



ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE 2023 GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN IN TARABA STATE.

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Abstract

The heated argument and divisions on religious and ethnic lines during the 2023 gubernatorial campaign on social media in Taraba State, gave rise to this study. The study assessed social media and political participation in the 2023 gubernatorial campaigns in Taraba State. The research was guided by Uses and Gratification Theory. This theory emphasises on the reason(s) people have for engaging one medium over another as well as the gratifications they aim to derive. The research employed descriptive survey which used questionnaire as instrument for data collection. Three hundred social media users in Taraba State were sampled. Well-structured questionnaire was issued of which 251 were returned and validated. Data were analyzed using frequencies and tables. The study found out that Social Media was used during the 2023 gubernatorial campaigns in Taraba State to a very large extent. Two hundred and seven respondents out of the 271 with 76% made the affirmation. It was also revealed that Social Media enhanced political participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaigns Taraba State, attracting voters to a candidate of their choice and the major challenge(s) was hate speech on opposition candidate(s). The study recommended that Taraba State politicians should use social media for campaign in honest way as users keep increasing, Taraba electorate should not depend on social media propaganda by politicians, rather they try find out about those politicians policies and competency; and government and social media app developers should jail perpetrators of hate speeches on social media.

Keywords: Assessment, social media, political participation, gubernatorial, campaigns

Introduction

Social media refers to the means of interaction among people in which they have opportunity to create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual networks and communities. It facilitates the creation and sharing of contents, ideas, interest and other forms of expressions through virtual communities and networks.

According to Funmilola and Matthew (2020), social media have penetrated all levels of the information in society and have catalysed the process of democratisation and political development. Social media, a modern trend in information and knowledge dissemination, has taken communication beyond the limitations of the traditional way of communicating and socialising, making it an essential part of people's lives; affecting their social, political and economic activities (Okoro et al., 2019).

Hence, Social media, as social instruments of communication, promote participation, connectedness, opportunity to disseminate information across geographical boundaries and the fostering of relationships and interactions among people. Commonly used social media are Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Telegram. Adibe et al. (2012), assert that social media support democratisation of knowledge and information thereby making the people both information producers and consumers.

Political participation involves the broad range of activities through which people develop and express their opinions on the democratic world and how it is governed, and try to take part in, and shape the decisions that affect their lives (Okoye et al., 2022). Political participation means “citizens’ involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives” (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013).

It is the various mechanisms through which citizens express their political views and/or exercise their rights and influences on the political processes (Chatora, 2012). Thus, it is a civic activity and a critical part of any democracy; an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue. Political participation could also be explained as a set of activities that citizens perform to influence government’s structured policies or officials. Political participation, therefore, includes such activities as political discourse, political campaigns, voter registration, voting, writing and signing of petitions, civil protests, public consultations, donating money to political party among others.

In Taraba State lately, scholars have been evaluating how social media aid developmental campaigns. Social media impact has been accessed regarding covid-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State. It was revealed that the level of impact social media has on the acceptance of the covid-19 vaccine in Taraba State was positive, facilitating the acceptance and reception of the vaccine. Gambo (2021).

Also, Politicians in Taraba State (gubernatorial candidates of various political parties) who canvassed for elections in 2023 employed social media for their campaigns due to their inability to reach some parts of the state. Also, many citizens who were not in any social media platforms back then, were already using the social media in 2023 which made the campaigns to have wider coverage. It is against this background that this study is set to assess how social media enhanced political participation in Taraba state.

Statement of the Problems

Social media is seen as platforms of social participation. People easily gain access to social media and they are privileged to post issues relating to politics as well as declaring their political status. Mayfield (2010), attributed the Social media capacity of boosting participation to its connectedness and textual/audio-visual characteristic appeal. It is apt to note that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, the GSM-SMS/calls, WhatsApp among others have made political participation much easier, faster and even more cost effective than ever before.

However, there are many cases of political character assassination, fake political news, discrimination on political and religious grounds, intimidation, privacy invasion and propaganda. These issues have created tension in Taraba State during last year’s gubernatorial election and have discouraged many social media users from participating in politics, they think that social media politics is not censored. According to Dunu (2018), recent anecdotal evidence points to other emerging developments in ways the social media may have been used recently in Nigerian political election process especially the Nigerian Gubernatorial elections that have different dates from other general elections.

Specifically, in Taraba State Gubernatorial campaign 2023, there was a letter suspected to have been released by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Taraba State Chapter, urging all Christians to

unanimously vote for the People's Democratic Party's candidate Dr AgbuKefas in order not to lose their mother land to a different religion. The letter generated hit arguments among the two major faiths in the State. It was also learned on the social media that some Muslims jointly contributed money and went ahead to campaign for the New Nigerian People's Party (NNPP) candidate Prof. Muhammed Sani Yahaya against the APC, PDP and SDP candidates. All these campaigns were going on in social media which caused serious divisions among the two faiths in the State. It is against these problems that this study seeks to investigate the use of Social Media for Political Participation in Taraba State with particular reference to the 2023 Gubernatorial campaign.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the research questions thus:

- i. What is the extent of social media usage for political participation during the 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State?
- ii. How did social media enhance political participation in the 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State?
- iii. What were the challenges of social media usage for political participation during the 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State?

Literature Review

Social Media

Social media, as a concept, has been explained in various ways by different social media scholars. According to Carr & Hayes (2015), social media is defined as internet-based channels of mass-personal communication that allow users to opportunistically interact with and selectively present themselves to broad and narrow audiences, deriving value primarily from user generated content.

Different social media platforms are popular in different places. Although Facebook has conquered the world as the top social networking portal, there are still countries where other platforms have maintained their popularity. Depending on the political culture and the degree of readiness of the government to interact with their citizens, social media have potentially created new possibilities for political participation. Societies where the majority of people have "free" access to the internet, social media can serve as a technical base for digital political debate and can facilitate opinion shaping processes.

Political Participation

Rahmawati (2014) simply put political participation deals with citizen involvement in issues of public concern that would eventually lead to producing a leader for the nation.

According to Verba et al, cited in Rahmawati (2014), political participation refers to "behavior that could affect government action – either directly by influencing the public policies that are implemented or indirectly by influencing the elections of political actors creating those policies".

More so, in a changing world, it is difficult to advance democratic change and development with old tools only. Today, leaders need to understand the role of changing communication technology for politics and society. This is the use of the new media (social media) in the field of governance and political development to increase citizens' participation in the political process. In recent times, social media have evolved new forms of democracy, government, and have become a clear and more effective voice of many.

It has become a potent tool for disseminating information and a more accessible tool for information gathering (Jumbo et al., 2023).

Okoro and Nwafor (2013) note that Nigerian politicians and organisations actively utilized social media to participate in politics. Organizations like Enough is Enough Nigeria, ReclaimNaija, WangoNet, and IamLagos established platforms enabling citizens to report election-related incidences with pictures, videos, text messages and voicemail. At the same time, traditional media houses such as Channels Television and *Punch* newspaper used the new media to disseminate information and gather feedback from viewers.

Review of Empirical Studies

Oyenuga. (2015), conducted a study titled ‘Social Media Participation and Pollution of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria.’ The paper examined the influence of social media on the 2015 General Election through the opinion polls and eventually, the broadcasting of the results, before the final release by INEC. The study used quantitative research that adopted secondary data analysis. It is a comparative analysis of the social media opinion polls results released via social media before the final release of results, and the final result from INEC using product moment multiple correlations. The findings of this study revealed that social media results were sourced from wards and participating youth corps members in the electoral procedures. The release of the results via social media increased political participation as most people had firsthand results before the final release. The results were not just transmitted from social media blogs, but were also re-circulated via social networking sites and applications. However, this paper used opinion polls and results released. This research, on the other hand focused on Tarabans’ use of social media to participate in 2023 gubernatorial campaign, while Oyenuga, in his study, focused on the general use of social media during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

Evaluation of Social Media and Students Participation in Politics; is a study carried out in (2019) by Isaac and Azubuike. The study examined, amongst others, the extent of usage of social media by the undergraduate students of UNN in politics. The survey research design was adopted for the study and a total of 375 respondents served as the sample size of the study. Among other findings, the research discovered that the respondents are highly exposed to Social Media and that they use social media to a high extent to participate in politics. Gaps exist in focus, geographical location and population in the sense that the study at hand tries to assess how social media aided 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State.

Social Media as Tools for Political Views Expressed in the Visuals Shared among Social Media Users; this study was conducted in (2019) by Ugwuanyi et al. The prevalence of this scenario among Nigerian social media users is the motivation for, and the problem of this study. Consequently, this study examined the nature of political pictures and illustrations common on social media and examines the implications of such visual representations on political mobilisation and participation. The study uncovers as the participants reported that they adopt different approaches to express their political views on social media in visuals. Among the approaches is the choice of social media platform. Therefore, the Facebook was reported as the most preferred social media for expressing political views in visuals.

However, it could be understood the three above study and the study at hand are related looking at almost the same thing. But the gaps still exist in that as the above study concentrated more on the appropriate social media tool participants utilized to share their views, which they identified Facebook. The study at hand concentrates on how social media aided gubernatorial campaign of 2023 in Taraba State.

Social Media Influence on Political Participation Among Students in Delta State, Abraka. This study was conducted by Francis (2018) The research was carried out using survey design method with population size of 300 drawn from the Departments of Political Science and Mass Communication, and the sample size of 163 was selected. The same administered questionnaire was returned by the respondents.

The study affirmed that social media influence political participation but do not really have strong relationship with political participation. From the findings above, the study has students as its case study, while the study at hand considers social media users in Taraba State as related to the 2023 gubernatorial campaign.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Uses and Gratification Theory. The Uses and Gratification Theory, framed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s. The uses (exposure to a particular medium) and, gratification (benefits or gains) are determined by the needs of members of the audience. Therefore, according to Anaeto et al. (2008), Uses and Gratification is concerned with what people do with media instead of what media do to people. The practical use of the media is what the Uses and Gratification Theory explains (Agbim et al., 2023). This theory emphasizes on the reason(s) people have for engaging one medium over another as well as the gratifications they aim to derive. Thus social media users, as the audience, preferred participating through it because of the benefits they gain.

Methodology

This study adopted descriptive survey design. The population of this study is the social media users of Taraba State. It is actually difficult to find out the exact number of social media users in Taraba State. The researcher randomly picked 300 social media users in Taraba State based on the recommendations of Wimmer & Dominick (2014) regarding sampling a numerically undefined population. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2014), sampling from populations that cannot be numerically defined is a very problematic endeavour; hence, there arises several formulas for doing such. For multivariate studies, however, they suggest that a sample size of “50 = very poor; 100 = poor; 200 = fair; 300 = good; 500 = very good; 1,000 = excellent”. The 300 users were randomly sent questionnaire online to fill and submit same. It is on this basis that this study arrives at the sampling size which is adjudged ‘good’ based on the categories above. The findings may not necessarily be generalized due to gap in the population and sample size, but it provides a clue and vital information about the role of social media in the 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State. The responses gathered from the respondents through the questionnaire are analysed in tabular illustrations using simple percentage method. Total of three hundred (300) questionnaire were administered to respondents of which only two hundred and seventy-one (271) were returned and used for the analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Respondent’s Personal Data

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
	n = 271	(100%)
Gender		
Male	187	69
Female	84	31

Age Bracket		
18 – 20 years	11	4
20 – 25 years	16	6
26 – 30 years	28	10
31 – 35 years	152	56
Above 36 years	64	24
Marital status		
Single	113	42
Married	133	43
Separated	16	6
Widowed	9	3
Educational Level		
WAEC	25	9
B.Sc	212	78
M.Sc	21	8
MBA	13	5

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The above table shows that out of the two hundred and seventy-one (271) respondents, 187(69%) are males. Eighty-four (84) with 31% are females. This implies that majority of the respondents are males. It is clear that those within the age bracket of 31-35 form the majority of the respondents. In the marital status, the table implies that majority of the respondents are married. Also, the table implies as regard to the educational qualification that most respondents hold B.Sc.

Table 2: The extent to which respondents used social media during 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
	n=271	100%
To some large extend.	207	76
Moderate extend	40	15
Low extend	18	7
Very low extend	6	2

Sources: Field Survey, 2024.

The table above shows the extent at which respondents used social media during the 2023 gubernatorial campaigns in Taraba State. Majority (76%) used social media (15%) used social media to a moderate extend. (7%) used of the social media then was low, while (2%) used of social media was very low. This implies that the respondents made used of social media during the 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State.

Table 3: How Social Media enhanced Political Participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
	n=271	100%
By attracting voters to a candidate.	144	53
By aiding the campaign to go wider	93	34
By generating more comment on candidate	21	8
By voting online	13	5

Sources: Field Survey, 2024.

The table above shows how Social Media enhanced Political Participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaigns in Taraba State. Majority (53%) revealed that is by attracting voters to a candidate. (34%) said is by aiding the campaigns to reach all social media users in the State.(8%) said is by generating more comments for a candidate; (5%) revealed that is by voting online. This implies that Social Media enhanced Political Participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State by attracting voters to a candidate.

Table 4: The challenges faced with the usage of Social Media in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
	n=271	100%
Hate speeches on opposition candidate(s).	141	52
Poor networks	97	36
Fake news about the candidate(s).	24	9
Difficult for democratic values.	9	3

Sources: Field Survey, 2024.

The table above shows the challenges faced with the usage of Social Media in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State. Majority (52%) said the challenge(s) was hate speech on opposition candidate(s). (36%) said it was poor network. (9%) said it was fake news about candidate(s); (3%) indicated difficulty to maintain democratic values as the challenge. This by implication means that the challenge(s) faced with the usage of Social Media in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaigns of Taraba State was mostly hate speech on opposition candidate(s).

Table 5: How the challenges faced by participating in politics through Social Media in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State could be curtailed.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
	n=271	100%
By avoiding hate speeches.	141	52
By improving on the networks	97	36
Avoid posting of fake political news.	24	9
By promoting democratic values.	9	3

Sources: Field Survey, 2024.

The table above shows how the challenges faced by using social media in the 2023 gubernatorial Campaigns in Taraba State could be curtailed. It was discovered that the challenges faced by using social media in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaigns in Taraba State could be curtailed by avoiding hate speech over candidates of opposition parties, improving on the networks, avoiding posting of fake political news and promoting democratic values.

Discussion of the Findings

The study finds out the extent of social media usage during the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State. It was discovered that social media was used during the 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State to a very large extent. 207 respondents out of the 271 which are the highest with 76% confirmed this. Also, 40 respondents with 15% said social media was used to a moderate extent.

These findings corroborate the findings of Azubuike (2019) on " which found out that the students are highly exposed to social media, and they use social media to a great extent to participate in politics. This is to say that social media provide a forum for students to participate in politics. Just like Mckeague (2011) revealed in Eke-Okpala et al., (2014), students use Facebook and other channels to develop their identities, beliefs, and stance on various issues such as politics, economy etc.

Also, the findings are relevant with the Uses and Gratification Theory as this research looks into why and how people use social media to participate in politics. Social media users, as the audience, are active with regards to their needs, they select the social media platform that appeals to them and they selectively consume the political contents that meet their needs, which serve as their gratification.

Also, the study ascertains how social media enhanced political participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State .It was established that social media has enhanced political participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State by attracting voters to a candidate because of the political campaigns done through it. 144 respondents which forms 53% and the majority confirmed this. However, 93 respondents with 34% said it enhanced political participation by aiding the campaign to reach all social media users in Taraba State .The findings are in line with that of Starndberg (2013) which revealed that social media play a significant role in sharpening people's political opinion and setting political agenda for them. Starndberg maintained that the use of Facebook and Twitter generates great effect to engage in politics. Social media users, who lack interest and motivation to participate in politics, would be more feasible to access political contents consciously through social media due to how often political campaigns and agenda are being spread on such platforms.

Lastly, the study examines the challenges of Social Media usage for Political Participation during the 2023 Gubernatorial Campaign in Taraba State. The study uncovered that the challenge(s) was that of hate speech on opposition candidate(s), poor network, Circulation of fakenews about candidates and difficulty to maintain democratic values.The findings captured some of the challenges discovered by Azubuike (2019)thus; low wireless network, lack of finance to subscribe to internet services, poor internet connection.It was equally revealed that hates speeches should be avoided and networks improved as measures of curbing the challenges.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

It is apt to conclude that social media is boosting political involvement, activities, and participation among Taraban's and Nigerians by extension. It has promoted political campaign and participation among its users. This work has, helped to provide a better understanding of the nexus between social media, political

campaign and participation particularly in the 2023 gubernatorial campaign in Taraba State. The researchers recommend the following:

- i. Politicians in Taraba State should use social media for campaign in a sincere and honest way as users keep increasing.
- ii. Taraba electorate should not depend on social media propaganda by politicians who got them attracted, but should try to find out about those politicians' policies and competency.
- iii. Government and social media App developers should jail perpetrators of hate speeches on social media which will deter others from doing same, as they improve on network across the state to curb challenges.

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