

UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN SOUTHWEST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria represented a crucial juncture in the nation's political landscape, making it important to understand the role of social media influencers in shaping voters' choices. Thus, this study examined the influence of social media influencers on 2023 presidential election voting behaviour in the Southwest, Nigeria. The study adopted Source Credibility Theory, which explains that credible sources consistently drive greater attitude change, thereby cementing credibility as a key element of persuasive communication. The study was based on the survey method and involved 400 electorates who use social media in three purposefully selected states in the South-West of Nigeria: Lagos State (LP), Oyo State (APC), and Osun State (PDP), each won by different major political parties in the region. The findings demonstrated that religion exerted a significant socioeconomic influence on voters during the 2023 presidential election in the country. The study found a relationship between social media influencers' endorsements and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election, indicating that these endorsements significantly shaped public opinions and reactions regarding the election results. In conclusion, it is quite evident that a small number of social media influencers with large followings were used to promote political candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Therefore, the significant impact of social media influencers on political campaigns, discussions, and narratives cannot be overstated. It was recommended that voters ensure that voting for a certain candidate in an election is not based on sympathy, empathy, or any other unsubstantiated reason; rather, it should be based on the ability of the candidate to deliver his campaign programmes.

Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has become deeply embedded in society, even transvassing generational boundaries as a primary means of communication, information-sharing, and news consumption. According to Igbinedion & Ajisebiyawo (2023) networks such as Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Telegram have effectively been deployed more recently by political actors to engage in public debate, voter mobilisation, and ideological. Through these means they have been able to bypass traditional media gatekeepers to deliver unfiltered messages directly to constituents. These platforms have emerged as powerful tools for political communication with their potentials of enabling candidates and parties reach their audiences with ease (Igbinedion &

Ajisebiyawo, 2023). Despite the growing importance of social media in shaping public opinion, there is limited research on how they affect voters' choices in Southwest, Nigeria.

However, election executives and experts condemned the improper use of communications on social media platforms by users before, during, and after the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria (Igbinedion, et al. 2023). Research by Ibrahim (2023), Aragba-Akpore (2023), and Salako (2023) indicated that Nigeria's 2023 presidential election campaign transformed social media into perilous instruments for disseminating political information, raising concerns that the election results could significantly impact the nation's burgeoning democracy. The dominant political parties and their adherents exploited social media to both inform the public about their manifestos and transform the 2023 elections into a spectacle of incendiary rhetoric, augmented by propaganda that could undermine the electoral processes and Nigeria's emerging democracy (Igbinedion, et al. 2023). It is a prevalent belief that social media can be significantly misused during elections, given the crowd-sourcing methods employed by numerous social media practitioners often originate from local groups that may possess partisan interests and biases. Likewise, the platforms are frequently employed to disseminate misinformation, perpetrate abuse, and incite violence; hence, the role of social media in promoting democracy and electoral concord has become a heated topic of discussion.

Igbinedion & Ajisebiyawo (2023) the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria were an important period in the political landscape of a nation. Social media influencers played a significant role in Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections, both mobilizing voters and spreading disinformation. Research has shown that political parties secretly collaborated with influencers to disseminate targeted messages. This study explores the influence of social media influencers on voter behaviour in the 2023 presidential elections, focusing on Southwest Nigeria as the study area

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the advances associated with the internet and social media since their inception have significantly transformed the ecosystem of communication. Several activities and phenomena arose through them. One such phenomenon is online opinion leadership, commonly referred to as influencers.

Despite the democratisation of influence, certain individuals have emerged as opinion leaders, with characteristics that enable them to mobilise and shape the views of their followers. The rise of social media has further blurred the lines, allowing anyone to assume an influential role and be capable of shaping public opinion. In Nigeria, this phenomenon is evident in online communities, where individuals known as influencers have gained significant traction,

particularly in areas such as politics and advocacy, and are now able to penetrate and shape public discourse. They have displayed their capacity through various movements such as (Bring Back Our Girls campaign) and voting pattern or behaviour such as hashtags (#votenotfight, #electionnotwar). The prevalence of social media influencers in Nigeria's online community consists of thousands of self-made and genuine influencers with huge followership (Bello, 2018). While the increasing adoption of social media in the political process and governance has been documented by researchers in the past, the unique use of in the 2023 elections requires further investigation. Furthermore, the impact of widespread social media influencers use on electioneering processes in Nigeria needs to be better understood in terms of its role in promoting political participation. Specifically, there is a need to look into how social media helps to increase civic engagement, voter turnout, and ultimately, election outcomes. For instance, it is important to study the types of political activities that social media supports, such as online activism, political discussions, and voter mobilisation, and how these efforts lead to real results, including voter turnout rates and election results. Thus, it is essential to analyse the influence of social media influencers on voting behaviour in the 2023 Presidential election in Southwest Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

This research will be guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the demographic and socioeconomic factors that may affect the influence of social media influencers on the voting behaviour of young people in Southwest Nigeria.
2. To determine whether there is a correlation between the activities of social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election.

Research Questions

The following specific research questions will further guide the study:

1. What demographic and socioeconomic factors influence the impact of social media influencers on the voting behaviour of young people in Southwest Nigeria?
2. Is there a significant correlation between the activities of social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election?

Hypothesis

Ho: There is no relationship between political social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election

Ha: There is relationship between political social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election

Literature Reviews

Social Media

Social Media (SM) are interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Social media has revolutionised the way humans communicate, interact, and access information, and its potential to shape our lives and societies is immense. Social media refers to interactive forms of media that allow users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and opinions through various forms of content, including text, images, videos, and live streams. It has the potential to transform and broadcast media while enabling users to engage in two-way communication and interact with each other in real-time. Social media covers a wide range of platforms, including *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok*, others have revolutionised the way we live and have become an undeniable component of contemporary culture. Millions of individuals globally utilise these services for communication, to disseminate their experiences, and garner knowledge. The scope of social media is immense, as it caters to various objectives such as digital marketing, online influencer marketing, and community engagement. These potentials have a significant impact on individuals, businesses, and society as a whole.

Social Media Influencers

An influencer is typically defined as someone capable of shaping the attitudes or behaviours of an audience, often cultivated through platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok. Vaibhavi and Leena (2018) note that the rise of users gravitating toward prominent online personalities has led to these figures being labelled as modern opinion leaders, or social media influencers. These individuals often hold sway over purchasing decisions by leveraging their rapport with followers, blending product endorsements with relatable content to foster trust. This dynamic has emerged alongside brands increasingly collaborating with influencers to promote goods, relying on their ability to weave promotional messaging into everyday posts, stories, or reviews shared across their personal channels.

While platforms like blogs or early social media were designed as spaces for casual dialogue, information exchange, or entertainment (Vaxjo, 2017), their role has shifted as audiences began valuing influencers' curated perspectives. Marketers now prioritise partnerships with influencers over traditional advertising, drawn by their perceived authenticity

and capacity to humanise brand narratives. For instance, fashion influencers on *Instagram* often showcase products organically by integrating them into styled photoshoots, accompanied by strategic brand tags (Vaibhavi & Leena, 2018).

Social Media Influencer and Political Promotion

An influencer is an individual who captivates the attention of others and, through this engagement, cultivates a persona that intrigues them. An influencer garners numerous followers on social media and serves as a source of guidance for them (Pradhan et al., 2023). Recently, influencers have embraced the concept of endorsing political parties and their preferred candidates. The current literature in the field of public relations regarding social media influencers reveals varied conclusions about the influence of social media on public perceptions of politicians and organisations (Davies and Hobbs, 2020; Johansson and Bengtsson, 2016; Stoldt et al., 2019). Social media exemplifies the opportunity for public relations practitioners to utilise and for social media influencers to manage networks of parasocial relationships to enhance awareness, motives, and affect global perceptions (Smith et al., 2021; Yang and Taylor, 2015). When establishing political objectives, politicians, governmental entities, NGOs, and interest groups recognise the importance of influence in attaining certain goals (Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019; Lees-Marshment, 2003, 2014; Nwala and Uwalaka, 2022). The establishment of a political party to cultivate an appealing vision or candidate necessitates the formulation of market and sales orientated plan guidelines (Lees-Marshment, 2014).

Empirical Review

In a study on social media influencers and their relationship on their followers on Twitter, Olatilewa (2020) who adopted a mixed method approach comprising online social media followers and a content analysis of influencers posts across three themes of interest: marketing, political and advocacy. This analysis focused on three key thematic areas: marketing, political discourse, and advocacy. The study revealed three key findings: (1) Informative communication strategies were most commonly employed by influencers, accounting for 42.9% of cases, to shape follower perspectives; (2) influencers' personality traits significantly determined the level of influence their online activities had on audiences; and (3) political influencers demonstrated comparable impact to marketing influencers, with no statistically notable difference in their ability to sway follower behaviour or opinions. The study therefore recommended that media literacy among youths should be enhanced to increase their capacity for following influencers reasonably.

A study by Agbim, Etumnu, and Iredibia (2023) examined “The role of the Obidient movement on Twitter in the context of Nigeria's 2023 general election”. The researchers found that Twitter can be a potent tool for mobilizing political support, but it is just one of several channels for engaging with voters. To understand the impact of the Obidient movement, the study employed extrapolation, which involves analyzing existing trends and patterns to make informed predictions about future outcomes. The study highlighted the potential of social media movements and hashtags to raise awareness about specific issues, shape public discourse, and amplify marginalised voices. Additionally, these online movements can facilitate discussions with policymakers, build support for various causes, and galvanize collective action. The findings indicated that the Obidient movement had a significant impact on voter behaviour and electoral outcomes in the 2023 general election, with a mean average of 2.8 suggesting a strong motivation behind the movement's emergence. Specifically, 378 respondents (or 98.4% of the sample) reported that the movement had influenced their voting decisions. The study's recommendations emphasised the need for electoral authorities in Nigeria to be prepared for increased voter participation in future elections.

Theoretical Framework

Source Credibility Theory

The Source Credibility Theory pioneered by Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953), posits that a message's persuasive power hinges on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of its communicator. Subsequent studies, including Hovland's later work and Weiss (1974), further dissected how credibility shapes persuasion. One pivotal experiment contrasted responses to identical messages delivered by credible versus non-credible sources, testing whether the source's authority alone could sway audience beliefs. Results confirmed that credible sources consistently drove greater attitude change, cementing credibility as a linchpin of persuasive communication.

Extending this logic to social media, Self (2007) defines source credibility as “the believability of a communicator as perceived by the recipient,” a lens through which influencers' impact can be assessed. To evaluate their persuasive power, this analysis will examine whether influencers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and audience alignment foster credibility and, consequently, follower satisfaction. The study tests the premise that influencers' personal traits, not just content form the basis of their persuasiveness, as posited by source credibility theory.

Methodology

This research employed survey. The population of this study includes electorates who make use of social media in the three (3) purposefully selected states in the South-West of Nigeria, namely Lagos State (LP), Oyo State (APC), and Osun State (PDP), which were won by different major political parties in the region. Active internet subscribers in the selected state with population were used determine population figure; Lagos, 8,702,394; Osun, 3,720,000; Oyo, 8,170,000 according to National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2022). Taro Yamane's formula was adopted in determine sample size of 400.

The study employed a multi-stage simple random sampling procedure to choose participants for the study. In each state selected, the state was divided into three (3) senatorial districts making (9) senatorial district in all. One most populous local government was picked from each of the senatorial district consisting of Lagos state; Lagos central (Surulere), Lagos West (Alimosho), Lagos East (Kosofe); Osun state; Osun West (Iwo LG), Osun Central (Osogbo LG), Osun East (Ife-Central LG) and Oyo South (Ibadan North East LG), Oyo North (Ogbomoso North LG), Oyo Central (Oyo West LG). A structured questionnaire served as a data collection instrument for quantitative approach of this study. The data collected for this study is simple statistic with the use of frequency and Statistical Package and Service Solution (SPSS). This provided for easy and clear understanding of the data analysis and presentation.

Data Presentation and Analysis

As stated in earlier, four hundred (400) copies of questionnaires were earlier administered, out of which three hundred and seventy-six (376) were correctly filled and the analysis is thus based on 376 copies of questionnaire that were correctly filled and retrieved.

Research Objective 1: To identify the demographic and socioeconomic factors that may affect the influence of social media influencers on the voting behaviour of young people in Southwest Nigeria

The findings suggest that demographics factors such as; Gender, Age, Education and Occupation, as well as socioeconomic factors such as; Political Ideology, Ethnicity/Tribe, Credibility, Attractiveness, Religion, Income among others significantly moderate the influence of social media influencers on the voting behaviour of youths in Southwest Nigeria. Findings on demographic variable indicate that business people are most likely to be influenced by social media influencers supports of candidates compared to other occupations. This is due to their experiences and possibly their socioeconomic status which is more stable. Also, younger ages that are mostly males with intermediate educational level (secondary school) are most susceptible to these influences.

Moreover, findings on socioeconomic variable indicate that religion is one of the formidable socioeconomic factors that influenced the young voters during the 2023 presidential election in the country. Understanding these moderating factors can help in crafting more effective political campaigns that leverage on social media influencers' endorsements to engage the youths' demography and socioeconomic status effectively.

Demographic Variables: The demographic variables of the respondents indicate that 55.9% of them were males, while 44.1% were females. This shows that the male gender dominated the study. Also, it was discovered that 44.1% were of age 29-38 years, while 5.9% were of age 49 years and above. This shows that the respondents between ages 29 and 38 are more likely to have interests in the subject matter. The findings on level of education indicate that 56.9% are educated up to secondary education, while 19.1% were uneducated. On their occupations, it was found that majority of them 30.1% were business people, while 8.2% were into farming. This shows that the respondents are mostly business-oriented people. Details are as presented below:

Table 1: Respondents Demographic Variables

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	210	55.9
	Female	166	44.1
	Total	376	100
Age	18-28	81	21.5
	29-38	166	44.1
	39-48	107	28.5
	49 & above	22	5.9
	Total	376	100
Educational Level	Uneducated	72	19.1
	Secondary	214	56.9
	Tertiary	90	23.9
	Others	-	0.0
	Total	376	100
Occupation	Business	113	30.1
	Civil Servant	42	11.2
	Farming	31	8.2
	Politician	94	25.0
	Student	59	15.7
	Others	37	9.8
	Total	376	100

Socioeconomic Variable: The findings indicate that among other socioeconomic factors, religion was considered as factor that influenced their choice of a presidential candidate in 2023 election. 58.8% of the respondents expressed their supports and votes based on religion, 23.5%

were influenced by political ideology, young voters were not moved and influenced base on income, personality trait and attractiveness. This shows that religion influenced the choice of voters in 2023 presidential election as presented in the table below:

Table 2: Socioeconomic Variable

S/N	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1	Political Ideology	40	23.5
2	Ethnic/Tribe	10	5.8
3	Income	-	0.0
4	Personality	-	0.0
5	Credibility	20	11.7
6	Attractiveness	-	0.0
7	Religion	100	58.8
Total		170	100

Research Objective 2: To determine whether there is a correlation between the activities of social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election

The data below indicates that a significant number of the respondents do not consider the role of social media influencers in the election to be negligible, suggesting that these influencers via their endorsements did have some level of influences on the outcome of the election. However, the divided opinions highlight that their level of influence was not universally recognised or acceptable. The critical stance of respondents towards the election results, irrespective of social media influencers' supports/endorsements, points to a broader context of political dissatisfaction or perceived irregularities in the election process.

Findings showed that, there exists a level of relationship between social media influencers' endorsement and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election, this influence is nuanced and not overwhelmingly decisive. The divided opinions on the role of social influencers and the mixed reactions generated during the post-election activities showed that social influencers' endorsements of their preferred candidate did play a role, but their influence was limited and varied among various segments of the voters. The criticism and dissatisfaction on the election results also underscores that other factors, likely more substantive than social influencers' endorsements, played a critical role in shaping public opinion and reactions towards the outcome of the 2023 presidential election.

Post Election Behaviour: The findings on post-election behaviour showed that 56.1% of the respondents agreed that social influencers played negligible role on the acceptance or rejection of the election results, while 61.7% agreed that they were made to believe the most popular candidate won the 2023 presidential election. Thus, it is evident from the findings that social

media influencers did not stop in their influential role during the election, but also after the election. Moreover, popularity of the presidential candidates actually determined the winner of the election. The details are presented in the table below:

Table 4.6: Post Election Activities (Acceptance, Approval and Disappointment)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Social influencers played a negligible role in influencing the acceptance or rejection of election results in Southwest	Strongly Agree	38	10.1
	Agree	211	56.1
	Undecided	17	4.5
	Disagree	68	18.1
	Strongly Disagree	42	11.2
	Total	376	100
I was made to believe that the most popular candidate won the 2023 presidential election	Strongly Agree	46	12.2
	Agree	232	61.7
	Undecided	8	2.1
	Disagree	71	18.9
	Strongly Disagree	19	5.1
	Total	376	100

Test of Hypothesis

The relationship between political social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential elections

In addition, we evaluate the relationship between prominent political social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential elections, using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient. The result is as provided in the table below:

Table 3: Relationship between social media influencers and outcome of the 2023 election

Variable	N	Std. Error	Sig. value
Political Social Media Influencers	392	0.494	0.050
Outcome of 2023 Presidential Elections	392		

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

It is noted from the table above, that prominent political social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential elections are positively correlated ($r = 0.494$, Sig. value < 0.05). The result leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis of no significant relationship between prominent political social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential elections (since Sig. value < 0.05). Thus, there is strong statistical evidence supporting a strong relationship between political social media influencers and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election.

Discussion of Findings

The findings showed that younger ages that are majorly males with intermediate level of education (secondary school) were most susceptible to the influence of social media influencers,

while religion also played a formidable socioeconomic role as a factor that influenced voters during the 2023 presidential election in the country. This finding is in tandem with the position of Hirose (2022) that youths prefer influencers because they produce contents and information in a very entertaining way and provide interesting contents in a more personal setting. It also aligns with the views of Arthur (2012) that youths who pursue their interests on the Internet are more likely to be engaged in civic and political issues, and are more likely to be exposed to diverse political viewpoints capable of shaping their orientations.

However, it was found that, there exists a level of relationship between social media influencers' endorsement and the outcome of the 2023 presidential election, while the endorsements of these influencers played a critical role in shaping public opinions and reactions towards the outcome of the election. Also, it was discovered that social media influencers did not stop in their influential role during the election, but also after the election, while popularity of the presidential candidates was also attributed as a determinant factor in deciding the winner of the election. This finding is in consonance with that of Goodwin and Woolley (2021) that, political social media influencers have become increasingly popular in the most recent elections, as these influencers discuss relevant topics on politics and elections, typically encouraging their followers to agree with their points and participate in election.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying that social media influencers are fast becoming critical stakeholders in the political space. This is due to their popularity and millions of followership they commands across social media platforms. More importantly, political actors have keyed into these trends by engaging the services of these influencers for campaign purposes. This is quite evident in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, as handful of social media influencers with larger followership base were used to promote political candidates. Hence, the powerful influence of social media influencers in political campaigns, discourses and narratives cannot be overemphasised. Their continuous engagements by the political bigwigs and parties are welcome idea in the political communication arena, especially in engaging the audience/voters on the need to exercise their franchise and vote for their choice of candidate in an election.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Voters should ensure that voting for certain candidate in an election is not based on sympathy, empathy or any unsubstantiated reason; rather it should be based on the ability of the candidate to deliver his campaign programmes.

2. Voters who are active social media users must ensure that social media influencers give strong reasons to vote their preferred candidate.
3. The category of voters that are active on social media space and who did vote, acknowledged the influence of social media influencers on their voting decisions

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