
Setting Agenda for Public Discourse: Examining the Impact of Social Media on Political Participation amongst Nigerian Youths

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ABSTRACT

In the present era of screen age and social media, every facet of human endeavour has been affected covertly or overtly by the mass media. In this period, no media has significantly influenced human activities as much as the social media. Therefore, this study sheds light on the impact of social media in electioneering campaign and political participation amongst Nigerian youths. This study is anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory in order to tests its applicability on social media. The researcher employed survey research method and simple percentage was used for the analysis. In the survey, a sample size of 400 respondents made up of youths was selected through convenience sampling in Benin City, the capital city of Edo State. This study found that social media during electioneering campaign is used in promoting aspirants and their political parties to the electorates. The study also found that social media has been largely successful in their agenda-setting function on political issues in Nigeria especially as the race for 2023 general elections kicks off. This study recommends that social media information about politics, political parties and their candidates should be verified by users before engaging them. It also recommends that political parties and aspirants should refrain from spreading falsehood in their electioneering campaigns on the social media.

KEYWORDS: *Social media; political communication; electioneering campaign; political participation; political marketing.*

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a media world –a global village; a world without communication boundaries and limitless in its potential to disseminate information across many frontiers simultaneously at the speed of light. The society has successfully transited from “analogue one-way” communication and intertwined with the “digital dialogic/interactive” communication (Allcott, & Gentzkow, 2017, p.211), in all facets of human endeavour, made possible by the new media, of which social media is paramount. Social media has significantly democratised how people communicate with one another. Studies have shown that democracy has continually benefitted from changes in information and communication media technology (Allcott, & Gentzkow, 2017). In the same vein, Gallop and Magee (2017) affirmed that since the dawn of the 21st century, the potentials and opportunities made possible by the shift from conventional media of print and broadcast media to the new frontiers in ICT, especially the plethora of social media platforms have significantly re-shaped the notion of democracy and political participation.

Social media has been described as the media for the screen age (Arijeniwa et al., 2022). They are defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61). They are technologically-driven media platform that allows users to create, generate, edit and share their own contents, ideas, opinions and thoughts with other users who shares similar community of interests with them (Arijeniwa, et al., 2022). These platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc have made access to information, opinions, ideas, thoughts, views, etc easy and faster at the speed of light and at the convenience of the users bridging the hitherto barriers of distance and time (Sawyer & Chen, 2012).

Therefore, due to the wide usage and myriads of potentials of the social media, it is increasingly difficult to escape from the contents of the social media as it has permeated every echelon of human society due to its potential and ability to reflect and reinforce different interests and diverse political views of individuals and groups in the society. In 2021, there are 4.2 billion active social media users in world with Nigeria boasting of 43 million active users (Tankovska, 2021). Therefore, the tentacles of social media usage have spread to every facets of human endeavour and has democratised information exchange between individuals across physical boundaries.

However, the effects and impact of social media, in modern times, have become prevalent in the realm of politics, especially in political communication, mobilisation and participation. Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, and van Atteveldt (2019) observed that in the present era, it is hard to imagine contemporary election campaigns without electorates being exposed to information from the traditional mass media such as radio and TV, and new media such as Facebook and Twitter. Political parties and aspirants are becoming conscious of their social media reputation and image as much as their offline reputation. In Nigeria today, politicians are employing the social media to expand their online presence to meet with the youths who constitute the bulk of eligible voters, as part of their electioneering campaign in order to meet with them on their own turf and at their convenience. In recent times, electioneering campaigns in Nigeria have gone beyond analogue (face-to-face) to accommodate digital or electronic campaign (e-campaign) in order to secure the popular votes and entrench political participation. Meanwhile, political participation is primarily about citizens’ activities in politics and their efforts to influence political outcomes (Segesten & Bosseta, 2015).

The available body of literature on social media usage in political communication reveals that many scholars have conducted empirical studies on the enormous role of social media on citizens’ digital engagement and political participation viz-à-viz social media usage for electronic participation and political marketing (An et al., 2011; Lamprianou, 2013; Hemphill & Roback, 2014; Ayankoya, Cullen & Calitz, 2015). However, majority of these studies did not address the subject of youths’ usage of social media and the interplay of the agenda setting notion on youths’ participation in politics in Nigeria.

Therefore, as 2023 general elections in Nigeria beckon, there has been endless expression of interest from individuals in the politicking of the country who wants to vie for one political office or the other. Most of these expressions have also been publicised on the social media as well as the mainstream media, as a means of creating a favourable perception and acceptance when the polls finally open. Thus, this study is imperative in examining whether

social media helps in setting agenda for public discourse as well as entrenches youths' participation in politics in Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It has been established from relevant literatures that social media usage in political communication, especially before, during and after an election, is becoming prevalent. Studies have shown that the rapid advancements in information and communication technology viz-a-viz the emergence of myriads of social media, has significantly influenced democratic participation around the world today (Segesten & Bossetta, 2016; Zaheer, 2016; Seteolu, 2017; Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Momoh, 2019). In the present political clime, political aspirants and their parties, in their quest for rapport building with electorates and the youths, have continuously employed social media platforms, particularly Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, to publicize their agenda-building campaigns (Chadwick, 2017) in order to shape and mould the opinion of the electorates towards their agenda and opinion. Nevertheless, other studies have shown that social media are occasionally employed negatively by political candidates and their followers which affect the fairness during electioneering campaigns (Apuke & Apollos, 2017; Dunu, 2018).

However, despite these influences and anomalies associated with social media usage in political communication, in Nigeria, there have been conscious efforts by the politicians and political aspirants to use their social media platforms to build and sell their agenda to their followers and potential electorates, especially the youths, as 2023 general elections beckons. This is because using social media, in most instances, does not guarantee political participation from users who are usually interested in other trendy topics and issues. Therefore, the extent to which these messages becomes a topic of public discourse in the society, both offline and online in order to enhance political participation is what this study focuses on ascertaining, even as 2023 general elections draw nigh in Nigeria.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study pursued the following objectives:

1. To establish the roles of social media in electioneering campaign amongst the youths.
2. To determine how social media usage in electioneering campaign influences youths' participation in political activities.
3. To understand youths' perception on whether social media is setting agenda for public discourse in order to entrench political participation amongst the youths.

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Media: The Interactive Media

Social media is an internet-based platform that enables user-generated contents to be shared and disseminated to a large number of end-users at their convenience bypassing the traditional barriers of time and space (Nwaoboli, 2022a; Nwaoboli and Asemah, 2021; Asemah and Nwaoboli, 2022). Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) conceptualised the social media as a cluster of internet-based applications that is powered by the innovation of web 2.0 and affords registered users the creation and exchange of user-generated contents. They are web-

based networking sites and applications that enable users to interact with other users via the use of computer and/or mobile phones. Nwaoboli, Ezeji & Osife-Kurex (2022) and Edegoh and Anunike (2016) added that the social media are computer-mediated communication platforms that afford registered users the opportunity to create and share their own contents as well as exchange ideas, information and audio-visual contents within a virtual community of interests and networks. Arijenwa et al., (2022) opined that these platforms have the *audio-texto-visual* advantage which makes it easy for users to express themselves without restrictions which are associated with using the mainstream media such as radio and television.

Although, the advent of social media could be seen as the fulfilment of the Marshall McLuhan's *global village* mantra, Mojeed-Sanni (2015) opined that the concept of a *global village* has over the course of the last two decades metamorphosed to a *global parlour* due to the size of the interconnectivity in the 21st century made possible by the internet. However, this did not nullify the idea behind McLuhan's thesis. This is because the idea of a *global village* as birthed by McLuhan is hinged on the premise that communication in the world today has significantly overcome the hitherto known geographical barriers, particularly as a result of wider social media usage by all classes of people irrespective of distance, age, creed, religion, race, ethnic, gender or ideologies that exists around the world.

However, there are plethora of social media platforms around the world that are employed by users for communication and information sharing activities. These include Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, LinkedIn, Zoom, Telegram, TikTok, Flickr, and Reddit, amongst others (Nwaoboli, 2022b). Statistics have shown that in Nigerian social *mediasphere*, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, TikTok, Telegram and YouTube are the most popular and widely-used (Tankovska, 2021). These social media platforms are used by different individuals and organisations who are registered users with an active profile for multi-faceted purposes - leisure, business, academic, social, political, religious, to name a few (Asemah, Nwaoboli & Nwoko, 2022; Asemah, Nwaoboli & Beli, 2022).

Conceptualising Electioneering Campaign

It is difficult to discuss electioneering campaign in isolation without mentioning elections itself. Olabamiji (2014, p.46) described elections as "a constitutionally mandated process of selecting, voting and mandating the people who will hold either legislative or executive position and steer the affairs of a state for a period of time". He stated further that it is a process of bestowing political power and authority on political aspirants and flag-bearers who had seek for the mandate of the masses to rule them. Therefore, elections help in establishing and renewing political authority and social contract for a stipulated tenure in political office of a state through popular votes between the government and the masses. Olabamiji (2014) opined that elections are closely-related to periodic rituals that focus on regularly renewing leadership in other to ensure continuity of government.

However, in the course of elections, electioneering campaign is crucial. Momoh (2019) noted that an electioneering campaign, which is sometimes referred to as political campaigns, is an organized effort which seeks to influence the choice of the electorates during an election. Norris (2005) added that there are fundamentally three types of electoral campaigns namely: pre-modern, modern and post-modern campaign. According to Norris, the pre-modern campaign which began in the 19th century until at least the 1950s, was characterised by

physical rallies, door-step canvassing, party meetings, wards meetings to planned the resources, and provision of all the machinery linking voters and various political aspirants.

In the modern campaigns era, which started from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s, according to Norris (2005), was characterised by: a nationally-coordinated strategic campaign; paid professional consultants specializing in communications, marketing, polling, and campaign management; the shift from more partisan newspapers towards national television news; and the development of a more detached and instrumental electorate. In addition, Norris (2005) affirmed that in the post-modern campaigns era, professional consultants on advertising, public opinion, marketing and strategic news management becomes co-actors with politicians, assuming a more influential role within government in a permanent campaign, as well as coordinating local activity more tightly at the grassroots. He added that during the post-modern campaign, there is a shift from national broadcasting towards more diverse news sources including satellite and cable stations, talk radio and 24-hour rolling news bulletins as well as the opportunities for newer forms of party-voter interaction caused by the rise of the internet.

Therefore, electioneering campaign is a period in political development of a democratic society when political parties and their flag-bearers/candidates exchange party and personal manifestoes with their supporters, followers and eligible voters. It is a period of political marketing that occurs before voters hit the polls to exercise their franchise and civic duty of voting and be voted for in an election. It is a period characterised by merry-making as well as festivities in major cities and towns within a nation to meet with electorates and eligible voters on an inter-personal level and interact with them. However, due to the amount of information exchange required during electioneering campaign, social media presents the electorates and candidates as well as their political parties the avenue to interact seamlessly with one another and as such facilitate political participation.

Political Participation in the Social Media Age

Political activities have been significantly enhanced with the advent of social media. It is hard and difficult to imagine political activities in a democratic clime without the usage of social media (Zaheer, 2016). Political parties, candidates as well as electoral bodies have been employing social media tools as a way of complementing their efforts at reaching the larger categories of electorates at their comfort zones and convenience. This is because the social media is an interactive platform that affords everyone the opportunity to interact and share contents without established restrictions and regulations attached to the usage of conventional mass media (especially the print, broadcast and outdoor or transit media). Against this backdrop, political participation has traditionally been conceptualised as the “acts” (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 2) or “action(s)” (Brady, 1999, p. 737) taken by citizens of a democratic setting to influence political outcomes during an election. Segesten and Bossetta, (2017) emphasised that political participation is centres on the activities of citizens and their efforts to influence politics in their societies. Therefore, the thrust of political participation is that eligible voters and individuals can easily connect with others, and easily navigate communicative boundaries to discuss matters that interest them and show their support towards a candidate or political party in order to influence electoral outcomes.

However, there is a growing body of literature that have shown that social media has been largely successful in stimulating citizens' participation in politics as well using the social

media to influence the dynamics of electoral activities in the 21st century (Zaheer, 2016; Segesten & Bossetta, 2017; Seteolu, 2017; Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & van Atteveldt, 2019). This has made scholars to believe that the incorporation of social media into political activities has created a paradigm shift in public communication dynamics which has continue to significantly alter the citizens' patterns of interactivity (Adebiyi, Ajetunmobi, & Olawale, 2020).

Therefore, there is a positive link between citizens' use of digital communication technologies and their future political activities (Segesten & Bossetta). Hence, as means of entrenching political participation in the digital age, the social media is a viable tool that must be tapped to its fullest potential.

Social Media in Electioneering Campaign and Political Participation

There is an avalanche of studies that have investigated and continues to investigate the effectiveness and efficiency of social media usage and its influence on electoral campaigns in Nigeria and in other democratic societies around the world (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015).

In recent times, Momoh (2019) asserted that the new internet-based media has become one of the most popular means of political communication especially social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. These platforms, which has been described as tool for public interaction and exchange of information has created an avenue for fostering strong political awareness and participation as well as enhancing effective participatory communication, rapid dialoguing, and engagement (Himmelboim et al., 2014; Ross & Bürger, 2014; Fountaine, 2017). These social media has changed the paradigm of democratic participation due to the opportunity the platforms provides for political parties, leaders, aspirants to communicate with the public, especially the flow of information between the politicians and the youths which constitute the larger crop of eligible voters. To this end, Momoh (2019) added that this has also influenced the way citizens all over the world interact with each other within a given political setting.

Muntean (2015), in his attempt to trace the origin of social media usage in electoral process, noted that the 2008 U.S. Presidential elections marked a historic chapter in the political sphere, when for the first time, social media allowed users to publicly share their support for a particular candidate as well as interact with others on political issues. Oelsner and Heimrich (2015) noted that as an e-campaigning tool, social media permits direct, personalised, responsive and dialogic communication between the candidates and their supporters/eligible voters and as such improving the connection between the aspirants and the citizens. Kalsnes (2016) affirmed that this is a strategy meant to remove the communication barriers associated with the mainstream media and directly engage the citizens without restrictions.

In the same vein, Rodrigues and Niemann (2017) emphasised that there are instances when social media has allowed politicians to directly reach and interact with their followers and potential supporters during electioneering campaigns. In lieu with this assertion Fountaine (2017) study found that political candidates and eligible voters have registered on various social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, as a means of building their online followings and influence positive electoral outcomes as well as seek for donations. Satterfield (2016) emphasised that there is a paradigm shift in the political landscape due to the potential of social media in electioneering campaigns as candidates and their supporters constantly post

their views on Facebook and Twitter. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) added that through social media, political aspirants appeal to the populace by maintaining continuous contact with their supporters thereby eliciting some form of active participations in form of contributions of ideas, sharing and likeness of posts as well as active comments. This mirrors previous studies, which found that most political parties and candidates open an account on Facebook, Twitter and other social media, so as to project their agenda for public discourse (Kreiss, 2014; David et al., 2016).

Indeed, the use of web-based social networking systems, especially, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube in electioneering campaign can never be overemphasized (Ajayi & Adesote, 2015). This is because social media permits users to express their political interests, beliefs, support a particular aspirant and interact with others on political issues (Abbott, MacDonald, & Givens 2013; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Boulianne, 2015; Chinedu-Okeke & Obi, 2016).

Review of Empirical Studies

Literatures abound on the impact of social media in political communication both globally and locally. While the focus is different, the overriding idea is geared towards understanding the relationship between new media and political participation and engagement in the society.

Seteolu (2017), in an attempt to underscore the importance of the media in politics in Nigeria, conducted an appraisal of the role of the media in the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria, viz-à-viz the paradigm shift from traditional media to social media as a means of increasing relevance and influence of the mass media in Nigeria. The study was predicated against the backdrop of media reportage on issues bothering on party financing, political campaigns, and election violence, amongst others. The paper argued that there has been a significant paradigm shift in the hitherto roles of the media, especially from informing the public to a more systemic role of influencing the political behaviour of the electorate. It was also found that, for a certainty, the social media has considerably penetrated the Nigerian political landscape, especially as regards direct information exchange between the electorate and the candidates. The author concluded that as more elections beckon in Nigeria, the new media, especially with the adoption of social media, will enhance the quality of the campaign and deepen Nigerian political participation and culture, alongside the traditional mass media. In a related study, Segesten and Bossetta (2016) investigated how, and to what extent, citizens use Twitter as a platform for political mobilisation in an electoral context in the build-up to the 2015 British general elections. The results showed that citizens – not political parties – are the primary initiators and sharers of political calls for action leading up to the election. The study also revealed that political awareness was expressed by citizens using Twitter's hashtag feature. This supports the idea that traditional notion of political participation needs to afford citizens new ways of participating in the politics of the digital age.

Apuke and Tunca (2018) investigated the significance of the usage of social media in electioneering campaigns and political processes in Nigerian. Anchored on the agenda setting and uses and gratification theories, the study found that in the two previous general elections in Nigerian held in 2015 and 2011, social media was used employed because of its ability to achieve participatory communication. The study revealed that social media was used as a channel for political campaign organisation, electioneering crusades, reinforcing party ideologies, and voter mobilization. Specifically, in the 2015 elections, it was found that

during results collation, citizen journalists and civil society organisations employed social media to inform the public about the situation of things around the country. However, the study also found that social media was used by political parties as a weapon to undermine and even destroy the image of their opponents. Other findings of the study were that character assassination, violence, and abuse (hate) speeches were carried out, which further increased the divide between the Northern and Southern parts of the country. Thus, the authors concluded that social media was primarily employed to influence the opinions and views of youths, increasing their political awareness and participation. That culminated in an unprecedented win in the presidential elections for the opposition, the All Progressives Congress (APC), over the ruling party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). It was recommended that political messages should be based on truth and full of information that will aid eligible voters in making determined, well-informed decision in their quest to participate in political activities and voting for their elected representatives.

In a similar study, Momoh (2019) examined the impact of social media on electioneering campaigns in Nigeria's 2019 general elections. The objective of the study was to ascertain the role of social media in electioneering campaigns in the build up to the 2019 general elections. The study revealed that social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have entrenched direct political interactions between political aspirants and electorates during the Nigeria's 2019 general elections as well as encouraged the rapid dissemination of information to a large audience within a short time. The study further found that despite the advantages inherent in using social media, it remains largely unregulated as many news-feeds or stories disseminated through social media are largely unreliable and not credible. Therefore, it was recommended that despite the advantages of social media in electioneering campaigns in Nigeria's 2019 general elections, there is the need for verification of news-feeds in order to prevent misleading information that is detrimental to human society. In another study, Adebisi et al., (2020) analysed the engagement of potential voters by the two major governorship aspirants in the 2019 gubernatorial election in Oyo State, Nigeria. The study explored the interaction, pattern of engagement as well as the extent to which their followers focused on issues of their campaigns on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Using the content analysis method to analyse selected comments of the supporters of the two aspirants on the three social networking sites between December 2018 to February 2019, results showed that there is significant level of engagement by the two candidates with their followers on the selected social media platforms. However, it was found that despite the level of interaction, a one-way communication pattern was observed as the followers' questions and observations were largely ignored. The study, therefore, recommended that media personnel of politicians should always engage in two-way communication with their online followers and they should strive to leverage on the potentials of the social media in political campaigns in order to effectively utilise them.

A critical appraisal of the above conceptual and empirical literature discourses revealed that, notwithstanding the increased impact of social media on electioneering campaigns in previous elections in Nigeria (from 2011 to 2019), most previous studies conducted by researchers and scholars alike do not capture electioneering campaigns and political participation as a two-pronged subject-matter as regards the youths. From the studies reviewed, we found that they do not focus on the impact of social media on electioneering campaigns and political participation amongst Nigerian youths, who constitute the larger percentage of eligible electorates in the country, even as 2023 general elections draw near. It

is against this backdrop that this study seeks to make significant contributions to this research area by examining how social media influences youths' participation in political activities in Nigeria, of which electioneering campaigns are fundamental.

Theoretical Framework

The imperatives of having a strong and applicable theory in any research endeavour cannot be overemphasised; especially in communications' research. This is because anchoring a study on pertinent theory (or theories) makes analysis of the subject-matter viable (Nwaoboli et al., 2021). Hence, to provide structure and focus, this study is located in the terrain of the Agenda Setting Theory (AST) of Mass Media.

The foundation of Agenda Setting Theory can be traced to Walter Lippmann's thesis on public opinion, published in 1922 (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). Although, Lippmann himself did not formulate the word "agenda setting", his argument centres on the idea that the mass media are the primary link between events in the ideal world and the actual images that radiate from the minds of the public (Asemah et al., 2017, p.247). The theory was therefore, formulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on the premise that the mainstream or conventional media set the agenda for the public to follow. However, Ikpe (2012) as cited in Asemah et al., (2017) observed that the paradigm has now shifted from *agenda-setting* to *agenda-building*. This is because the media has altered its role in society to transcend giving people what to think about to creating a pattern of thoughts for the public. However, the primary assumption of the theory is that although the media may not be successful most of the time in telling the public what to think, their influence may be significantly felt in telling the populace what to think about. Asemah et al., (2017) observe that agenda-setting theory holds that most of the images and montages in people minds, as well as what constitutes people's readership/listenership/viewership interests, discussions, thoughts, and worries are a stark reflection of what they consumed from the mass media. Hence, the premise centres on the fact that the more the media, most of the time, successfully creates prominence about certain issues and events in society, the more such issues will become important to the audience.

Applying this theory to the current subject matter, it could be inferred that the notion of agenda setting argues the role of social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook) in establishing the overriding agenda of the populace before and especially during electioneering campaigns. Thus, this theory is applicable to this study as it would create a basis for understanding the role of social media in moulding and shaping the opinions of the public on crucial issues in society, of which election and political matters are vital.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the survey research design as the methodology and structured, self-administered, questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The population of the study comprises of the youths who are residents of Benin City, the Edo State capital, which is a non-finite population. However, the overall population of Benin City, which according to the population projection by the National Population Census (2016) Enumeration Area Demarcation (EAD) Data, was 1,496,000. Therefore, sample size of 400 was obtained using Taro Yamane formula. The formula for the calculation is: $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$ where n is the sample size; N refers to the population of the study; —el refers to the sampling error (usually

0.05 acceptable error); \wedge means raised to power of and n referred to the sample size. Therefore, $n=1,496,000/[1+1, 1,496,000 (0.05)^2]$; $n=400$.

Meanwhile, 100 respondents were administered the questionnaire from each of the four local governments areas (Ovia North-East, Egor, Ikpoba-Okha and Oredo) which are within Benin City, using the convenience sampling technique. The research instrument was administered on the respondents through direct contact. Out of the 400 copies of questionnaire administered, 393, representing 98.3% were retrieved and valid. Data gathered from the field were, therefore, presented and analysed, using simple percentage and frequency distribution tables.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Social Media Mostly Used by Respondents

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|------------|----------------|
| Facebook | 98 | 24.9 |
| Instagram | 71 | 18.1 |
| Twitter | 66 | 16.8 |
| Telegram | 32 | 8.1 |
| WhatsApp | 83 | 21.1 |
| TikTok | 43 | 10.9 |
| Total | 393 | 100 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2023*

This data presented above shows that all the respondents are active users of social media. However, the implication of this is that of all the social media captured in this study, Facebook is mostly used by majority of the respondents, followed closely by WhatsApp and Instagram respectively. Therefore, this shows that Facebook still remains the most used of all the social media platforms.

Table 2: Exposure and Access to Social Media

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|------------|----------------|
| Very high | 198 | 50.4 |
| High | 137 | 34.9 |
| Can't Say | 39 | 9.9 |
| Low | 12 | 3.1 |
| Very Low | 7 | 1.8 |
| Total | 393 | 100 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2023*

The implication of this data is that the audience are active users of the social media and as such constitute the right audience whose responses will be invaluable in providing answers to the questions that necessitates the study.

Table 3: Roles of Social Media in Electioneering Campaign

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|-----------|----------------|
| Mobilizing and educating eligible voters | 68 | 17.3 |
| Marketing party candidates/aspirants | 154 | 39.2 |

| | | |
|--|------------|------------|
| Building favourable image for the party | 77 | 19.6 |
| Seeking for donations | 41 | 10.4 |
| Disseminating news stories to the public | 43 | 10.9 |
| Others | 10 | 2.5 |
| Total | 393 | 100 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2023*

The import of this data is that social media performs critical and important functions in electioneering campaign, especially when there is need to reach the teeming youth population who constitute the highest users of social media in the present age.

Table 4: Social Media Usage in Electioneering Campaign Enhances Information Exchange between the Candidates and the Young Eligible Voters' Population

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 127 | 32.3 |
| Agree | 196 | 49.9 |
| Undecided | 48 | 12.2 |
| Disagree | 13 | 3.3 |
| Strongly Disagree | 9 | 2.3 |
| Total | 393 | 100 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2023*

The implication of this data is that the respondents are of the view that the use of social media in electioneering campaign increases the speed of information exchange between the candidates and the young electorates as they can swiftly express themselves without going through the bureaucracy involved in the traditional/conventional mass media in the society.

Table 5: Social Media Usage in Electioneering Campaign Allows Youth to Express Their Political Beliefs, Support A Specific Candidate and Interact With Others on Political Issues

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 167 | 42.5 |
| Agree | 203 | 51.7 |
| Undecided | 12 | 3.1 |
| Disagree | 7 | 1.8 |
| Strongly Disagree | 4 | 1 |
| Total | 393 | 100 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2023*

This data implies that the youths' ability to use the social media without restriction and express their political beliefs freely as they deem fit is a feature that political parties and candidates have harnessed to their advantage to reach out to the youths in their space.

Table 6: Social Media Presentation of Certain Political Issues Enhances the Prominence and Importance Attached to Such Issues by the Youths

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|------------|----------------|
| Strongly Agree | 99 | 25.2 |
| Agree | 186 | 47.3 |
| Undecided | 49 | 12.5 |
| Disagree | 33 | 8.4 |
| Strongly Disagree | 26 | 6.6 |
| Total | 393 | 100 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2023*

The implication of this result is that the perception of the audience is that social media play significant role in the level of prominence and importance that they (the youths) attached to such political issues on the long run.

Table 7: The Volume of Social Media Discourses on Certain Political Party and her Candidates Influences Youths' Voting Decision

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|------------|----------------|
| Strongly Agree | 113 | 28.8 |
| Agree | 207 | 52.7 |
| Undecided | 37 | 9.4 |
| Disagree | 23 | 5.9 |
| Strongly Disagree | 13 | 3.3 |
| Total | 393 | 100 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2023*

The implication of this data is that the continuous exposure of social media users to certain messages about certain party/candidates have the ability to significantly impact the support such candidates will have compared to aspirants/parties whose social media presence is not as visible/prominent.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this study, it was found that majority of the respondents, who are youth population, have considerable and significant access and exposure to the social media. The data, as seen in table 3, also confirms that the respondents are active users of the social media as all the respondents affirmed that they use the social media, albeit at different levels of exposure and accessibility. This finding is not far from the truth as statistics shows that over 43 million Nigerians are active users of social media, of which majority are the youth population. The frequency and level of exposure of youths to social media means that it has become one of the most effective means of disseminating information that are targeted at the youth's population. Therefore, in a bid to encourage political participation of youths, political parties and their aspirants have consciously engages the youths on social media due to the rate at which they have access to these media. This result mirrors previous study conducted by Arijeniwa et al., (2022) in which the authors found that youths are the highest users of social media in Nigeria and world over, as well as Zaheer (2016) study where online participation in

political activities was found to be significantly correlated with demographic variables such as gender and age.

Findings also showed that the respondents were able to establish the perceived roles that social media performs in electioneering campaign, especially as regards Nigerian youths. The findings revealed that one of the major roles of social media during electioneering campaign is the marketing of aspirants as well as their political parties to the electorates. Interestingly, the respondents also identified mobilizing and educating eligible voters, building favourable image for the party, seeking donations as well as disseminating news stories to the public as other important roles of the social media during electioneering campaigns. These roles of social media are relatively tied to the fact that electioneering campaigns and political participation in Nigeria and in democratic societies, is an “information business” and the flow of information during electioneering campaign between the electorates and the aspirants as well as their political parties is crucial in order to secure the needed popular votes required for victory. This finding correspond with previous findings that information exchange as well as voter education and mobilisation are crucial role performed by the social media during election (Momoh, 2019; Adebisi et al., 2020)

In understanding how social media usage in electioneering campaign influences youths' participation in political activities, the study found that majority of the respondents are of the view that social media usage in electioneering campaign enhances information exchange between the young electorates and their preferred candidates, and it allows youths the liberty to express their political beliefs, support a specific candidate and interact with others on political issues at their convenience. This supports previous studies that have established that social media is a veritable source of political information (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017) as it provide the platform for political engagement amongst millions of voters as well as presenting political parties and their candidates to deliver their campaign messages directly to the electorates through their smartphones and on the go (Momoh, 2019).

The study also found that social media has been largely successful in their quest to overtly and/or covertly set agenda on political issues in Nigeria, for social media users as 2023 general elections beckons. This is because the more the social media popularises a particular candidates and/or political party, the level of engagements around that entity increases and dominates the social *mediasphere* for as long as possible. This is particularly true with Facebook, Instagram and Twitter where issues with the highest number of shares, comments and re-tweets become trending. Social media trending of certain issues elevates and generates discourses around such issues at an unprecedented level. Youths, who are the highest users of social media, are able to engage their political interests as much as would without leaving their comfort zones. This supports the thrust of the Agenda Setting Theory as formulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972) which surmises that the mainstream or conventional media sets the agenda for the public to follow. Hence, the agenda setting notion becomes applicable to the social media as much as the mainstream media due to its ability to give the youths something to think about on the political situation of the country ahead of 2023 general elections, amidst the road to presidency, legislative and gubernatorial seats.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focused on examining the impact of social media in electioneering campaign and political participation amongst Nigerian youths in Benin City metropolis. The respondents' data have been credible in providing answers to the pertinent questions that necessitated this study. Therefore, based on these findings, this study concludes that the need for interactivity in political communication between the leaders and the masses is crucial. In the spectrum of electioneering campaign, having the ability to engage in two-way dyadic communication with the young eligible voters in Benin City who might not attend physical rallies becomes imperative in order to entrench political participation of the young electorates in Benin City and in Nigeria at large.

However, this task can be achievable using the social media due to the teeming population of Nigerian youths who are constantly creating, sharing, interacting and exchanging user-generated contents with other users at their convenience without restriction. As affirmed by Benin City youths, the capability of the social media to set agenda for public discourse is a viable potential that needs to be positively employed by the political parties and aspirants to reach these categories of eligible voters in Nigeria in the 21st century. This is because elections and electioneering campaign in the digital age has gone beyond physical campaigns to digital, especially with political parties and aspirants now using the social media marketing (SMM) to foster two-way communication with the electorates who would not have been able to interact with each other using the mainstream media. In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Social media users should endeavour to verify political information they come across from credible mainstream and traditional mass media channels as well as official sources linked with such information before engaging and spreading them in order to avoid creating a discourse around false information.
2. Also, political parties and aspirants should refrain from spreading information that are untrue or targeted at damaging the reputation of specific political parties or oppositions in their electioneering campaigns on the social media as these narratives affect the way people view opposition parties and candidates in Nigeria based on the information accessed via the various social media platforms.
3. It is also proposed that as 2023 general election in Nigeria beckons, political parties and their candidates should harness the positive potentials of social media as much as they are using the mainstream media in electioneering campaign. This is because the social media is a viable tool of public communication and interaction which can also influence political participation and mobilisation of young eligible voters in Nigeria.

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