

# Social Media Political Campaigns and Voting Behaviour Among Electorate in Owerri Municipal During the Electioneering of the 2023 General Elections in Imo State, Nigeria

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The study investigated social media political campaigns and voting behaviour among electorate in Owerri Municipal in the 2023 general elections. The study was anchored on public sphere theory. Descriptive survey research design was employed to sample opinion of the electorate on social media and voting behaviour. The population of the study comprised 134,169 registered voters in Owerri Municipal. A sample size of 399 was derived from the population using Taro Yamene sample size calculator. Using the instrument of questionnaire, 378 copies of the questionnaire was returned and found valid. Findings revealed that the electorate got exposed to social media political campaigns during the 2023 general elections extensively at 62.7%. Also, exposure to social media political messages had little or no influence on the electorate voting behaviour during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections (Average weighted mean score = 2.11). Further findings indicated that other factors influencing their voting behaviour are as follows: candidate's pedigree, personality of candidate, manifestos of candidates, senatorial district of the candidates, party loyalty and no better choice of candidates (Average weighted mean score = 3.14). This implies that social media political campaigns have little or nothing to do with the way the electorate in Owerri Municipal voted in the 2023 general elections. The researcher, therefore, recommend that the civil society organisations should endeavour to organised trainings, town-hall meetings, campaigns, grassroots advocacy, community mobilisation, and sensitisation workshops on regular basis in order to change the voting narrative in Nigeria as they people no longer have trust again on these politicians as such do not take information emanating from them into action.

## **Background to the Study**

In this contemporary digital age, political campaigns heavily depended on online communication platforms to gain support in campaigning. Social media can be just as hurtful as it is helpful, but social media has the capacity to dampen the scope of politics (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). Campaigns create room for voters to update their expectations of each candidate's or party's chances of success. It gives voice to potential coalition partners in an election (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023). Social media have become ubiquitous communication channels for candidates during election campaigns. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable candidates to directly reach out to voters, mobilise supporters, and influence the public agenda. These fundamental changes in political communication therefore present candidates with contesting elective positions with a widened range of strategic choices (Stier, Bleier, Lietz & Strohmaier, 2018). In line with this, Dungse, Mato, Makinde & Chidozie (2018) in their study of the role of social media for political mobilisation reported that citizens are increasingly tweeting, politically active and that general engagements are improving.

In the 2023 elections, several efforts were made to enhance the active participation of Nigerian electorate in the entire gamut of the electoral process. Such efforts have been mostly led by civil society organizations. Organisations like the Building Blocks for Peace Foundation (BBFORPEACE), YIAGA Africa, YMonitor, Peace Education and Practice Network (PEPNET), Youth Hub Africa, Centre for Peace Advocacy and Sustainable Development (CEPASD), and the Ladies Empowerment Goals and Support Initiative (LEGASI) have been building and strengthening the capacities of people towards the prevention of electoral violence. These organisations, among several others, have organised trainings, campaigns, grassroots advocacy, multi-stakeholder dialogues, community mobilisation, and sensitisation workshops to address voter apathy and raise awareness of the need for meaningful engagement of the electorate in coming out to vote candidates of their choice through participation in the political and electoral processes (Kujenga, 2023). They have also been harnessing the power of social media political campaigns to mobilize citizens for peaceful elections, expand the frontiers for voters' participation, and express themselves in the political space.

To this effect, there are some of the popular hashtags related to the major political candidates of the 2023 general elections. Hashtags such as #BATified, #Obidient, #Atikulated, #kwankwasiya, etc. This camouflaged scheme is likely to intensify as the elections draw closer. Notwithstanding the presence of these social media campaigns, the level of apathy on political issues among electorate globally and in Nigeria appears to be on the increase. One wonders, as important as the issue of electorate and politics are, not many researches have been done to ascertain the level and causes of apathy among the electorate as well as while the voters choose to vote a particular candidate over others in the just concluded general elections in Imo State. This study tried to fill this gap by discussing social media political campaigns and voting behaviour among electorate in Owerri Municipal during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the level of exposure to social media political campaigns during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri Municipal of Imo State.
2. Examine the Influence of social media political campaigns on the voting behaviour during the general elections in Owerri Municipal of Imo State.
3. Identify other factors that influenced voting behaviour during the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri Municipal.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions, therefore shall guide this study:

1. What is the level of exposure to social media political campaigns during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri Municipal of Imo State?
2. What is the Influence of social media political campaigns on the voting behaviour during the general elections in Owerri Municipal of Imo State?
3. What other factors that influenced voting behaviour during the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri Municipal?

## **Literature Review**

Social media as the most used medium to promote political campaigns (Abdillah, Darma, & Yani, 2014). Ushering in social media to old electoral politics will entice new and younger voters to greater participation Xenos & Foot (as cited in Abdillah et al. 2014). Political candidates incorporated social media tools like Facebook into their campaigns. This avenue provides them opportunity to interact directly with their supporters easily as a campaign strategy. Thereby, creating an instantly and relatively informal way for users to respond to the messages of candidates standing for elective positions to publicly unveil their support (Xenos, Macafee, & Pole, 2015). Social media portends to be the current and future media for political campaigns and reach the voters and supporters immediately. Social media has ability to establish a political party's image in the contemporary society. Today, almost all the political parties have social media platforms used in sharing information and ideas among their teaming supporters as well as to engage actively most online citizens (Abdillah, et al., 2014). Adamu and Abdullahi (2021) opine that the social media capabilities have the whims and caprices of positively influencing the old and conservative manner in which the Nigerian citizens participate and respond to political activities particularly in the areas of governance and public accountability. Ghani, Chaudhary, Minhas, Jabeen, and Hussain (2020) assert that social media is deemed the most readily overused means of communication between individuals and other social stakeholders. Its utilisations in politics have been felt immensely over the years. The Nigerian political sphere has witnessed paradigm shift due to the use of social media. This is because of its manifestation in political campaigns, political protests, political talk shows both by the politicians and the general public. Ahmad, Alvi and Ittefaq (2019) reinforce the above position when they posited that the social media have become an

important tool for political discussions and political participation. The utilisation of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. in general elections in Nigeria in the last decade to disseminate and share information and engineer voters "mobilisation on issues of interest was laudable.

### **Empirical Review**

In this study relevant scholarly works were reviewed to show the relationship between social media political campaigns and voting behaviour among electorate. According to Abdillah et al. (2014) in their study on social media as political party campaigns in Indonesia. Findings indicated that social media are effective instrument for present and future political campaigns to reach out the voters and supporters simultaneously. They are used by political parties to display their logo/icon; as well as count results. Also, result showed that political parties that social media campaigns won the legislative elections.

In relation to this, Solarin, Oyesomi, Gbolahan, and Ahmadu (2017) investigated that Twitter as a tool for the mobilisation of the #Bringbackourgirls# Campaigns among undergraduates. Result revealed that a good number of the respondents have a twitter account and them on regular basis. Majority of the respondents at 70% affirmed that social media are the main sources of information on political campaigns and as such proved to be an effective tool for sourcing information and mobilisation.

According to Omotayo and Folorunso (2020), in their study on the use of social media for political participation by youths in Oyo State, Nigeria. Findings revealed that social media was highly used by the youths for political participation. Facebook was the most commonly used, followed by Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter and Yahoo Messenger respectively. According to them, social media provide them with avenue to participate in political activities by communicating with politicians, political discussions, monitoring and reporting electoral malpractices, public consultations, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, blogging about political issues, and writing letters to public officials respectively. Most of them perceived social media usefulness, ease to use, subjective norms, and computer self-efficacy significantly influenced the use of social media for political participation.

Again, Ghani, et al. (2020) investigated social media a tool of political awareness and mobilisation: A study of Punjab, Pakistan. Findings revealed that the public is keen to verify the legitimacy of political messages dished out to them. In the face of political battleground, Facebook has been designated as a source of political knowledge and political influence whereas Twitter comes in second. Other social networking applications such as WhatsApp, YouTube, etc. are currently less well-known in this region. The study concluded that social media is significantly creating political awareness and political mobilisation.

In the same vein, Erubami (2020), examined public perception of social media contributions to political participation processes in Delta State, Nigeria. Findings

revealed that social media were perceived to have positively influenced Nigeria's democracy by improving the flow of political information and awakening citizens political consciousness as well as to have increased the spate of hate speech and stoked political unease. Similarly, Anyanwu and Orji (2020) examined social media and political participation among residents of Southeast, Nigeria. Findings showed that Southeast residents' exposure to social media has influenced their participation in political activities positively at 70%. Also, result revealed that relatives, friends, opinion leaders, social groups and political parties are all vital avenues for the dissemination of political information that could influence citizens' participation in the political process.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research was anchored on the Public Sphere theory which was credited to a German sociologist, Jurgen Habermas. According to Abubakar (2011, p.103), the theory holds that the media (old & new) are components of the various avenues where citizens freely participate, communicate and share political ideas and information in a democratic forum. He further adds that other platforms where citizens can participate are clubs, coffee and saloon joints, assemblies and so forth. The emergence of new media technology brought a paradigm shift in the character and nature of the public sphere. With the advent of new media technology, political participation and deliberation is now mediated online.

The relevance of this theory to the study is that government' laws and policies should be steered by the public sphere. The media are purveyors of the society. The media ideally communicates all government laws and policies to the people or citizens on the other hand, the media in its role as the watchdog of the society correlates parts of the society. Through the media, the plight of people is relayed to the government. The public sphere theory advocate that legitimate governments are those that listen to public sphere. Here the basis for democracy is that citizens are provided opportunity to engage in the enlightened debate on political discourse that determined how they been governed. Social media have been key for interaction and exchange of ideas between political gladiators and the citizens to come in terms with political realities that concern them. It provides platform for the citizens

### **Research Methodology**

Descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. This design assisted the researchers obtain opinion and views of Owerri residents pertaining social media political campaigns and voting behaviour during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri Municipal. The population of the study consisted of 134,169 registered voters in Owerri municipal (Vanguardngr.com, 2023). To determine the sample size for this study, Taro Yamane statistical tool was used, with the formula shown below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n = the sample size required  
 N = total population  
 e<sup>2</sup> = limit of tolerable error  
 I = unit (constant value)

The sample size is computed as follows:

$$n = \frac{134169}{1 + 134169(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{134169}{1 + 134169(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{134169}{336}$$

$$n = 399$$

Therefore, the sample size for this study is 399. For the purpose of this study, the multi-stage or cluster sampling technique was adopted. The data obtained were analysed using simple percentage and mean score.

## Results

Research Question: What is the level of exposure to social media political campaigns during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri municipal of Imo State?

**Table 1:** Responses on whether the electorate were exposed to social media political campaigns during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections

Options	Frequency	Percent
Valid Yes	378	100
No	0	0
Not sure	0	0
Total	378	100.0

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

**Table 2:** Respondents view on the extent to which the electorate were exposed to social media political campaigns on political campaigns in the 2023 general elections

Options	Frequency	Percent
Valid Can't say	18	4.8
Low	61	16.1
Moderate	62	16.4
Large extent	237	62.7
Total	378	100.0

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

Research Question Two: What is the influence of social media political campaigns on the voting behaviour during the general elections in Owerri Municipal of Imo State?

**Table 3:** Responses on the influence of social media political campaigns on the voting behaviour during the general elections in Owerri Municipal of Imo State

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
I had a candidate to vote for but it was the social media political campaigns of my candidate that reinforced my choice	21	39	230	88	1.98	Disagreed
I had a candidate to vote for but social media political campaigns made me change my mind	15	34	180	149	1.77	Disagreed
I didn't want to vote but Social media political campaigns made me change my mind	34	59	190	95	2.08	Disagreed
Social media political campaigns moved me to campaigns for the candidate I supported	47	78	163	90	2.21	Disagreed
Social media political campaigns made me vote based on ethnicity	49	55	187	87	2.17	Disagreed
Social media political campaigns made me vote based on credibility	44	78	147	109	2.15	Disagreed
I wouldn't have voted for the candidate I voted for if not for social media political campaigns that smeared the character and integrity of my former candidate	110	64	88	116	2.44	Disagreed
<b>Grand total</b>					<b>2.11</b>	<b>Disagreed</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Research Questions 3: What other factors that influenced voting behaviour during the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri Municipal?

**Table 4:** Respondents views on other factors that influences voting behaviour aside social media political campaigns during the 2023 Owerri Municipal general election

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
No better choice	67	45	123	143	2.09	Disagreed
Candidate's pedigree	135	243	0	0	3.35	Agreed
Personality of candidate	126	252	0	0	3.33	Agreed
Manifestos of candidates	131	247	0	0	3.34	Agreed
Senatorial zone/LGA of the candidates	142	236	0	0	3.37	Agreed
Political parties of the candidates	157	221	0	0	3.41	Agreed
<b>Grand Total</b>					<b>3.14</b>	<b>Agreed</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2023

### **Discussion of Findings**

The level of exposure to social media political campaigns during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections among electorate in Owerri municipal of Imo State.

Findings showed that there was a high level of exposure to social media political campaigns during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections amongst respondents at 62.7%. The respondents' have social media account with internet connectivity through which they got themselves extensively exposed to social media messages on political activities during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections. The implication is that there was high level of political awareness campaigns done by political parties and their candidates during the 2023 general elections using social media platforms like facebook, youtube, whatsapp, blog among others. Through which the electorate were fully aware of the political happening in the state. In agreement with this finding, Solarin et al. (2017) revealed that 90% of the respondents have a twitter account and they access them regularly and that social media were their main sources of information on the campaigns at 70%. According to Omotayo et al. (2020) concluded that social media was highly used by the youths for political participation. Facebook was the most used, followed by Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter and Yahoo Messenger respectively.

### **Influence of social media on the voting behaviour of electorate during the 2023 general elections in Imo state**

Findings revealed that exposure to social media political messages had little or no influence on the electorate voting behaviour during the electioneering of the 2023 general elections (Average weighted mean score = 2.11). This by implication means that majority of the respondents believed that their high level of exposure to social media have little or nothing to do in changing their predisposition about the candidate to vote for during the 2023 general elections or even change their decision not to come out to exercise their franchise on the election day. It points to the fact, that high level of exposure did not translate into them changing their mind and decision of voting for any candidate of their choice. This by implication implies that the electorate are hardly swayed by social media messages to change their pre-determined choice of candidate in every election. In tandem with this finding, Erubami (2020) revealed that social media were perceived to have positively influenced Nigeria's democracy by enhancing the flow of political information and awakening public political consciousness. Abdillah et al. (2014) indicated that social media are effective tool for reaching out to the voters and supporters immediately. Also, result revealed that political parties which using social media as part of their campaigns won the legislative elections.

### **Other Factors that Influenced voting behaviour during the 2023 General Elections among Electorate in Owerri Municipal**

Findings revealed that respondents affirmed that other factors influencing their voting behaviour are as follows: candidate's pedigree, personality of candidate, manifestos of candidates, senatorial district of the candidates, political parties of the candidates. Even there are credible candidates standing for elective positions (Average weighted mean



score = 3.14). However, it was found that both senatorial zone of a candidate and political parties are two major factors that are responsible for their voting behaviour notwithstanding the level political campaigns that are launched on social media. This implies that candidates are supported along party lines and the senatorial zones they come from. This is perhaps as a result of the zoning system which has characterized Nigerian politics right from time immemorial. In line with this finding, the study of Anyanwu and Orji (2020) concluded that relatives, friends, opinion leaders, social groups and political parties are other factors that influenced citizens' participation in the political process as a powerful channel of information on political activities.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion of this study is that social media political campaigns had little or no influence on the voting behaviour of electorate during the 2023 general elections in Imo State. This is because the electorate are pre-determined to vote a given based on the fact that candidate is from his or her own locality. Also, party loyalty has persistently played significant on electorate voting behaviour irrespectively of their high level of exposure to social media political campaigns. These is a clear pointer, that Nigerians are yet to embrace full democratic tenets as sentiment, clanship, ethnicity, selfish interest among others remained a determinant factor in determining who rule and govern over them. Although, citizens are gradually yawning for electing credible leadership, but this clamour will take a long time to come through constant sensitisation and enlightenment awareness campaigns. Given these findings, the study concludes that electorate decision on who to vote is not always a function of the media political campaigns they are exposed to.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Political stakeholders and politicians should not wait until electioneering period before engaging on political awareness campaigns using social media platforms and other communication channels commonly used by the people to reach out to them.
2. There is need for political stakeholders to incorporate clergies, traditional rulers and other opinion leaders whom they people mostly believed in changing this wrong voting attitude.
3. Civil society organisations should endeavour to organised trainings, town-hall meetings, campaigns, grassroots advocacy, community mobilisation, and sensitisation workshops on regular basis in order to change the voting narrative in Nigeria as they people no longer have trust again on these politicians as such do not take information emanating from them into action.

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