FRAMING ELECTORAL VICTORY: COMMUNICATION, IDENTITY AND CAMPAIGN STRATEGY IN NIGERIA'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the crucial role of communication in the electoral process, particularly focusing on the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. The study examines how political candidates leveraged communication strategies to gain an electoral edge, using theoretical frameworks such as Political Communication, Media Effect, and Political Marketing. Through qualitative analysis, the research explores the use of message framing and social media by key presidential candidates. It highlights the role of identity politics, past achievements, and the strategic use of social media hashtags to engage diverse voter demographics. The study underscores how candidates adapted their communication strategies to appeal to geographic and socio-political contexts, using communication as a powerful tool to shape public perception. Findings reveal that communication, particularly through social media, played a pivotal role in framing political messages and mobilizing voters. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of integrity and accuracy in political communication, advocating for strategies that ensure informed electoral decisions in the future.

Keywords: Social Media Campaign, Political Communication, Political Strategies, Presidential Election, Election Victory, Message Framing

Introduction

Communication is an integral part of the electoral process globally. The agenda of political parties is passed across to the electorates; it also forms a basis through which candidates are being sold to eligible voters. The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, the seventh since the country's return to democracy in 1999 (Amaza, 2023), was characterised by an intricate interplay of political tactics and limitations.

Consequently, the lead-up to the 2023 elections was widely seen as an important moment for Nigeria, sparking intense competition for political positions (ACLED, 2023; Hazan, 2023). Alongside the power struggle involving the incumbent, and other contenders vying for the nation's highest office. Figures like Peter Obi of the Labour Party and Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria Peoples' Party (NNPP) posed a potential threat to the leading figures like Asiwaju Bola Tinubu and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, to force a runoff election (Amaza, 2023).

In total, eighteen candidates were eyeing the presidency, while an astonishing 4,223 candidates entered the race for the 469 seats in the National Assembly (ACLED, 2023). This dynamic presented a formidable challenge for the emergence of diverse political strategies (Oluwasanmi, 2023).

In the same vein, Professor Yemi Osinbajo's presidential aspirations considerably narrowed the path for other contenders during the primary elections, limiting their prospects of securing victory in the

main election. The overall campaign atmosphere was fiercely competitive, with candidates organising rallies across the nation. However, the elections were held amidst economic challenges, characterised by Naira currency fluctuations and fuel scarcity. This adversely impacted campaign activities and attendance (Fourchard & Sikiru, 2023; EU report, 2023).

The prevailing cash austerity in the country, attributed to the cash crunch policy implemented by the Central Bank of Nigeria under the federal government, substantially reduced the traditional practice of vote buying by the political elite. Consequently, politicians found themselves with limited options, compelling them to pivot towards appealing to voters through alternative methods. A paramount strategy in this regard involved robust political campaigning across a spectrum of media platforms.

To overcome the above challenges, aspiring candidates had to employ compelling tactics that would resonate with the sentiments of the delegates and eligible voters (Oluwasanmi, 2023). This necessitated vigorous campaigns and carefully crafted appeals. Effective communication emerged as a potent instrument for swaying the delegates, with one particularly noteworthy strategy being the *Abeokuta Declaration* delivered by Asiwaju Bola Tinubu (Oluwasanmi, 2023).

Social media played a significant role in covering the campaign, even amid the backdrop of economic challenges, institutional pressures, and electoral violence (Hazan, 2023a). By 2023, the number of Nigerians on social media had surged from 27 million in 2019 to 36 million, ahead of the 2023 elections (Hazan, 2023b). Nevertheless, despite the increased access to online information, the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms posed a substantial challenge. Such false narratives often seeped into mainstream media, raising concerns about whether expanded access to digital information translated into a more informed citizenry.

While prime-time news broadcasts did cover topics like the Naira exchange rate and the contentious relations between the All Progressive Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), both political parties received relatively equal exposure, albeit sometimes with a negative bias. Politicians frequently engaged in divisive rhetoric on air, and conspiracy theories originating online frequently made their way into popular talk shows and social media. Unfortunately, there was a noticeable absence of in-depth analytical reporting on the manifestos of the political parties.

A notable setback for informed decision-making was the refusal of the APC and PDP to participate in presidential debates, thereby undermining voters' right to a well-informed choice (EU, 2023). As a result, social media emerged as a potent campaign tool, with political actors actively utilising these platforms for outreach (Ibrahim, 2023).

However, these platforms were also misused, disseminating harmful content and disinformation about critical electoral processes. The measures implemented by the platforms to safeguard electoral integrity were found to be inadequate. Furthermore, misleading information emanated from political actors themselves, further contributing to a muddled information environment for voters (EU, 2023).

The above gave rise to political maneuvering through a range of campaign strategies. Politicians strategically harnessed identity politics, utilising religion and ethnicity as potent tools for their campaigns. These aspects of identity were not only wielded as political instruments but also extended to the realm of political track records, with politicians emphasising their past achievements in office without presenting a clear vision for the future (EU, 2023). These tactics collectively aimed at one overarching goal: securing victory in the upcoming election.

The extant literature on the use of communication to secure election victory focuses on the use of media either traditional or modern by the political parties (Omilusi, 2020; Benoit, 2017; Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Dahlberg, 2020; Rußmann, 2012; Okoro et al., 2019). Little attention has been paid to how communication strategies serve as a political weapon wielded by aspiring candidates to clinch election victory, particularly in the Nigerian context and the 2023 presidential election. Hence, this study examines

the communication strategies employed by politicians during the run-up to the presidential election of 2023, it examines the media channels through which these strategies were channelled and sheds light on the significance of these communication channels in securing electoral victory.

      The paper has six sections. The first section presents the introduction to the paper explaining the background and events leading up to the 2023 presidential election. The second section presents the methods and materials used in investigating the communication strategies used in the 2023 presidential election. The third section explains the theoretical framework employed. In the fourth section, the keywords which feature in this paper are conceptualised and literature reviews of the existing literature on the use of media for election victory are done. In the fifth section, findings and discussions are undertaken while the sixth section is the conclusion of the paper.

Methods and Materials

This study investigated the communication strategies employed during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election campaign. It specifically examines how various media channels were employed by the leading political aspirants to shape voter perceptions. A qualitative approach was used, focusing on textual analysis, to gain insights into the communication strategies employed by the candidates. The purpose was to understand how campaign speeches were crafted and disseminated to appeal to voters and secure electoral victory.

Data Collection

The data for this research comprised campaign speeches delivered by the presidential candidates during the 2023 election season. These speeches were sourced from YouTube recordings of public addresses, as well as articles and reports from leading Nigerian newspapers. By focusing on public speeches, the study aimed to capture the direct messaging intended for voters and how these messages were framed to influence public opinion.

      The speeches of the top three candidates, Asiwaju Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Peter Obi of the Labour Party, and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), were selected based on their prominence in the electoral race and their widespread media coverage. Additional sources such as press statements, interviews, and social media posts were used to supplement the analysis where relevant.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was adopted to select the campaign speeches and media content. This sampling technique was employed to ensure that the texts chosen were rich in political messaging and strategic framing. Campaign speeches were chosen based on their timing (those delivered at critical moments in the campaign) and the media through which they were broadcast (mainstream media and social media platforms). Speeches that attracted significant public and media attention, such as the *Abeokuta Declaration* by Bola Tinubu, were prioritised to explore the use of messaging as a campaign tool.

Textual Analysis

The study employed textual analysis as the primary method to examine the content of the campaign speeches. This method was chosen to dissect the political messaging, understand the embedded values, and

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evaluate the rhetorical strategies used by the candidates (Smith, 2017). Textual analysis enabled the researchers to interpret how specific linguistic and rhetorical devices were employed to influence voters' sentiments (Sanders, 2005; Khan, 2023).

The process involved reading through the transcripts of the speeches multiple times to identify recurring themes, such as identity politics, past political achievements, and the appeal to religious or ethnic affiliations. Each speech was broken down into sections to examine the framing of issues and the persuasive strategies employed. Additionally, attention was given to how certain messages were amplified or downplayed depending on the audience and the geographic or socio-political context.

Secondary Data

To strengthen the findings, the textual analysis was corroborated with a review of existing literature on political communication and electoral strategy. Studies on message framing, media effects, and political marketing were referenced to contextualize the findings within broader theories of political communication. This comparison helped to validate the analysis and ensured that the results could be generalized to other electoral contexts.

Social Media Platforms

The study also analysed the use of media channels, focusing particularly on the role of social media. The use of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were investigated to understand how candidates made use of hashtags, videos, and other multimedia content to frame their campaign messages and engage with different voter demographics.

The study paid special attention to the proliferation of the use social media in Nigerian politics, recognising its growing importance as a tool for political communication and voter mobilization. This is in line with the study conducted by Olanrewaju *et al.* (2024). By combining textual analysis of speeches with an exploration of media platforms, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the strategic use of communication in electoral campaigns. The methodology adopted can serve as a model for future research on political communication in other election contexts.

Political Communication, Media Effect and Political Marketing

There is a plethora of theories applicable to communication between the politicians and citizens. While political communication theory serves as the overarching theory in this context, the theories of media effects and political marketing serve as a subset within the broader framework of political communication theory (Soukup, 2014; Borah, 2015). In the context of this study, these theories will be subsumed under the theory of Political Communication.

An understanding of political communication theory is indispensable in this study. Political communication theory explores the role of communication in politics. It is conceived as a dynamic interplay involving political actors, the media, and citizens, characterised by its persuasive and strategic nature (Gonçalves, 2018). It encompasses various terms, including propaganda, electoral marketing, political marketing, political campaigning, and political public relations (Gonçalves, 2018).

Politicians utilise political communication to garner votes, while governments employ it to inform citizens about newly formulated policies. Concepts such as agenda-setting, message framing, and the two-step flow of communication (as explained in the next section), can be relevant here. This theory helps one to understand how political messagingis disseminated, received, and interpreted.

In the same vein, Media Effects Theory incorporates elements of media effects to analyse how various media channels (television, radio, social media, etc.) influence public opinion and voter behaviour. This theory was espoused in the work of Lazarsfeld et al (1948), Hovland et al. (1953), and Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955). The concept of Media Effect became prominent in the 1950s due to the research carried out between the 1920s and 1930s (Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016). The theory explores concepts like the third-person effect, selective exposure, and cultivation theory to understand how media shapes perceptions of political candidates and issues.

Another cluster of theories pertinent to this study revolves around political marketing and campaign strategy, encompassing elements such as branding, image construction, and voter targeting. Political marketing theories help to analyze how candidates craft their messages and target specific voter segments to maximize their chances of victory in any election.

Hence, the overarching theoretical underpinning for this study lies within the context of Political Communication theory. This is adopted for various aspects of political campaigns in Nigeria, with specific reference to the 2023 presidential election. The paper uses the theory to explain how politicians establish connections with potential voters leading up to the election.

Political Communication, Election and Campaign Strategies

Political communication is an interactive process of exchange of information among politicians, the news media, and the public (see Fig. 1). The process can take two main forms: horizontal or vertical. Horizontal political communication refers to connections between political actors, while vertical communication flows both downward from governing institutions to citizens and upward from public opinion to authorities (Wright, 2015). Communication enhances the election process. No politician will be involved in an election process without employing communication strategies.
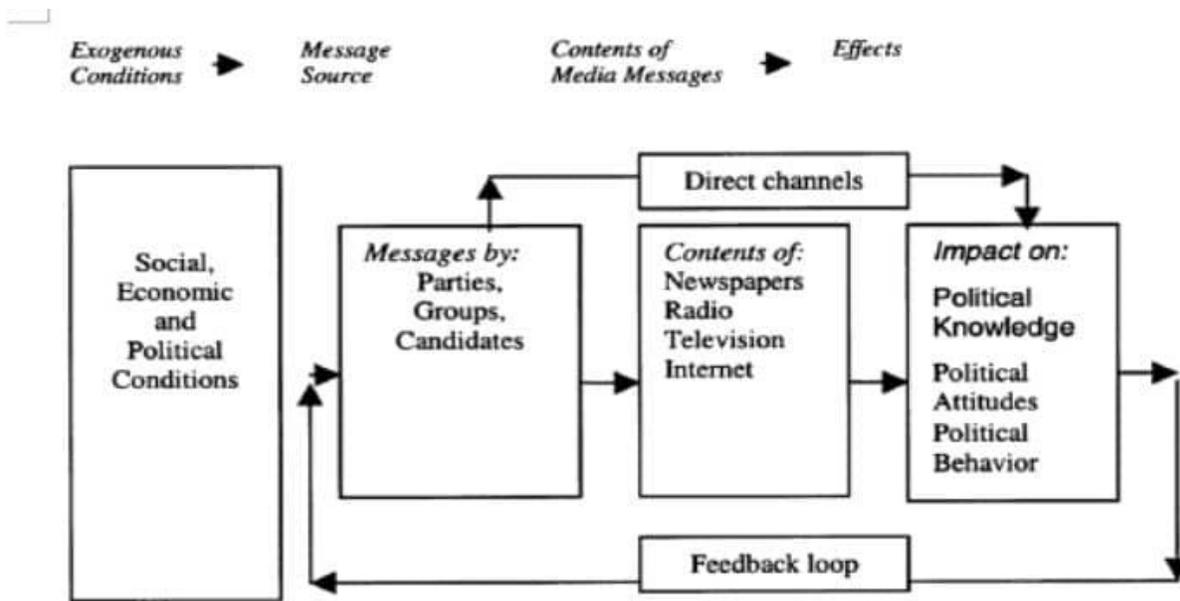

Fig. 1: Model of political communication

Source: *https://political-science.iresearchnet.com/political-communication/*

In modern democracy, communication plays a crucial role in the campaign process in any election. Election, defined as the "formal process of choosing a candidate for a public office or of accepting or rejecting political position by voting" (Webb, Eulau, and Gibbins, 2024; para 1, line 1-2) often give rise to democratic government. In such situations, the electorate are enabled to vote in leaders of their choice and hold them responsible when things do not go well.

During political campaigns, candidates vying for different political offices solicit voters' support by giving public speeches, publishing their manifestos or online advertisements, and using other means of communication. Candidates communicate their standpoints, policies, intentions and agenda while trying to convince constituents of their quality as political leaders (Library of Congress, 2024).

At the heart of it all lies the question of how candidates' idiosyncrasies and positions of importance together shape candidates' campaign communication and strategies. How the candidate should strategise his communication for better results, what should be prioritized and what should be forfeited. However, there are different factors and strategies to be considered if one desires to win an election, one of which is communication.

Communication is an indelible aspect of the election campaign process as it creates room for the electorate to get to know the candidate better. This section will interrogate the position of scholars on the use of the strategy of communication to win elections both within and outside Nigeria. There are various accounts of the way communication is employed to win elections.

In recent times, communication has proven to be a veritable tool in political campaigns. Atkin and Rice, in their article, *Theory and Principles of Public Communication Campaigns*, assert public communication campaigns as, "purposive attempts to inform or influence behaviours in large audiences within a specified period using an organised set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society" (Atkin and Rice, 2009; 23). According to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2013), a communication strategy would be as much a strategic exercise or an effective planning instrument.

Consequently, campaign strategies are often examined and re-examined to achieve the best results. The design process starts with a conceptual evaluation of the situation, aimed at recognising opportunities and obstacles. It involves identifying the specific behaviours individuals would engage in to achieve desired outcomes (Atkin and Salmon, 2010). The media has a remarkable influence on the people which they do not hesitate to exercise whenever the need arises, furthermore, politicians employ what Atkin and Salmon refer to as "persuasive messages" to appeal to the beliefs of the people (p. 29).

Within public communication campaigns, persuasive messages often leverage the fundamental expectancy-value mechanism. This involves crafting messages to foster beliefs about the subjective likelihood of different outcomes. The resulting attitudinal and behavioural effects depend on each individual's assessment of these outcomes.

Media campaigns possess significant potential to inspire interpersonal influences close to focal individuals. Additionally, they can exert influence on institutions and groups at both national and community levels (Atkin and Salmon, 2010). In the seminal works of Petrocik (1996) and Riker (1996), candidates and political parties hold certain issues in media campaigns. For him, candidates would focus their campaign communication on the issues considered beneficial to citizens, while neglecting others. This forms the basis for message framing.

Message framing implies choosing specific aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient while disregarding other elements (Sikorski and Matthes, 2020). It refers to the deliberate presentation of issues or events in a manner that constructs a meaningful yet selective representation of reality. The intention behind this framing is to advance a particular issue, such as problem definition, causal

interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation, in favour of a specific orientation and course of action (Entman, 1993; Sikorski & Matthes, 2020). This is exemplified in Riker's two principles of campaign rhetoric. He was of the view that "when one side has an advantage on an issue, the other side ignores it; but when neither side has an advantage, non-seek new and advantageous issues".

He named the former the dominant principle and the latter the depression principle. The theory predicts that there is an extreme form of divergence in communication strategies. That is either the candidate with an advantage addresses an issue or not, if there are no advantages to address, the issues would be neglected by all.

Roles of the Media in Political Communication

Mass and social media have become very important tools of political communication in today's world. This is because of the great need for politicians to reach a large number of people with appropriate messages within the shortest possible time as they have a lot of ground to cover. Bearing this in mind, the media plays an important role in political communication.

Trent and Friedenberg assert that political campaign communication revolves around three crucial facets within political campaigns: bolstering voter trust in the political system, enabling citizens to freely choose their leaders, and facilitating the assessment of how their interests can be effectively addressed while validating the legitimacy of elected officials (Trent and Friedenberg, 2004). The affordances of political campaign communication are such that when properly engaged, the chances of one winning an election are pretty high. Rice and Atkin assert,

> in many campaign situations, informational messages that seek to create awareness or provide instruction play an important role. Awareness messages present relatively simple content that informs people on what to do, specifies who should do it, or provides cues about when and where it should be done. Even superficial messages can stimulate the audience to seek out richer, in-depth content, from elaborated informational resources such as webpages, books, and opinion leaders. The more complex instruction messages present how-to-do-it information in campaigns that need to produce knowledge gain or skills acquisition, including enhancing personal efficacy in bolstering peer resistance and acquiring media literacy skills (Rice& Atkin, 2009).

However, despite advancements, many campaign designers continue to rely on conventional broadcast and print platforms to convey their messages, encompassing public service announcements, entertainment-education features, and news segments. Since the late 1990s, campaign strategies have integrated websites hosting pre-assembled informational content as a primary dissemination tool. Subsequently, there has been a growing adoption of interactive technologies, including online platforms, DVDs, and mobile applications, in recent campaigns. Evaluating numerous channels for message delivery, campaign designers weigh the pros and cons across various communicative fronts.

Campaign Strategy and Implication for Election Victory

Political campaigning offers politicians the chance to connect with the general public and convince them to endorse their candidature to secure victory in an election (Oluwasanmi, 2023). In doing this, leveraging communication emerges as a potent strategy to sway potential voters by tapping into their emotions, thereby securing victory in an election.

Salmon and Atkin (2003) explores various communication channels, examining aspects such as reach (the extent of audience exposure), specialisability (targeting specific demographics or tailoring messages to individuals), interactivity (engagement and adaptation during message processing), meaning

modalities (utilisation of senses in conveying meaning), personalisation (the human-centric nature of interaction between sender and receiver), decode ability (cognitive effort needed for processing), depth (capacity for conveying detailed content), credibility (trustworthiness of conveyed information), agenda setting (ability to prioritize issues), accessibility (ease of message placement), and economy (cost-effectiveness of message production and dissemination).

The associated concept of Entertainment–Education (E-E), according to Singhal et al., (2004), integrates campaign-related content into entertainment programming, finds widespread acceptance among media gatekeepers in developing nations but faces resistance in the United States. Meanwhile, the Internet has emerged as a pivotal platform for information dissemination, discussion facilitation, therapeutic resources, and physician accessibility (Rice, 2006; Rice and Katz, 2001).

Blogs play a crucial role in connecting users with shared information needs and concerns, fostering a space for exchanging views and experiences, whereas wikis foster collaboration among campaign stakeholders. Podcasts offer a convenient avenue for delivering pertinent audio content (such as social support, variations on persuasive messaging, or relevant health updates) to engaged audiences at their convenience.

In election campaign processes, navigating through the vast array of media options poses a significant challenge for campaigners. This challenge presents both obstacles and opportunities, as highlighted by Elchahabi and Gallagher (2015). A prime example of strategic adaptation in the face of such challenges can be seen in the case of Abraham Lincoln. Following his defeat in the senate race against Douglas in 1858, Lincoln pursued the presidency of the United States in 1860 and emerged victorious. Lincoln astutely adjusted his approach during a challenging period in American history marked by uncertainty and upheaval. Recognising the urgent need for direct communication with voters amidst the prevailing atmosphere of insecurity, Lincoln adeptly addressed their concerns, offering reassurance and articulating his vision for a better, more progressive America.

Abraham Lincoln realised that there was a need to re-strategise, so he found a way to communicate with voters and not depend solely on the debates and speeches which politicians employed in reaching out to their numerous voters. Lincoln together with his team of supporters employed direct communication with the electorate. They fashioned innovative methods of interpersonal communication and equally navigated around local societies where they interact with prospective voters as much as possible.

All communication campaigns, along with their various components, encompass a broad spectrum of ethical considerations. These include everything from the underlying assumptions guiding the campaign, be they individual or societal in nature, to the actual choices made in interventions. Though often implicit, these ethical dilemmas are deeply embedded within the decision-making processes of campaigns (Guttman, 2003). Albert (2007) argues that campaigns serve as vital catalysts in the intricate relationship between elections, candidates, and voters. They empower candidates to inspire voter support based on the values and issues they champion.

Idasa and Mayer, as cited in Albert (2007), shed light on the multifaceted nature of campaigning, revealing its components as political advocacy, lobbying, and communication. Mayer views it as a battleground where opposing sides vie for advantage, with campaigners frequently grappling with the balance between the quality and quantity of their messaging. This underscores the significant reliance placed on mass media, particularly through commercial advertising. Consequently, immense importance is attributed to garnering support, as a larger voter base enhances a candidate's electoral prospects. Often, a candidate's underlying motives for seeking office dictate the strategies employed in their campaign (89 & 115).

O'Day (2006) explains that once the decision is made to target only a portion of the electorate, roughly half or less, to secure support for a candidate, the focus shifts to understanding what distinguishes

these potential supporters from others. This delineation is typically achieved through geographic and demographic targeting strategies. Most campaigns employ a blend of both approaches (O'Day, 2006). For instance, politicians often use their personal achievements and past assistance as a strategy to get voters' attention.

For example, during the February 2023 election campaigns in Nigeria, politicians highlighted their previous accomplishments in office to gain support for the positions they were seeking. This strategy has been termed "politics of antecedent" by Oluwasanmi (2023). Another tactic often used was the assertion of entitlement to the desired office, with politicians believing they deserved the seat of government even before the election took place. This approach is referred to as "politics of entitlement" by Oluwasanmi (2023). These strategies could be incorporated through modern and traditional media.

According to Foot and Schneider (2006), incorporating the internet into campaign strategies offers both expediency and timeliness. While it could not replace traditional grassroots events during the 2007 elections, e-technology allowed certain candidates to effortlessly convey their messages to voters. This enabled them to gather funds from various sources, shield themselves from negative campaigning, scrutinise staff members, and engage with supporters.

Notably, many leading presidential and gubernatorial candidates, as highlighted by Foot and Schneider, established campaign websites containing valuable information shared through rallies and advertisements. For instance, Atiku Abubakar's website succinctly outlines his key priority areas including wealth creation, poverty alleviation, democratic governance, education, healthcare, and addressing the Niger Delta crisis. Atiku, in his authorised biography, portrays himself as a significant farmer, importer, and oil industry figure. Additionally, he claimed to have invested part of his wealth in enhancing schools, religious institutions, and healthcare centers.

Furthermore, as Owen (2018) notes, alongside traditional media, the proliferation of mobile phones and the rise of new media have diversified communication channels, shaping individual media experiences. The evolution of ICT in political communication stems from the fundamental notion that citizens in a democracy require comprehensive information and understanding to actively engage in deliberation and decision-making (Dahl, 1989). The 1990s witnessed a heightened professionalization in political communication, marking the onset of the postmodern campaign era. Political entities adopted a market-driven approach to communication, influencing the crafting of key messages and policy priorities (Lees-Marshment, 2001).

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that many scholars project the affordances of political communication as a viable step in the effort to win elections.

Findings and Discussion

Communication strategies employed by politicians during the run-up to the presidential election of 2023

Strategies take up a chunk of political campaigning; without strategies, political campaigns will be doomed to fail. For Finucane (2023), a successful political campaign will take 20% of the campaign activities vis-à-vis other activities. This shows that strategies take a pivotal position and cannot be done away with. One of the benefits of strategies is that they create a roadmap to follow for the rest of the campaign activities (Finucane, 2023).

The campaign activities for the 2023 elections came with many complexities. The intense competition among the leading contestants led to a keen contestation, in which each candidate secured the most appealing strategies to woo prospective voters, including the delegates (Oluwasanmi, 2023). In the

heat of the campaign, one of the strategies adopted was message framing. The leading political aspirants, especially for the presidential office, deployed message framing to appeal to the sentiments of voters.

Politicians often employ message framing as a technique to shape the agenda and exert influence on public opinion regarding issues of interest. This process is executed through media effects with the goal of political marketing to influence voter choice or public opinion on any political issues. For instance, Asiwaju Bola Tinubu, the then aspirant for the office of the president under APC auspices, went to Abeokuta to meet the delegates. His meeting with the delegates is later tagged the *Abeokuta Declaration*. In this, he used the combination of politics of identity, antecedent and entitlement (Oluwasanmi, 2023).

Identity politics reflects in his speech with delegates when he went to Abeokuta, Nigeria. He leveraged ethnicity, language, and religion. According to him,

> Since the time we started with the AD, AC, CAN and now the APC, I wanted to contest for president that time, Buhari asked me to be his Vice President. He said the first time he contested, he picked Okadigbo, but Nigerians did not vote for him. The second time, he picked another Igbo, Ume-Ezeoke, Nigerians didn't vote for him; even [if] he brings the Pope to run as his vice (sic), Nigerians won't vote for him (Channels Television, 2022).

Likewise, he used the past assistance rendered to politicians to convince the delegates to vote for him:

> When Atiku was being flogged out of PDP by Obasanjo, he ran to me for help...The same with Nuhu Ribadu, he came to me I backed him…. Even Dapo Abiodun, can he say he can become the governor without me? We were together at the stadium, he was being intimidated. I personally handed over the party flag to him… he knows he cannot be the governor without the help of God and my support (Channels Television, 2022).

Tinubu built on his past achievements to garner support for his primary campaign. He extensively used his past achievements drive his campaign to the delegates. By doing so, he made the delegates realise the importance of making a Yoruba president, of which he is the most preferred among the available alternatives. He reiterated that it should be him because it was his turn to be the next president of Nigeria:

> But I say, it is my time. It is not about age. I am educated; I am experienced. I have been serving you for a long time. Bring me the presidency, it is my turn… It has been over 25 years now that I have been serving them… Things are serious now… this is not a matter of songs, it is a matter of doing what is right. This is our time. The presidency is not only meant for the North… but I say it is the turn of Yorubas, even then, it is my turn. In [a] critical situation, you take care of yourself first before taking care of someone else, even if it's your child. Enough of protecting other people, I also want to become the president (Channels Television, 2022).

His campaign strategies were framed along his antecedents, identity and the politics of entitlement (See Figure 2). There is a deliberate use of Yoruba Language to drive home his campaign at the location, Abeokuta, being a Yoruba-speaking state in Nigeria.

Peter Obi's campaign also employed message framing as a winning strategy. In leaked audio between him and a supposed clergyman, allegedly believed to be Bishop David Oyedepo, he described the campaign process as *a religious war,* leveraging identity politics (See Figure 2). He said, "Thank you, Daddy, I need

you to speak to your people in South West and Kwara, the Christians in South West and Kwara, this is a religious war" (cf: Adeyemi, 2023).

In response to the above, the clergyman allegedly said:

I believe that… I believe that… I believe that… You know I did a release 'Nigeria Going Forward' and I am coming with the second one today. I wanted it out when they won't have any time to do damage control. But in the name of Jesus, this would be a success. You know what I said in today's own? A sickling nation like Nigeria will require a strong and healthy personality. I said anyone whose source of wealth could not be verified should not have access to governance. So, all we are doing is appealing to the conscience of people to know where to go. But I want to assure you, in the name of Jesus, that the result will be favourable (cf: Adeyemi, 2023).

As reflected in the extract above, the intention is to appeal to the sentiment of an average voter, thereby gaining political advantage over other contestants.

For Atiku Abubakar, he believed the northerners should vote for him in the presidential election of February 2023 because he is from the north (Folorunsho-Francis et al., 2022; Egobiambu, 2022). While addressing his audience during the Arewa Joint Committee in Kaduna, he said:

What the average Northerner needs is somebody who's from the North and also understands that part of the country and has been able to build bridges across the country… This is what the Northerner needs. It doesn't need a Yoruba or Igbo candidate. I stand before you as a pan-Nigerian of northern origin(Folorunsho-Francis, *et al.,* 2022).

Having presented himself as a pan-Nigerian candidate of northern origin, Atiku came under firestorms from different quarters, especially the APC, Labour Party, and New Nigeria People's Party (Folorunsho-Francis*et al*, 2022), especially for making a statement that is prone to destabilising the unity of Nigeria. Atiku was accused of "belonging to a dying breed of politicians who resort to ethnic and regional sentiments in their desperate bid to capture power" (Akinrefon and Ajayi, 2022; para. 2, line 2). The statement was credited with the breaching of Section 97 of the Nigerian Electoral Act, which states:

A candidate, person or association that engages in campaigning or broadcasting based on religious, tribal or sectional reason to promote or oppose a particular political party or the election of a particular candidate, commits an offence under this Act and is liable on conviction to (a) a maximum fine of N1m or imprisonment for a term of 12 months or both and (b) in the case of a political party, to a maximum of N10m.

While declaring his ambition to contest for the post of president, Atiku's inconsistency on the issue of national unity and security became evident. His initial statement was said to be debilitating to the unity of Nigeria, he promised to unify Nigeria despite the socio-cultural differences. He promised to hand over to a younger generation if elected (Ayitogo, 2022). In his words,

Since the civil war, the unity of Nigeria has never been threatened as it is today. Nigerians are losing hope in the oneness of this country. My fellow Nigerians, I am the unifier that is coming to bond the broken union… Throughout my life, I have never looked at Nigerians as divided people. In my eyes, all Nigerians are the same. When I see you, I don't see Yoruba or Hausa or Igbo or Fulani or a northerner or southerner; when I see you, I only see a Nigerian, and I expect the best from you (cf: Ayitogo, 2022).

The above statement contradicts Atiku's initial position, and it is a good example of how the political class frame their messages during the campaign process to appeal to the voters' sentiments and gain political advantage.

Deduced from above, the three major presidential aspirants employed tactics most suitable based on their political and geographical advantages as well as the rate of acceptance depending on the most available demographic. The above is in line with the opinion of O'Day (2006) on the need to determine what is needed to persuade the electorate to vote for the candidate, and what makes a potential voter different from the others. He suggested two ways to do this: geographic or demographic targeting or a combination of the two methods (O'Day, 2006). For instance, Tinubu framed his campaign message based on geographic cumpolitics of entitlement and past assistance rendered to other politicians, Atiku used geographic and ethnicity while Obi framed his message along demographic (youth) and religion.
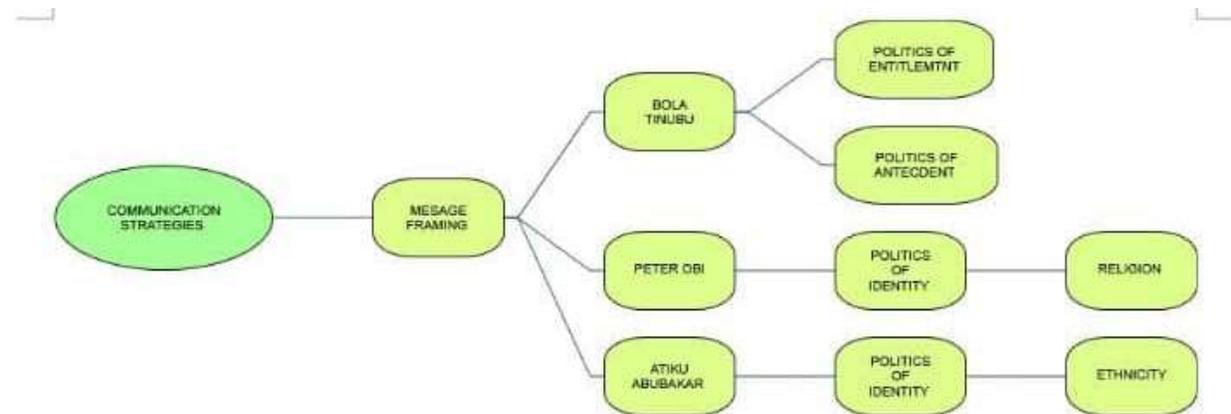

Fig. 2. Summary of communication strategies employed in the 2023 presidential election.

Source: Drawn by the authors based on data generated from extant literature

Social Media as a Tool for Message Framing and Political Communication

Message framing has been an important tool used in political communication. Even at the international level, the actors at the international level leverage message framing as a veritable tool to sell their interest to other actors and individuals within the international communities. For the political class, the campaign process starts with a comprehensive survey of constituents to discern the pivotal issues shaping the elections and gauge the sentiments of the parties and candidates. Based on the poll results, consultants craft a winning strategy that determines the messaging tailored to target specific demographic components most likely to secure votes (Bamigbetan, 2023). The art of message framing begins with a creative process aimed at engaging the target audience's heart or mind, utilising verbal, visual, and textual language that resonates effectively and connects them to the appropriate symbols. Context and meaning are maximised to predispose the recipient to believe in the promises and commit to the cause. The impact of the message hinges on the effectiveness of its distribution across various media and channels. The increasing commitment of voters serves as evidence of the strategy's efficacy (Bamigbetan, 2023).

In this digital age, social media has evolved into an indispensable tool for elections, expediting campaign strategies to reach a broader audience. Globally, social media has firmly established itself as an integral component of election campaigns, with its use for securing electoral victories dating back to the year 2000 (Olabanjo*et al*., 2023). The effectiveness of social media in shaping politicians' messages is pivotal, enabling the rapid dissemination of political interests in real-time, surpassing the reach of traditional media platforms. With approximately 36 million Nigerians actively engaged on various social media platforms (Hassan, 2023), the majority being relatively younger, educated, and urban, it forms a significant demographic (Fujiwara, Muller, and Schwarz, 2023).

However, this extensive reach also exposes a concerning trend of misinformation and disinformation within these digital spaces. Instead of serving educational interests to enlighten users and cultivate informed citizens, social media channels have been used to confuse the public, reinforcing existing divisions rooted in ethnicity and religion, particularly through the spread of misinformation (Hassan, 2023).

To address these challenges, informal organisations and hired social media influencers on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok play a crucial role in bridging the educational divide. According to Hassan (2023:3),

> Cross-platform posting remains critical to understanding Nigeria's digital ecosystem as screen grabs or content from one platform can be shared across all others, broadening the reach beyond the number of direct users. Content also moves from online forums into offline spaces with soldiers of mouth spreading online content through street talks, in motor parks and at newspaper stands.

Politicians strategically employed pre-established hashtags. For instance, #MyAsiwajuStories was used to amplify the noteworthy accomplishments of Asiwaju Bola Tinubu when he was Lagos State governor. His supporters were said to be #BATified, an acronym for his full name, Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

Similarly, the #Obedient movement hashtag gained popularity among the youth, serving as a platform to advance Mr. Peter Obi's agenda. The #Atikulate movement was also actively in play so was the #Kwankwasiya for Rabiu Kwakwanso. These initiatives were orchestrated to enhance political visibility among the general populace and to secure a political edge over competing candidates.

Significance of Social Media as a Communication Tool to Secure Electoral Victory

Nigeria drew inspiration from Barack Obama's sweep electoral victory in 2008, where he notably leveraged social media to establish political significance and secure a landslide victory (Luckscheiter, 2022). Consequently, the subsequent political developments in 2011 saw widespread adoption of social media campaign strategies.Being that Social Media platforms can be used to raise awareness and inspire actions (Ajala and Alayinde, 2025), during the 2015 election season in Nigeria, Twitter exhibited a tenfold increase in activity compared to regular periods.

Social media enthusiasts generated more than 12.4 million tweets discussing the elections, and approximately 216,000 Facebook users engaged with content on popular public pages related to the electoral process (Luckscheiter, 2022). In 2023, it was documented that the three primary presidential contenders, Peter Obi, Atiku Abubakar, and Bola Ahmed Tinubu, marked a substantial rise in their followership on Facebook and Twitter within the preceding six months. Hashtags directly associated with each candidate trended nearly every day on local Twitter and Facebook platforms as noted above.

The use of social media enables the real-time monitoring of electoral situations throughout the country. Political parties have also employed social media to spread disinformation and fake news, aiming to discourage voters from participating in opposition strongholds by leveraging the threat of violence or

disseminating false information about the electoral processes (Hazan, 2023). This strategy is employed to discredit opponents and embellish records, whether factual or not (Luckscheiter, 2022).

Unlike traditional media outlets, social media has become the primary means of communication and information dissemination. It enables rapid distribution of information, effectively reaching the intended audience with precision. The accuracy and specificity offered by social media make it the preferred platform for political actors involved in political marketing and campaigns. However, it can also be exploited to enhance message framing and spread disinformation, using bots and trolls for these purposes.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to analyse the campaign strategies employed in the 2023 presidential election, identifying communication as a vital component of the electoral process. Through communication, political messaging is disseminated, shaping the interactions between candidates and the electorate. The lead-up to the election fostered intense competition among candidates, making political marketing the norm. As a result, various campaign strategies were employed to manoeuvre through the political landscape. The study utilized political communication, media effects, and political marketing as theoretical frameworks to reveal the strategies adopted in the 2023 election.

The findings highlighted a significant reliance on message framing, especially through social media platforms. The leading political contenders framed their messages around entitlement politics, past assistance to former politicians, and identity factors such as religion and ethnicity. Social media's global importance and its growing user base in Nigeria, particularly its influential demographic, contributed to the widespread use of the platform during the campaign.

In conclusion, the 2023 Nigerian presidential election illustrates the critical role communication plays in shaping political outcomes. The strategic use of media, particularly social media, allowed candidates to craft messages that resonated with voters' identities, past experiences, and religious affiliations. This study demonstrates how central message framing and political marketing are to influencing voter behaviour and securing electoral victories. As political campaigns continue to evolve in the digital age, the role of communication in engaging the electorate remains indispensable. Looking ahead, it is essential for communication strategies to prioritize accuracy and integrity, ensuring an informed electorate free from misinformation. Ultimately, the communication landscape will continue to be crucial in shaping political success in Nigeria and beyond.

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