direct messaging should be solicited for and planned in such a way that it does not invade the privacy of the receivers and also not be overflogged. As technology continues to advance, the role of social media and digital strategies in political campaigns is likely to evolve further. The integration of artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality could offer new dimensions of engagement and persuasion. Additionally, the ethical and regulatory considerations surrounding the use of these technologies will require ongoing attention.

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