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## IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE 2015 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Before now, political mobilization in Nigeria was done through traditional mass media channels. But with the advent of social media, the landscape changed. The study examined the influence of social media on electorates' choice of political party candidates; the extent to which social media usage promotes the popularity of a presidential candidate, and the degree to which it influences the change in their behavior. Survey research design was adopted for the study in which online platforms were used to elicit information from eligible voters in Nigeria. While purposive random sampling was used to obtain a sample size of 180, based on the number of returned questionnaire online. Structured questionnaire on a 4-point scale was used to obtain information from the population of study. Descriptive statistics was used to answer the research questions; while inferential statistics was used to test the hypotheses. Findings showed that there is a positive significant correlation between social media and the manner it influences electorates' choice of a political party's candidate. A positive significant correlation also exist between social media and change in behavior of electorates. The study observed that social media platforms served as important channels for disseminating political information, mobilizing supporters; and stimulating political discussion among citizens. The study also notes that these platforms allowed political messages to circulate rapidly; especially among young voters. The study recommends inter-alia, that as a behavioural-change platform, social media should be used by individuals to galvanize the youth for political discourse, sensitization, enlightenment and political education of electorates.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, Presidential Election, Platform, Campaign, Electorate.

### Introduction

Before the advent of social media, the mass media have been used as veritable tools for information dissemination during elections. They have been used to propagate ideas. The information projected by the different media of mass communication alongside other societal factors influenced voter's choice(s) during electioneering. Fundamentally, the media exists as an organ of information sourcing, dissemination, social enlightenment and mobilization. These functions set the media apart as an important factor in the relationship between the government and the governed, thereby making them indispensable for good governance, deepening of democracy, societal growth and development generally (Olujide, Adeyemi & Gbadeyan, 2010). However, the evolution of social media in the 21st century changed the nomenclature in the interaction, communication and sharing of

information amongst people throughout the world (Titus & Ita 2019:11). This interaction and the manner in which information is presented, depends on the varied perspectives and building of shared meaning among communities, as people share their stories and experiences (Pinheiro, Olatunji, and Owolabi, 2020).

The print and electronic media in Nigeria have always been strong a tool of sensitization and mobilization of people towards democracy; even in the dark days of brutal military dictatorship (Ajayi, 2007). However, their reach was limited by such factors as government intimidation and harassments, logistics, limited resources and their elitist ownership and control (Titus, 2025:60). But with the widening of communication media space through improved technology, information dissemination and sensitization, people now have a widespread, immediacy and more diligent

follow up of events. This is as a result of their easy accessibility and availability, irrespective of social status. Even with the cheapest mobile phones, one can still access some social media platforms at a reasonable cost; for information, education and entertainment.

Thus, the use of social media in politics has continued to grow in many parts of Africa including Nigeria since the 21st century. For instance, 2011 general election marked a significant milestone in the use of social media for political communication in Nigeria. More so, 2015 witnessed a massive use of social networking sites like Facebook, X, You-tube, WhatsApp, Blogs etc; in the general election in Nigeria. Due to their participatory, interactive, and cost-effective nature, social media have become veritable and significant instruments for political campaign engagement and mobilization. Thus, the place of social media in rallying political support is no longer in doubt (Titus, Mbon and Edem, 2024:66).

The citizen's exposure to political mobilization in Nigeria has developed through successive waves of social media-driven campaigns that increasingly position citizens, especially young people as both audiences and active carriers of political messages. One of the earliest widely circulated civic mobilization narratives on social media was the "One Man One Vote" slogan which gained prominence during the administration of Goodluck Jonathan; particularly around the 2011 and 2015 general elections. The slogan was widely shared on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X, BBM, You-tube etc. This targeted young voters with messages emphasizing the power of the individual vote. There are however some arguable positions that application of social media has no influence on electorates' decision on who to vote for, neither does it make impact on the electioneering processes. It is on this premise that the study investigated the influence of social media on the behavioural changes of the electorates towards 2015 general election.

### **Statement of Problem**

Before the rise of digital technologies, political communication and mobilization was largely done by

the traditional mass media, like newspapers, radio and television. These platforms served as the main channels through which political actors disseminated information, shape public opinion and mobilize for votes (Adedayo & Bello, 2019). The advent of social media has significantly transformed the landscape of political participation in Nigeria. Platforms such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram, You-tube and Tik-Tok enabled citizens to access, share and respond to political information in real time.

Despite the growing use of social media as a tool for political mobilization in Nigeria; general citizen participation in actual voting on the day of the election remained low, especially among youths. While political campaigns on social media generated significant discussions, shares, and online interaction; many citizens who were engaged online did not translate this engagement into voting or other forms of active participation (Ibe, 2024; Boma & Ebiere, 2023). President Jonathan actively engaged millions of Nigerian youths through the active use of the social media such as Facebook. The platform bridged the communication gap between the political leadership and the ordinary Nigerians. Jonathan's closest rival, Muhammadu Buhari was portrayed in the media as a rigid personality, an old-fashioned ex-military dictator and religious fundamentalist who cannot lead a modern Nigeria. It was not surprising that Jonathan emerged as the clear winner of the presidential election in 2011.

### **Research Questions**

- i. Did the social media influence electorates' choice of political party candidates during 2015 general election in Nigeria?
- ii. Was the popularity of presidential candidates during the 2015 presidential election influenced by their social media usage?
- iii. Did the social media influence behavioural change of electorates during 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?
- iv. How did a political campaign message from social/traditional media influence Nigerian electorates' choice of votes?

### **Objectives of the Study**

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Examine the influence of social media on electorates' choice of political party candidates
- ii. Analyze the extent to which social media usage promotes the popularity of a presidential candidate
- iii. Ascertain the extent to which social media influence the change in behavior of electorates.
- iv. Establish the validity or otherwise of political campaign messages from social/traditional media on Nigerian electorates' choice of votes? Significantly, the paper stands to educate both the electorates and political parties on the use of social media effectively and efficiently.

## Conceptual Framework

### Social Media

Social media is a collection of online communication channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. According to Aduloju (2016), Social media represent an internet-based platform, which shares most, if not all of the following characteristics: Participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness. It is one of the driving forces of globalization and has validated the statement that the world is a global village. The main characteristics of social media, as highlighted above, makes these platforms useful not only to the business world (owing to its tendencies of making millionaires and billionaires) but also to politics, religion, academia and all other walks of life.

The notion of participation and openness gives an opportunity to every individual regardless of age, gender, race, religious background and social status. If there is anything human-beings desire most, it is the opportunity to belong, which the notion of participation and openness affords. With regard to other characteristics in the definition above, the notion of conversation, community and connectedness speaks to the human need for identity. People always want to communicate, to listen and to be heard. Social media platforms give people this sense of identity (Pinheiro, Olatunji, and Owolabi, 2020). Nwozor et al (2022) assert that, the use of social media for electioneering is relatively new in Nigeria. While Nigeria connected to the web in 1996, it was later in 1998 that full accessibility to the internet was achieved (Adomi,

2005). However, real expansion in access to the internet in Nigeria started from 2001, when the country granted the Global System for Mobile communications (GSM) licenses to designated telecommunication companies. In other words, access to the internet began to evolve and expand from 2001 following the introduction of the GSM. It is estimated that over 100 million Nigerians are currently connected to the internet, with internet penetration standing at 50 percent (Russon, 2020).

According to statistics, as at January 2021, Nigeria had 33 million active social media users, with WhatsApp being the most popular, preferred by 93 percent of internet users aged 16 to 64 years. Facebook, You-tube and Instagram followed in that order with 86.2 percent, 81.6 percent and 73.1 percent respectively (Sasu, 2022; Kamer, 2022). A study by Omotayo & Folorunso (2020) revealed that youths leveraged social media in Nigeria's recent elections, especially Facebook, to participate in the political processes. The active involvement of youths in the 2019 politics through social media platforms, especially Facebook was described as a paradigm-changing development in political participation (Mustapha & Omar, 2020). In driving political engagement on Facebook, sometimes hash tag tools are used for campaigning and mobilizing participation for elections. According to Ofori-Parku and Moscato (2018), "the hashtag (#) symbol is often used to mark conversations on social media and serves as an indexing system, making it easier to store, search for, and collect information".

### 2015 Presidential Elections and Electioneering Campaign

The 2015 general elections in Nigeria was the 5th quadrennial election to be held since the end of military rule in 1999. Nigeria operates a multi-party presidential system. Among the over forty registered political parties in Nigeria during the 2015 general elections, two major political parties, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) dominated Nigerian political discourses online. Expanding outside of (purely) political websites, social media tools, such as Facebook, X, SMS, among others, were incorporated into the campaign tool repertoire. In fact, Muhammadu Buhari's latecomer to

the digital political discursive practices also created both personal X and Facebook accounts to promote his presidential ambition. He used the platforms to mobilize support and woo influential and educated voters during the electioneering campaigns (Opeibi 2019).

The 2015 general election happened when Nigeria was caught up in the dilemma of opportunity and challenge, more than at any other point since the country's first decade of independence. Hate speech and soapbox rhetoric were heating up the social and political system. Hopes were high that the most populous black nation in the world would once again conduct an election that would mean development, unity and peace – not only for Nigeria but for Africa at large. This aspiration was noticeable in visits by the United States' Secretary of State and other world leaders to the two main contenders for the apex office in Nigeria viz: Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari, to obtain their views on the conduct of violence-free elections. Social media platforms afford individual or groups the opportunity to access and exchange information, share comments, and engage in conversations (Aduloju, 2016).

### **Social Media and Electioneering Campaigns**

Social media are both accessible and inexpensive, but that does not preclude the purchase of a smart phone by users; in the case of electioneering campaign, the candidate that will contest in an election and the electorates. This explains why Dhuraj (2013) opines that social media refer to the many relatively inexpensive and widely accessible electronic tools that enable any one to publish and access information, collaborate on a common effort, or build relationships. These platforms provide 24hours access to anyone who owns an account with any of the many social networking sites. The use of social media to scout for votes is much more inexpensive, compared with using newspapers or the electronic media of television or radio. Social media could also be accessed at anytime and anywhere using all kinds of hand-held devices at the disposal of users. It is also very easy for the candidate to respond to queries from political followers as quickly as possible using social media than any other medium. Social media are therefore much more useful to politicians for electioneering

campaign purposes in terms of reach, cost, accessibility, convenience, and speed. However, there is a large body of research-based evidence that social media are particularly suited for reaching young people, especially in political communication and other categories of people in a given national population (Essential Media Poll 2012; Chen and Vromen, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Agenda Setting Theory**

The Agenda-Setting Theory is one of the most influential theories in the field of mass communication and media studies. It explains how the media influences public perception of what issues are important. Developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their seminal 1972 study titled "*The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*", the theory emerged from research conducted during the 1968 U.S. Presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Their findings revealed that the issues the media emphasized most were the same issues that the public regarded as most important. This suggested that while the media may not tell people what to think, it is remarkably successful in telling people what to think about.

The theory rests on several key assumptions:

1. The media does not reflect reality, but filters and shapes it. News selection and framing determine which issues are visible to the public.
2. Media attention determines public attention. The more coverage an issue receives, the more the public perceives it as important.
3. The public's perception of what matters is influenced by the frequency and prominence of media reports.
4. People rely on the media for cues about reality, especially when they lack direct experience with an issue. Scholars later expanded the theory into two levels:

#### **(a) First-Level Agenda-Setting**

Focuses on the salience of issues: the idea that media coverage determines *which* topics is seen as important.

**Example:** If Nigerian newspapers repeatedly emphasize "insecurity" or "fuel subsidy removal," the

public begins to view those as the nation's most pressing issues.

### (b) **Second- Level Agenda-Setting (Attribute Agenda Setting)**

Introduced by McCombs (1997), this level explores how issues and people are presented — i.e., the attributes or frames used.

**Example:** Media may not only highlight “corruption” as an issue but may frame it in terms of “government inefficiency” or “political greed,” shaping *how* people think about it.

### **Criticisms of the Theory**

Despite its strength, several criticisms exist:

- i. It overestimates media influence, ignoring individual differences and interpersonal communication.
- ii. In today's digital and social media environment, audiences can set their own agendas through content selection and sharing.
- iii. It does not fully account for agenda-building, where politicians and elites influence media agendas.
- iv. The theory assumes a passive audience, which modern participatory media environments challenge.

### **Relevance and Application in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, Agenda-Setting Theory is particularly relevant in understanding how traditional and new media influence national discourse:

- i. During elections, media framing of candidates often affects voter priorities (e.g., corruption, security, economy).
- ii. Issues like Boko-Haram insurgency, fuel subsidy, or governance reforms often dominate headlines, shaping public and political conversations.
- iii. Media ownership and control often by political elites also influence *which* issues make it to the public agenda, aligning with elite theory and the idea of media capture.

The reason for adopting this theory is that agenda setting explicates the role or functions of the media in ascertaining public agenda before, during, and after elections. It further traces the influence of the media in molding and shaping the notion of the public towards

some topical issues, of which election is paramount. In fact, the primary thrust of the agenda-setting theory is that the mass media set the docket on the burning topic in the society for public discussion. Consequently, social media can be used to influence electorates to vote for a particular candidate and as such, could also be deployed by the candidate to promote manifesto. For example, Dare (2011:44), found that former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan launched his Facebook fan page to reach out to Nigerians with a view to getting feedback on electoral reform and other national issues. His study also revealed that in the 2011 elections, many politicians in Nigeria used the social media platform (Facebook, X) to trumpet their political agenda in order to get electorate's support and votes. Similarly, studies on social media and politics remarked that Obama's usage of social media in the 2008 elections frequently refers to the most excellent way an applicant can efficiently contact the group of the electorate, notably the young (Gutman and Dalton, 2009; Nagourney, 2008). Thus, social media utilization shaped, influenced and set agenda for people in Nigeria.

### **Empirical Review**

Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) focused on Social Media as a Political Platform in Nigeria: A Focus on Electorates in South-Eastern Nigeria. The study was anchored on the theoretical frameworks of technological determinism and social judgment theory which suggests that exposure to Political campaigns encourages people to “assimilate” or equate their feelings about related target attitudes. Using electorates in the South-East of Nigeria, the study explored the extent of youth involvement with the social media for electioneering process. The data generated were analyzed using frequency distribution and simple percentage. The findings indicated that the political campaigns through the new media had significant effect on the electorates' decision-making and participation in Nigerian elections. The study recommended the embracing of social media for successive political campaigns that grants the electorates the interactive opportunity with the political candidates.

Onwe (2016) examined the impact of social media in engendering political engagement between the citizens

and the political actors during the 2015 presidential election. The study was premised on the social shaping of technology theoretical construct. The survey method was employed and the questionnaire was administered to respondents drawn from three selected tertiary institutions from Ebonyi, Cross River and Lagos State. Findings showed that the participants in the study were not only aware but were actively involved in the 2015 electioneering campaigns through the social media. The consequence of the findings is the fact that social media has enriched our political culture through the introduction of a form of revolution in political engagement. The work recommended that political actors should embrace the social media regime as an eternal phenomenon and find ways of making it part of their campaigns and governance, while regulatory authorities should improve on the operational, legal and technical aspects of social media for it to serve the desired purpose.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study utilized the survey method using a questionnaire to solicit responses from eligible Nigerian voters who have Facebook and/or X accounts

on their voting behaviour. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to Nigerians between the voting age of 18years to 35years that have Facebook or X accounts. The copies of the questionnaires were distributed in and around cybercafés located in the five State-owned universities in the South-East. The sample size for this research is 180 respondents, who were randomly selected based on the return of online questionnaire used by the researcher. The questionnaire was a 4-point scale document of strongly agreed- 4point; Agree- 3point; Disagree -2point and Strongly Disagreed -1point. Each subject in the questionnaire had 5-items which correspond to the objectives of the study. A total of 15 items were contained in the questionnaire. Guttman scale of coefficient was adopted to establish the reliability of the instrument used. This is calculated as;  $1 - \frac{3}{20} = 1 - 0.15 = 0.85$  Therefore, the reliability test shows that the Pilot test for the instrument was reliable, given the 85% consistency in the test.

### Research Question One:

How did social media influence electorates' choice of political party candidates?

**Table 1: Mean Response of the Influence of Social Media on Electorates Choice of Political Party Candidates**

Social Media and Electorates Choice of Political Party Candidates	Mean	Std, Dev.	Decision
Social media successfully influenced electorate to vote a particular candidate during the 2015 presidential elections	3.58	0.53	SA
Social media is one of the strongest media that had an impact in the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria compared to the Traditional media (Television, Radio, and Newspaper).	3.41	0.69	A
political messages on social media influence your choice of candidate at the polls	3.27	0.88	A
The 2015 presidential candidates posted campaign messages on social media to influence electorates to vote for them	3.38	0.58	A
Candidates and supporters posted credible and non- credible information against opponents in the 2015 presidential campaign	3.35	0.71	A
<b>Cumulative Mean</b>	<b>3.39</b>		

Research objective one sought to determine the influence of social media on electorates' choice of a political party candidate. From the response, it can be said that respondents strongly agreed that Social media successfully influenced electorate to vote a particular candidate during the 2015 presidential elections. They further agreed that Social media is one of the strongest media that had an impact in the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria compared to Television, Radio, and Newspaper. Respondents also agreed that political messages on social media influenced their choice of

candidate at the polls. Consequently, they agreed that messages posted by presidential candidates on their social media page influenced electorates to vote for them. The cumulative mean of 3.39 clearly indicates agreement among respondents that social media influences electorates' choice of a political party candidate.

#### **Research Question Two:**

To what extent does social media usage promote the popularity of presidential candidates?

**Table 2: Mean Response on the Extent to which Social Media Promotes Candidate' Popularity**

<b>Social Media and Promotion of Candidate Popularity</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Decision</b>
Presidential candidates posted messages on social media on every political update in the 2015 elections	3.53	0.56	
The use of social media greatly influenced the popularity of candidates in the 2015 presidential election	3.5	0.61	
social media usage influence youths' voting preferences for a particular presidential candidate in 2015 presidential election	3.35	0.65	
my choice of one of the two topmost presidential candidates during the 2015 presidential election was influenced by their popularity on social media	3.66	0,50	
the two topmost presidential aspirants during 2015 elections were popular because they utilized social media in their political campaign	3.53	0.65	
<b>Cumulative Mean</b>	<b>3.51</b>		

Objective two sought to determine the extent to which social media usage promotes popularity of a candidate. The responses presented above show that posting by candidate on their wall of any political update strongly promotes their popularity. It was also strongly agreed among respondents that social media promoted candidates' popularity in the 2015 presidential elections. There is also agreement among respondents that social media usage influences youths' voting preferences for a particular presidential candidate in 2015 presidential election. Consequently, it was strongly agreed among respondents that the popularity of two of the topmost candidates in the election was due principally to social media. On the whole, the

cumulative mean of 3.51 indicates very strong agreement among respondents that social media usage promotes popularity of presidential candidates.

#### **Test of Hypothesis One**

**H<sub>01</sub>:** Social media has no significant influence on electorates' choice of political party candidates

The samples correlation shows that there is a very high positive significant correlation between social media and the manner it influences electorates choice of a political party candidate. Furthermore, the paired samples test between social media and electorates' choice of a candidate shows the paired are statistically

significant. On the basis of this, the null hypothesis is rejected.

### Test of Hypothesis Two

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Social media usage does not significantly promote popularity of presidential candidates.

The samples paired correlation shows a positive and significant correlation between social media and popularity of a presidential candidate. Consequently, the paired samples test indicates a statistically significant relationship between the pair. This implies that the null hypothesis is rejected

### Discussion of Findings

The study specifically focused on the influence of social media on electorates' choice of a party candidate, the extent to which social media promotes a candidate popularity and the extent to which electorates behavior are shaped by social media. From the findings of this study, it has been established that social media has become very successful as tool for electioneering campaign and has significantly influence electorates' choice of a political party candidate. Furthermore, candidate's popularity can be promoted or discredited through the use of social media. Consequently, change in behaviour of electorates can be influenced by the use of social media. Comparing the findings of this study with previous studies, it can be emphatically stressed that social media has changed the political landscape of electioneering campaign in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

The wave that social media has made in electioneering campaign across the country has proven that this medium of communication is gradually taking over from traditional media of communication. What could invariably account for the widespread use of this

medium of communication is non-restriction of its usage by all manner of people irrespective of age, sex and creed. It is equally important to mention that the youth are most vulnerable in the use of social media. In view of its non-restrictive nature, there seem to be abuse of the medium by political parties and their supporters to rain insults on opponents so as to discredit them. From whatever angle one tends to look at it, the truth is that, social media has come to stay as a tool of electioneering campaign and has significantly influenced electorates' choice of a party's candidate. It can promote or discredit a candidate's popularity and significantly influence behavioural change in electorates.

### Recommendations

From the findings of the study, the following are recommended;

- i. Each political party should set up educational wing of their campaign team to educate their followers and supporters on positive use of social media in promoting the party agenda and not to use it as a medium to insult or discredit opponents.
- ii. There should be a law by the supervisory agency on communication to regulate the activities of users of social media handles. This law should be in collaboration with social media handle providers. This is to ensure decency in the language used on social media against a political opponent.
- iii. As a behavioural change platform, social media should be used by well-meaning individuals to galvanize the youth for political discourse, conscientisation and education. In turn, these phenomena can facilitate the effective transformation of electoral processes in Nigeria.

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