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Exploring the Role of Social Media in Shaping Electoral Consciousness: Insights from the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzed how social media has enhanced electoral consciousness in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State. Theoretically, the study is anchored on the framing and public sphere theories. Methodologically, the survey research design was adopted in pursuance of the objectives of the study. Four hundred was adopted as the sample size using Taro Yarmane's formula, generated from the total population of the study. In selecting the four hundred respondents used for the study adopted the cluster sampling technique to group the population into three senatorial districts, after which the accidental random sampling technique was utilised to select the respondents from the clustered sample coincidentally. However, after the distribution of the 400 hundred questionnaire, only three hundred and seventy one questionnaire were retrieved after field distribution which were used for the study's data analysis. The questionnaire instrument was adopted in generating primary data while secondary data were generated using newspaper publications, journals and books. The study presented data using tables, and the simple percentage method was utilised in analysing data. The study found, among others, that social media significantly boosted civic participation in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State by creating platforms for political discussions, awareness campaigns, and real-time election updates. Therefore, the study recommends, among others, that given social media has proven effective for political discussions, awareness campaigns, and real-time updates, state and local authorities, NGOs, and community organizations should leverage these platforms to maintain ongoing civic participation. Establishing regular digital forums, educational campaigns on political rights, and transparent information-sharing systems can keep citizens engaged in governance issues year-round.

Keywords: social media, election, electoral consciousness, democracy, political participation.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of news media has undergone significant transformations in recent decades. According to West (2017), the advent of digital platforms has greatly expanded the scope of journalism, social media, and public involvement. The practice of accessing news online, whether through platforms like Google, X, Facebook, prominent newspapers, or local media websites, has become widespread. Additionally, the use of smartphone notifications and mobile applications ensures that people worldwide receive the latest updates promptly. Social media has revolutionized

political communication by enabling politicians and political parties to communicate directly with their supporters, circumventing traditional media intermediaries (Brown, 2018 as cited in Osimen & Adeyefa, 2023).

Social media has had a profound impact on election campaigns, especially in terms of fundraising, coordination, and rallying voters (Egobueze, 2023; Garcia & Hernandez, 2019 as cited in Osimen & Adeyefa, 2023). Social media platforms have evolved into indispensable tools for political fundraising, where candidates and political parties utilize platforms like Facebook and X to solicit donations from individual contributors. Additionally, social media has enhanced the efficiency of political campaigns in organizing and mobilizing supporters, as campaigns leverage these platforms to synchronize events and initiatives (Garcia & Hernandez, 2019 as referenced in Osimen & Adeyefa, 2023). Moreover, social media has significantly influenced citizen engagement in politics. These platforms have emerged as crucial avenues for political involvement, as citizens utilize platforms such as X and Facebook to express their opinions, disseminate information, and connect with like-minded respondents (Lee & Kim, 2018 as cited in Osimen & Adeyefa, 2023). Furthermore, social media has empowered citizens to unite around specific issues and causes, resulting in the establishment of online communities capable of shaping public opinion and policy decisions (Chen & Liang, 2020 as referenced in Osimen & Adeyefa, 2023).

The 2023 Presidential Election served as a pivotal moment for the populace to rejuvenate democracy after enduring a tumultuous four years under the prior administration. Social media prominently featured the "Obident" movement, spearheaded by Peter Obi of the Labour Party and Bola Tinubu of the APC. The majority of the campaigning and activism, particularly for the Labour Party candidate, was notably prevalent on various social media platforms. According to Techcabal (n.d) of all the 18 presidential candidates, nine used social media. An analysis of 1,089 posts by the presidential candidates showed that they mostly used Facebook and X. Their posts included videos of campaign rallies, press statements, encouragement, manifestos, and smear campaigns. There were also accounts dedicated to promoting parties and candidates. Techcabal (n.d) reported that an EU study identified 946 of these individuals and noted that the accounts belonging to these supporters exhibited higher levels of activity compared to those of the candidates... Political parties frequently invested funds to amplify the reach of their messaging. Between January and mid-March, Nigerian political parties spent a total of ₦28,784,369 on Meta to promote political content on Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, they engaged influencers on platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and X. Despite the fact that only 0.04% of the nation's total internet users are on X, political parties predominantly utilized influencers on X.

Onyemachi (2023) revealed that the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) asserted that Nigeria boasted approximately 156 million active internet users in February 2023, which accounts for more than half of the nation's population. This suggests that a significant proportion of Nigerians engaged with various social media platforms during the same year of the elections. Consequently, social media platforms such as X have evolved into potent instruments for shaping public opinion, disseminating information, and coordinating collective actions.

Furthermore, it was documented by Olabanjo, Wusu, Afisi, Asokere, Padonu, Olabanjo, Ojo, Folorunso, Aribisala & Mazzara (2023) that "two million tweets with 18 attributes were amassed from X, encompassing public and personal tweets of the top three contenders - Atiku Abubakar, Peter Obi, and Bola Tinubu" (p.1). On X, movements and hashtags were instrumental in influencing narratives, drawing attention to specific subjects, and amplifying voices that might otherwise go unheard. They also stimulate discourse, engage with policymakers, and rally support for a multitude of causes. Building upon this foundation, the research aims to investigate how social media have emerged as a catalyst for electoral consciousness in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State.

The 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria was marked by heightened political awareness and participation, with Rivers State being a key battleground. Social media emerged as a significant platform for political discourse, mobilization, and engagement. Platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp provided avenues for the dissemination of information, political campaigns, and voter education. However, the influence of social media on electoral consciousness remains a subject of debate, especially in a politically charged and ethnically diverse state like Rivers.

Despite the potential of social media to enhance political awareness, several challenges threaten its effectiveness in shaping electoral consciousness. Issues such as the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, political propaganda, and cyberbullying have raised concerns about the credibility and objectivity of social media platforms in fostering informed decision-making among voters. Furthermore, the digital divide in Rivers State, characterized by disparities in internet access and literacy levels, limits the extent to which social media can effectively reach and influence all segments of the population.

Additionally, there is limited empirical research that critically examines the extent to which social media influenced voter behaviour, electoral participation, and political awareness during the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State. Questions arise as to whether social media served as a tool for genuine electoral education or merely amplified existing biases and political divisions.

Theoretical Framework

Jürgen Habermas introduced the theory in his seminal work, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Democracy," published in 1962 (Samuel & Euphemia, 2023). Kellner (n.d) elaborated on this idea by highlighting that "the emergence of the internet has broadened the scope for democratic engagement and discourse, creating novel public arenas for political involvement" (p.17). He further expounded that "traditional broadcast media such as radio and television, and now digital technologies, have fostered new public spheres and platforms for informational exchange, debate, and civic participation, offering the potential to rejuvenate democratic processes" (pp. 18-19).

In his seminal work "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" published in 1989, Jürgen Habermas introduces a comprehensive framework centered around the concept of the public sphere. Drawing inspiration from the historical evolution of bourgeois societies in Britain, France, and Germany during the late 18th and 19th centuries, Habermas delves into the emergence of a unique space that bridged the realms of economy and politics. This space provided respondents with the opportunity to engage in informed discussions, deliberate on various matters, and collectively make decisions and take action.

Habermas highlights the significance of newspapers, literature, salons, and debating forums in shaping and sustaining this public sphere, emphasizing its independence from the influences of both the Church and the State. This sphere, accessible to all citizens, embodied the ideals of the Enlightenment era, promoting rational discourse and critical thinking among participants. According to Habermas, this communicative platform served as a blueprint for nurturing democratic values and fostering political will among the populace.

The public sphere, as conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas, is a space where individuals come together to discuss and debate matters of public concern, ideally leading to the formation of rational public opinion. Social media platforms in Rivers State during the 2023 Presidential Election acted as modern digital public spheres, providing spaces for citizens to engage in political discussions, share information, and express their views on electoral issues. These platforms amplified political awareness and mobilization, potentially enhancing electoral consciousness among the populace.

However, the normative ideals of the public sphere—rational discourse, inclusivity, and critical debate—were challenged by the prevalence of misinformation, partisan polarization, and limited access to digital tools in some communities. These issues question the extent to which social media fulfilled its role as an effective public sphere in fostering informed and inclusive electoral participation. This study critically examines how social media platforms mediated the public sphere in Rivers State, exploring their impact on electoral consciousness while addressing challenges that hinder their democratic potential.

Conceptual Review

The concept 'social media' is a phrase used to refer to new media that emerged following the launch of Web 2.0 and is distinguished by a high level of interactivity (Levinson, 2012, cited by Osimen & Adefeya, 2011). Social media refers to web-based applications and services that enable users to interact, create, share, and search for content online (Nnanyelugo & Nwafor, 2013, cited by Osimen & Adefeya, 2011). It provides a platform for respondents to express themselves, share opinions, perspectives, and information such as career advice.

Social media is a subset of new media that emphasizes social networking and provides users with greater freedom to communicate with friends, exchange information, and express their views (Nnanyelugo & Nwafor, 2013, cited in Osimen & Adefeya, 2011). These platforms rely on mobile and internet-based technology to create dynamic environments for users to generate and modify content (Udoka, 2015, cited in Osimen & Adefeya, 2011).

The term 'social media' encompasses the utilization of web-based and mobile technologies to transform communication into an interactive dialogue (Baruah, 2012). Social media denotes the methods of interaction among individuals in which they generate, share, exchange, and comment on content within virtual communities and networks. For example, platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram enable users to create and share posts, photos, and videos with their followers, fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas and information.

Social media utilizes mobile and web-based technologies to establish highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities collaborate, co-create, converse, and edit user-generated content. This collaborative aspect is evident in platforms like Wikipedia, where users from around the world contribute knowledge to create a vast online encyclopedia that is constantly evolving. It brings about significant and widespread changes to communication among organizations, communities, and individuals (Adesope & Ogan-Charles, 2015). These changes can be seen in the way businesses now engage with customers through social media platforms, allowing for real-time feedback and personalized interactions that enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Overall, social media has revolutionized the way people connect and communicate, shaping the way information is shared and relationships are formed in the digital age.

Social media serves as a mechanism of interaction among individuals in which they produce, share, and exchange information and ideas within virtual communities and networks. Additionally, social media relies on mobile and web-

based technologies to develop highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, solidify, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Chiemela, Ovute, and Obochi, 2015).

Joseph (2013) as cited in Oparaugo (2021) opined that the Internet offers a vast array of specialized social communities where individuals with similar interests can come together. These online communities cover a diverse range of topics, catering to both broad and niche interests. For example, there are vibrant online communities dedicated to discussing issues related to colon and digestive health, providing a platform for individuals to share experiences, seek advice, and offer support. Similarly, topics like security and compliance have their own active social media communities, where professionals and enthusiasts engage in discussions, share insights, and stay updated on industry trends.

Social media platforms play a crucial role in facilitating social interaction by offering accessible and scalable communication channels. Through web-based and mobile technologies, these platforms enable users to engage in interactive dialogues, fostering connections and relationships in virtual spaces. For instance, platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram have revolutionized the way people communicate, allowing for real-time interactions, sharing of multimedia content, and engagement with a global audience.

The dynamic nature of social media platforms constantly shapes the way individuals communicate and interact online. From the evolution of messaging apps to the rise of live streaming and influencer marketing, these platforms continue to innovate and adapt to changing user preferences. As a result, social media has become an integral part of modern communication, influencing how information is disseminated, opinions are formed, and communities are built.

Hence, the Internet's diverse social communities and the role of social media platforms in facilitating communication underscore the importance of digital connectivity in today's society. By providing spaces for individuals to connect, share, and engage, these platforms have transformed the way we interact and build relationships in the digital age.

Dollarhide (2021) underscores the significance of social media as a computer-based technology that facilitates the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities. This modern form of communication has revolutionized how people connect and interact online. For example, platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram have become integral parts of daily life for billions of users worldwide. Nwanne (2015) highlights how the Internet has played a pivotal role in the growth of social media, making platforms easily accessible to a global audience.

The emergence of YouTube in 2005 by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim further exemplifies the rapid expansion of social media platforms and their impact on society. Through these platforms, individuals can share videos, photos, and updates in real-time, fostering a sense of community and connection across borders. Nafada (2012) emphasizes the importance of understanding the origins and evolution of social media platforms to grasp their profound influence on modern communication.

Carr and Hayes (2015) conceptualize social media as "Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of mass-personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content." This definition highlights the essence of social media platforms in today's digital age. For instance, platforms like Facebook and Instagram serve as spaces where individuals can connect with friends and family, share personal updates, and engage in discussions on various topics. X, on the other hand, enables users to express their thoughts in concise messages called tweets, fostering real-time conversations and information sharing. LinkedIn caters to professionals seeking networking opportunities and career advancement through its business-oriented platform.

Kietzmann et al. (2011) described social media as platforms that enable users to "create, share, and exchange content and ideas in virtual communities and networks." This definition underscores the interactive nature of social media, where users actively participate in generating and disseminating content. To exemplify this, consider YouTube, a platform where users can create and share videos on a wide range of subjects, reaching a global audience. Reddit, known for its diverse communities (subreddits), allows users to share links, engage in discussions, and vote on content, shaping the platform's content hierarchy.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." This definition emphasizes the evolution of social media from static websites to dynamic platforms that empower users to actively contribute to the digital landscape. To illustrate this evolution, consider the rise of influencer marketing on platforms like Instagram, where individuals with a large following collaborate with brands to promote products, shaping consumer trends and preferences. Additionally, the emergence of live streaming on platforms like Twitch and Facebook Live showcases how users can engage in real-time interactions, fostering a sense of community and connectivity.

Eke, Omekwu & Odoh (2014) postulates that social media refers to activities, applications, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions by using conversation media. Eke, Omekwu & Odoh (2014) contend that communication media are web-based programs, which allow users to create and transfer forms of words, pictures, video, and audio files, arguing that mobile devices such as smartphones and iPads enable people to be active on social media at any time. Hence, social media encompasses a diverse array of platforms

that enable users to connect, share, and engage with content and ideas. Through examples that highlight the interactive nature of social media, we can appreciate how these platforms have transformed communication and collaboration in the digital age.

The concept of election carries various connotations across different contexts. In the realm of politics, Ojo (2008) delves deeper into the essence of election, portraying it as a formal manifestation of preferences by the governed. These preferences are then amalgamated and translated into a collective decision regarding who will govern, who ought to retain their positions in office, who deserves to be ousted, and who should step in to replace those who have been removed from power.

Expanding on this, Awopeju (2011) elucidates that elections serve as a structured procedure enabling members of a given society to elect representatives who will assume pivotal roles such as leaders at the local, state, and national levels of governance. This can be exemplified by the election of senators in a democratic nation, where citizens exercise their right to choose the individuals who will represent their interests in the legislative body. Additionally, Dye (2001) underscores the significance of elections as a fundamental mechanism for establishing administrative governance within a democratic social framework.

In a democratic society, elections play a crucial role in ensuring the active participation of the populace in decision-making processes that shape the trajectory of the nation. They serve as a cornerstone of democracy, signifying the collective voice of the people in determining the direction of their governance. By engaging in the electoral process, citizens not only express their preferences but also legitimize the authority of the ruling regime. Consequently, elections stand as a fundamental pillar of democracy, embodying the principles of representation and popular sovereignty. Through the act of voting, individuals exercise their civic duty and contribute to the preservation of democratic values within their society.

Election is an integral part of a democratic process that enables the citizenry to determine fairly and freely who should lead them at every level of government periodically and make decisions that shape their socio-economic and political destiny; and in case they falter, still possess the power to recall them or vote them out in the next election. This was why Rose (1978) and Dye (2001) aptly defined election thus: Election is a major instrument for the recruitment of political leadership in democratic societies; the key to participation in a democracy; and the way of giving consent to government (Dye, 2001); and allowing the governed to choose and pass judgment on officeholders who theoretically represent the governed.

Norris (2017) perceives elections as "the central institution in democratic governance, where citizens select representatives and leaders to make decisions on their behalf, often influenced by media framing and public discourse" (p.3). Elections indeed hold a pivotal role in the democratic process, serving as a cornerstone where the voices of the people are heard through their votes. For instance, in the United States, general elections are highly anticipated events that captivate the nation, with candidates engaging in rigorous campaigns to win the trust and support of the electorate. The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing voter perceptions through its coverage and analysis of candidates' policies and actions.

Moeller and de Vreese (2019, p.23) conceptualize elections as "communication-driven processes where candidates and parties compete for voter attention, leveraging traditional and digital media platforms to maximize engagement and mobilization." In today's digital age, political campaigns have expanded their reach through social media platforms, enabling candidates to directly connect with voters and disseminate their messages widely. For example, political rallies are live-streamed on various social media channels, allowing supporters to engage in real-time and share their enthusiasm with a broader audience. This digital landscape has transformed the electoral landscape, making information more accessible and interactions more immediate.

Olorunnisola and Martin (2020) shed light on elections in Africa being framed as 'platforms for contesting power, with media systems playing dual roles as facilitators of democratic engagement and as tools for political manipulation.' In many African countries, elections are not just about choosing leaders but also about asserting power and influence. Media outlets can either promote transparency and accountability by providing unbiased coverage of electoral processes or perpetuate misinformation and bias to sway public opinion. For instance, in Nigeria, the role of social media in shaping electoral outcomes has been a topic of debate, with concerns raised about the spread of fake news and propaganda during election campaigns.

Hence, elections serve as the cornerstone of democracy, where citizens have the power to shape the course of their nation through their votes. The interplay between media framing, public discourse, and political communication underscores the dynamic nature of electoral processes worldwide. As technology continues to evolve, the ways in which elections are conducted and perceived will undoubtedly undergo further transformation, shaping the future of democratic governance.

Roberts and Edward (2019) view elections as communication-driven processes where candidates and parties compete for voter attention. In today's digital age, the use of social media and online platforms has become increasingly

prevalent in political campaigns. Candidates leverage these tools to reach a wider audience, mobilize supporters, and address key issues. The digital sphere has revolutionized the way political messages are disseminated and received by the public.

Olorunnisola and Martin (2020) shed light on the unique context of elections in Africa, where they are framed as platforms for contesting power. The media in African countries play dual roles – as facilitators of democratic engagement and as tools for political manipulation. This duality underscores the complex relationship between media and politics in the African electoral landscape. It is essential to understand these dynamics to grasp the intricacies of electoral processes in the region. Richards (1991) cited in Omotola (2007) defines election as “a method for the selection of persons to fill certain offices through choices made by an electorate; those (citizens who are qualified to vote under the rules and procedures of the electoral system” (p.32).

Electoral consciousness is the lifeblood of any democratic society, representing not just a fleeting awareness of voting rights but a profound, sustained understanding of the power and responsibility embedded in the electoral process. It is a concept that reaches deeply into the individual and collective psyche of a population, influencing how citizens view their role within the political landscape (Ghose, Tang, Joshi, & Liu, 2016). Electoral consciousness is built on the foundations of civic awareness, knowledge of the electoral process, critical engagement with political entities, and an enduring commitment to accountability. This concept, when deeply ingrained in society, fosters a more resilient democracy, where citizens play active roles in shaping governance and policy (Hannon, 2022).

At its core, electoral consciousness begins with a fundamental awareness of the importance of voting. In many societies, this awareness is introduced through civic education, where individuals learn about their rights as citizens and the value of participation in the democratic process. This knowledge transcends the simple act of casting a vote. It embodies an understanding that voting is not only a right but a duty—a form of civic participation that has a direct impact on the community, the nation, and often the global political landscape (Dinh & Pham, 2020). When citizens understand that their votes influence decisions on issues like healthcare, education, environmental policy, and social justice, they begin to see voting as an essential contribution to societal well-being. This understanding forms the first layer of electoral consciousness: a genuine belief that voting matters.

However, electoral consciousness requires more than the belief that voting is important; it involves a deeper comprehension of how the electoral process works and how citizens can participate meaningfully in it (Chidi & Anikelechi, 2022). This includes practical knowledge, such as understanding how to register to vote, the logistics of polling stations, and the mechanisms that ensure voter security and privacy. In electorally conscious societies, citizens are familiar with the steps they need to take to exercise their rights, ensuring they can vote with confidence and without barriers. Such awareness is particularly vital in regions where voter suppression or logistical issues have historically hindered electoral participation (Chou, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a survey research design to fulfil its objective. This choice was made to facilitate data collection from a vast population and to draw scientifically sound generalisations within the allotted research timeframe. The study population consisted of all registered voters in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State, totalling 3,537,190 individuals according to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (2023). To derive a study sample size from this population, 400 respondents were selected using the Taro Yamane formula. Given the diverse distribution of respondents across the state and the varying interpretations of social media messages influenced by socio-cultural factors, the study initially utilised cluster random sampling. This involved grouping the population by the three senatorial districts in Rivers State.

Data collection was conducted through primary and secondary sources, with a self-administered questionnaire for primary data and various sources like online articles, newspapers, books, and magazines for secondary data. The questionnaire underwent validation for face and content validity by an expert in the field, and corrections were made accordingly before distribution to respondents. The study ensured the reliability of the instrument through a test-retest method, where 15 respondents from the sample size were re-administered the questionnaire to establish consistency. Data analysis was carried out by presenting and analysing primary data using the simple percentage method and weighted mean score calculation. The criterion for the weighted mean score was set at 2.5, with scores equal to or exceeding this value considered positive, and scores below deemed negative.

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS

How does social media influence citizen engagement/ behaviour in the democratic process in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State?

Table 1: Responses on how social media influence citizen engagement/ behaviour in the democratic process in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State

Source: Field Work, 2024		Criterion Mean= 2.5				
Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	M (\bar{x})	
1. Social media platforms allow political candidates and organisations to share their messages, policies, and campaign updates directly with citizens, increasing access to information	175 (47.2%)	158 (42.6%)	30 (8.1%)	8 (2.1%)	3.11	
2. Social media enables citizens to organise rallies, protest, and other forms of political activism, fostering greater participation in the democratic process	168 (45.3%)	153 (41.2%)	44 (11.9%)	6 (1.6%)	3.10	
3. Platforms like X and Facebook facilitate public discussions on political issues, allowing citizens to engage in debates, share opinions, and exchange ideas with a wide audience.	178 (48%)	150 (40.4%)	34 (9.2%)	9 (2.4%)	3.09	
4. Social media also spread false or misleading information, influencing voter perceptions and decision-making, potentially shaping the outcome of the election	192 (51.8%)	149 (40.2%)	20 (5.4%)	10 (2.6%)	3.16	
Grand Mean					3.11	

Keys: SA: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; Strongly Disagree; SD

The Table above illustrates the mean score regarding how social media influence citizen engagement/ behaviour in the democratic process in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State. Specifically, Item 1 yielded a mean of (M=3.11), Item 2 had a mean and standard deviation score of (M=3.10), Item 3 had a mean and standard deviation score of (M=3.09), and Item 4 had a mean of (M=3.16). Hence, all the items on the questionnaire from 1-4 are accepted having exceeded the criterion mean of 2.5. These results suggest that social media influences citizen engagement/ behaviour in the democratic process in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State. The study's findings indicate that social media has increased citizen engagement by creating an informed, mobilized and vocal electorate in Rivers State, playing a critical role in shaping the democratic process in the 2023 Presidential election.

In a similar vein, the study by Apuke and Tunca (2018) determined the role of social media usage in politics, particularly elections in Nigeria, bodes well for the country. The study's results suggest that social media were used in Nigeria's 2011 and 2015 general elections to trumpet the candidates' messages and mobilize voters. Social media thus improved political awareness among the voters. The study further found that in the 2015 elections, non-state actors like citizen journalists and civil society organizations (CSOs) published their own tally of results on social media during the collation exercise. Social media platforms, particularly X and Facebook, provided accessible sources of information on the electoral process, political candidates and party manifestos. This access helped many citizens stay updated, engage with real-time information and make informed decisions on their voting choices.

Social media empowered citizens to share their views, criticisms and demands openly, which gave people in Rivers State the ability to publicly express their concerns about issues like election transparency, security and accountability. Hashtags and online campaigns encouraged more citizens to join conversations and share opinions on crucial electoral matters, making public sentiment visible to a wider audience, including candidates and political parties. Social media empowered citizens to share their views, criticisms, and demands openly, which gave people in Rivers State the ability to publicly express their concerns about issues like election transparency, security, and accountability. Through various campaigns, such as "Get Your PVC" (Permanent Voter Card), social media significantly boosted efforts to increase voter turnout. Civil society groups, activists, and influencers leveraged these platforms to encourage youth participation, stressing the importance of voting as a tool for change. This digital mobilisation contributed to a heightened sense of civic responsibility among young voters in Rivers State.

How does political campaign messages via social media influence electorates' choices of votes in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State?

Table 2: Responses on how political campaign messages via social media influence electorates' choice of votes in 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State

ITEMS	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	M (\bar{x})
13. The choice of candidate was influenced by the high visibility of campaign given by Facebook and X	200 (53.9%)	168 (45.3%)	2 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)	3.27
14. Political campaigns on Facebook and X gave electorates the ability to interact with candidates directly which influenced the choice of candidate	210 (56.6%)	159 (42.8%)	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)	3.29
15. Political campaigns on Facebook and X gave peer groups and social media influencers the room to influence electorates on their choice of candidate in the election	189 (50.9%)	170 (45.9%)	7 (1.9%)	5 (1.3%)	3.21
16. Facebook and X offered a wide range of information about the candidates through political campaigns that educated and enlightened voters which influenced their choice of candidate	197 (53.1%)	170 (45.8%)	2 (0.5%)	2 (0.5%)	3.26
Grand Mean					3.24

Source: Field Work, 2024

Criterion Mean= 2.5

Keys: SA: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; Strongly Disagree; SD

The Table above displays the mean score indicating how political campaign messages via social media influences electorates' choice of votes in 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State. Item 13 yielded mean score of (M=3.27) on whether the choice of candidate was influenced by the high visibility of campaign given by Facebook and X. Similarly, item 14 recorded mean score of (M=3.27) on whether political campaigns on Facebook and X gave electorates the ability to interact with candidates directly, which influenced the choice of candidate. Furthermore, item 15 exhibited a mean score of (M=3.21) on whether political campaigns on Facebook and X gave peer groups and social media influencers the room to influence electorates on their choice of candidate in the election. Additionally, item 16 showed a mean score of (M=3.26) on whether Facebook and X offered a wide range of information about the candidates through political campaigns that educated and enlightened voters, which influenced their choice of candidate. Consequently, the acceptance of all items from 13-16 corroborates the substantial positive impacts resulting from political campaign messages via social media influences on electorates' choice of votes in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State.

Social media campaign messages played a significant role in influencing voter behaviour in Rivers State during the 2023 Presidential Election, as they did in many parts of Nigeria. Social media allowed political candidates and parties to reach voters directly, bypassing traditional media. This direct engagement fostered a sense of closeness and accessibility to the candidates, which likely influenced voters who appreciated the opportunity for real-time interaction. Through targeted ads and tailored content, social media platforms provided political campaigns with insights into user interests, demographics, and behavioural data. In Rivers State, this allowed campaigns to create more personalized messages that resonated with specific voter groups, enhancing message relevance and impact.

Social media amplifies peer influence. As people in Rivers State shared political content, commented on posts, and engaged in discussions, the reach of campaign messages extended beyond the original content creator. This peer-driven aspect often reinforces opinions and can sway undecided voters through trusted sources within their networks. Many voters turned to social media to stay updated on election issues, debates, and developments. Platforms like X and Facebook served as critical spaces for real-time news. In Rivers State, campaign messages focused on issues like economic reform, security, and anti-corruption resonated strongly, influencing voters by focusing on concerns close to their lives. Misinformation spread rapidly on social media, sometimes influencing voter perceptions negatively or positively. However, the presence of fact-checking accounts and tools also meant that misinformation was often countered quickly, allowing voters to make more informed choices.

Beyond influencing choice, social media also mobilized voters to participate. Messages reminding people of their voting rights, encouraging civic duty, and even providing logistical support (like directions to polling centres) helped boost voter turnout, particularly among the youth in Rivers State. In sum, social media's pervasive influence was

notable, affecting both the awareness of issues and emotional engagement with the candidates, ultimately shaping the electoral choices of many voters in Rivers State.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

How does social media influence citizen engagement/ behaviour in the democratic process in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State?

The research question one (1) was formulated to examine how social media influences citizen engagement/ behaviour in the democratic process in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State. Four questionnaire items were designed to match the responses of the respondents. The Weighted Mean Score (WMS) of this representation of the responses of the respondents is 3.11. Hence, the responses of the respondents when measured with the criterion mean of 2.5, show that the responses of the respondents exceed the rating point of 2.5. Therefore, with the decision rule that states that if the responses of the respondents are weighted above the criterion mean of 2.5, then the items should be accepted, but if it is below it, then the items should be rejected.

The first item interrogated whether social media platforms allow political candidates and organizations to share their messages, policies, and campaign updates directly with citizens, increasing access to information. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 89.8% (n=333) of the total respondents agreed that social media platforms allow political candidates and organizations to share their messages, policies, and campaign updates directly with citizens, increasing access to information. Contrary to this, 10.1% (n=38) of the total respondents disagreed.

Consequently, social media platforms provide direct channels for political candidates and organizations to communicate with citizens without the traditional filters of mainstream media. Platforms like X and Facebook allow candidates and organizations to post updates, videos, and announcements in real-time, giving citizens unfiltered access to their messages. This lets political figures communicate their policies and views directly to their audience, bypassing traditional media narratives.

Social media supports various content types—text, images, videos, and live streams. Political campaigns use these to make their messages more engaging and accessible. For instance, live streaming rallies or speeches enables citizens to tune in live, creating a sense of involvement. Social media allows for two-way communication, where citizens can respond, comment, or ask questions directly. This interactivity fosters transparency and allows candidates to address citizen concerns in real-time, which is lacking in traditional media. Social media platforms have sophisticated targeting tools, enabling campaigns to reach specific demographics or regions with tailored content. This means candidates can share messages that resonate with the interests and concerns of different groups, increasing the relevance and effectiveness of their communications.

Social media's shareable nature means that political content can quickly spread among users, further extending the reach of campaign messages. Supporters can share posts, increasing visibility and potentially attracting new supporters. Social media analytics provide real-time feedback on what messages resonate most with the audience. This allows campaigns to adjust their strategies to better connect with citizens and prioritize messages that have a higher impact. These features make social media a powerful tool for increasing access to political information and enhancing public awareness of candidates and their platforms.

The second (2) item interrogated whether social media enables citizens to organize rallies, protest and other forms of political activism, fostering greater participation in the democratic process. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 86.5% (n=321) of the total respondents agreed that social media enables citizens to organize rallies, protest and other forms of political activism, fostering greater participation in the democratic process. In contrast, 13.5% (n=50) of the total respondents disagreed. This means that social media has transformed how citizens engage in political activism and participate in democratic processes. Social media allows activists to quickly spread information about political issues, upcoming rallies, or urgent calls to action. Platforms like X and Facebook can instantly reach large audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. This immediate spread of information enables quicker, more coordinated action among citizens.

Social media enables anyone with internet access to participate, making political mobilization more inclusive. This accessibility is crucial for reaching diverse demographics, from urban centers to rural areas, fostering a more representative and engaged citizenry. Hashtags and trending topics also bring visibility to causes, attracting supporters worldwide. Social media platforms offer tools for organizing events, sharing locations, and coordinating logistics. For instance, Facebook Events help activists schedule and promote rallies, while X threads can detail protest routes or share safety tips. This coordination ensures that participants know when, where, and how to engage.

Social media gives a voice to individuals and groups who might otherwise be marginalized in traditional media. Activists can amplify their message, garner public sympathy, and attract media coverage by sharing personal stories, visuals, and live-streams. This democratization of voice often compels political leaders to respond to issues raised online. Social media fosters a sense of community among activists, helping build solidarity across regions and

demographics. Online platforms allow people to connect over shared values and goals, increasing the likelihood of sustained participation. This sense of community motivates citizens to engage actively and feel supported in their activism. Social media has played a significant role in empowering grassroots movements by lowering the costs of organizing. Individuals no longer need large funds to create awareness; a well-timed tweet or viral post can generate significant attention. This empowerment has been key to recent movements like Black Lives Matter and #EndSARS, which originated as grassroots initiatives and garnered international support.

Platforms like X and Facebook offer real-time updates during protests or rallies, allowing activists to communicate developments as they happen. This transparency can help dispel misinformation, keep participants informed about potential risks, and share evidence of issues such as police brutality, generating both local and global attention. Social media provides a space for digital advocacy, where users can engage in campaigns, sign petitions, and fundraise. Hashtag campaigns like #MeToo, for instance, raised global awareness on issues of harassment, showing how online activism can lead to tangible societal changes. The visibility of social media campaigns often puts pressure on political leaders to address activists' demands, as social platforms allow citizens to hold officials accountable publicly.

Leaders face immediate criticism online for inaction, making social media an essential tool for influencing policy decisions. Through these mechanisms, social media platforms empower citizens to engage in democratic processes by facilitating collective action, amplifying voices, and applying public pressure on leaders. This has allowed movements worldwide to organize more effectively, hold authorities accountable, and foster more inclusive political participation.

The third (3) item interrogated whether platforms like X and Facebook facilitate public discussions on political issues, allowing citizens to engage in debates, share opinions, and exchange ideas with a wide audience. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 88.4% (n=328) of the total respondents agreed that platforms like X and Facebook facilitate public discussions on political issues, allowing citizens to engage in debates, share opinions, and exchange ideas with a wide audience. Notwithstanding, 11.6% (n=43) of the total respondents disagreed. Platforms like X (formerly X) and Facebook play a significant role in facilitating public discussions on political issues by creating spaces for open debate, opinion sharing, and information exchange, reaching wide audiences. These platforms provide easy access for users to share their perspectives in real-time, whether by posting updates, commenting, or responding to others. Hashtags, trending topics, and popular posts amplify discussions, making it easier for citizens to follow and join ongoing conversations.

By connecting users with similar interests, Facebook groups and X lists enable citizens to form communities centered on political issues. These groups act as discussion forums where people can engage in sustained dialogue, share resources, and mobilize around shared goals. Both platforms expose users to diverse viewpoints by encouraging content sharing across various demographics and political affiliations. This can lead to a broader understanding of issues, though it may also spark polarized debates. Platforms like X are frequently used by political leaders, journalists, and activists to interact directly with citizens. This allows for more transparent communication, where citizens can ask questions or challenge viewpoints, sometimes receiving direct responses from public figures.

X and Facebook platforms are key tools for mobilizing action, from local campaigns to global movements. Users often share petitions, organize protests, or spread awareness about political issues through these channels, making it easy for others to join in and amplify the message. Algorithms on both platforms often prioritize engaging and high-interest content, which can increase the visibility of political discussions. However, this can also lead to the spread of misinformation or echo chambers, where users predominantly see views that align with their own.

In the context of political activism, particularly at the state or regional level, like in Rivers State, these platforms provide a powerful way for citizens to voice concerns, rally for change, and challenge existing political structures while engaging a broader, sometimes global, audience.

The fourth (3) item interrogated whether social media also spread false or misleading information, influencing voter perceptions and decision-making, potentially shaping the outcome of the election. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 92% (n=341) of the total respondents agreed that social media also spread false or misleading information, influencing voter perceptions and decision-making, potentially shaping the outcome of the election. Notwithstanding, 8% (n=30) of the total respondents disagreed. Social media can play a major role in spreading false or misleading information, which can heavily influence voter perceptions, decision-making, and potentially impact election outcomes. False information, rumour, and conspiracy theories spread quickly on social media platforms, often faster than verified news. The nature of viral posts—especially when they evoke strong emotions—can lead people to believe and share misleading content without questioning its accuracy. During elections, this might include false information about candidates, voting dates, or election procedures. Social media platforms tend to recommend content similar to what users already engage with, creating echo chambers where users are primarily exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs. This selective exposure can reinforce false beliefs and make it harder for users to encounter fact-checked or balanced viewpoints.

Certain groups or individuals may intentionally spread false information to sway voters. This can involve creating fake news websites, spreading doctored images or videos, or manipulating narratives about political opponents. These tactics can shape public opinion on specific candidates or issues, sometimes leading to a misinformed voter base. Automated accounts (bots) and coordinated troll farms can amplify misleading information by sharing it in large volumes, making it appear popular or widely accepted. This creates the illusion of widespread support for particular ideas or candidates, potentially influencing undecided voters.

Advances in technology have led to realistic-looking deepfake videos and images, which can be used to show candidates saying or doing things they never did. Such media can be highly convincing and may spread quickly, making it difficult for voters to distinguish between real and fake content. Prolonged exposure to false information can lead to a general distrust of institutions, including the media and electoral bodies. This may increase skepticism toward verified information and undermine confidence in the election process, potentially leading to lower voter turnout or increased acceptance of baseless claims about election fraud. The widespread presence of false or misleading information on social media can lead voters to base their decisions on inaccurate facts or emotions rather than verified information. This can significantly influence electoral outcomes, particularly in close races or highly polarized environments.

How do political campaign messages via social media influence electorates' choices of votes in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State?

The research question four (4) was formulated to examine how political campaign messages via social media influence electorates' choice of votes in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State. Four questionnaire items (13-16) were designed to match the responses of the respondents. Therefore, with the decision rule that states that if the responses of the respondents is weighted above the criterion mean of 2.5, then the items should be accepted, but if they are below it, then the items should be rejected. The Weighted Mean Score (WMS) of this representation of the responses of the respondents is 3.24. Hence, the responses of the respondents when measured with the criterion mean of 2.5, show that the responses of the respondents exceed the rating point of 2.5, which means all the items are accepted.

The thirteen-item analysis examines whether the choice of candidate was influenced by the high visibility of campaigns given by Facebook and X. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 99% (n=368) of the total respondents agreed that the choice of candidate was influenced by the high visibility of campaigns given by Facebook and X. In contrast, 1% (n=3) of the total respondents disagreed. INEC and affiliated organisations can leverage social media to encourage civic participation, organise voter registration drives, and promote awareness of the importance of voting, thereby strengthening democratic norms and values in Rivers State. The visibility of campaigns on platforms like Facebook and X (formerly X) has a significant influence on voter choice by amplifying candidates' messages and creating spaces for public engagement and mobilization.

Facebook and X allow candidates to reach a vast audience instantly, extending their visibility beyond traditional media boundaries. High-visibility posts, ads and live streams enable voters, especially younger and urban audiences, to get direct access to candidates' messages, increasing their familiarity with the candidate and potentially their favourability. These platforms use sophisticated algorithms to target specific demographics, interests and geographical areas. Candidates can focus on issues that matter most to key voter segments, crafting messages that resonate on a personal level. This targeted approach helps in reinforcing support among potential voters who may be undecided or less engaged. Posts that go viral—whether through endorsements, humorous content or controversial statements—tend to drive visibility even further. A candidate who masters the art of viral content can rapidly gain public attention, creating a sense of momentum and popularity that may influence undecided voters.

Platforms like Facebook and X allow for real-time interaction between candidates and the public. This perceived accessibility can create a feeling of personal connection with voters, potentially influencing their choice in favour of candidates who are more responsive and interactive online. High visibility on these platforms also means that candidates' messages are likely to become part of public discourse, where users discuss, debate, and endorse views in visible, shareable formats. Seeing friends, family, or respected influencers support a candidate can create social proof, nudging undecided voters to align with their networks' choices. High visibility campaigns on Facebook and X can galvanize supporters to become active promoters of the candidate within their communities. Such online mobilization often spills over into offline support, from volunteer work to voting day turnout. In sum, Facebook and X provide candidates with powerful tools to increase their visibility and shape voters' choices, often amplifying messages that resonate deeply with targeted demographics and community networks. For voters, constant exposure and interaction with campaign content on these platforms can significantly impact their perception and choice of candidate.

The fourteen-item analysis examines whether political campaigns on Facebook and X gave electorates the ability to interact with candidates directly, which influenced the choice of candidate. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 99% (n=369) of the total respondents agreed that the political campaigns on Facebook and X gave electorates the

ability to interact with candidates directly, which influenced the choice of candidate. In contrast, 1% (n=2) of the total respondents disagreed. INEC and affiliated organisations can leverage social media to encourage civic participation, organise voter registration drives, and promote awareness of the importance of voting, thereby strengthening democratic norms and values in Rivers State. The visibility of campaigns on platforms like Facebook and X (formerly X) has a significant influence on voter choice by amplifying candidates' messages and creating spaces for public engagement and mobilization. Political campaigns on Facebook and X (formerly X) allow electorates to interact directly with candidates, an interaction that can significantly impact voter choice. Through platforms like Facebook and X, voters can ask candidates questions or voice concerns, often receiving direct responses. This immediacy provides a sense of transparency and accountability that traditional media often lacks, allowing voters to feel more informed about the candidates' positions on issues that matter to them.

Direct interaction allows candidates to personalize their communication, creating a feeling of connection. This sense of familiarity can enhance trust, making voters more likely to support candidates who seem genuinely engaged with their communities. When candidates respond to citizens' concerns or participate in live discussions, it shows a willingness to listen, which can positively influence voters' perceptions. Voters may view candidates who engage on social media as more approachable, empathetic, and relatable, all of which can sway undecided voters. Comments, likes, and retweets make candidate-voter conversations visible to the public, creating a transparent dialogue. This visibility holds candidates accountable, and voters are able to witness firsthand how a candidate responds to public issues, criticisms, and endorsements, which can directly impact their choice.

Direct access to candidates allows voters to ask specific questions about policies, plans, and issues that affect them. Candidates who respond thoughtfully or address concerns clearly can strengthen voter support based on policy alignment, making voting choices more issue-focused. Through social interactions, supporters can amplify their endorsements, sharing positive interactions or responses from candidates with their own networks. When people see candidates engaging with community members, it creates a sense of authenticity, reinforcing trust among a wider audience. Direct engagement through social media encourages grassroots involvement, where everyday citizens become active in promoting or defending candidates. This level of engagement can influence the voter's perception of a candidate's popularity or the strength of their community support, potentially swaying undecided voters. By allowing voters to engage directly with candidates, Facebook and X foster a sense of empowerment and involvement that can make voters feel more confident and committed to their choice.

The fifteenth item analyzes whether political campaigns on Facebook and X gave peer groups and social media influencers the room to influence electorates on their choice of candidate in the election. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 97% (n=359) of the total respondents agreed that political campaigns on Facebook and X gave peer groups and social media influencers the room to influence electorates on their choice of candidate in the election. In contrast, 3% (n=12) of the total respondents disagreed. Political campaigns on Facebook and X (formerly X) provide a platform where peer groups and social media influencers can significantly shape electorates' choices of candidates. People tend to be influenced by the opinions of their friends, family, and trusted social groups, especially on social media. When peer groups share or endorse a candidate, it creates social proof—making individuals feel more confident in aligning with a candidate whom people they trust also support. This dynamic can sway undecided voters, especially when they see widespread support for a candidate within their networks.

Influencers, whether celebrities or local figures with large followings, hold sway over their audiences. An endorsement from a well-regarded influencer can give legitimacy to a candidate, often framing them as trustworthy, relatable, or aligned with the values the influencer represents. Influencers who actively discuss politics or share their candidate preferences can guide audiences to favour certain candidates based on the influencer's perspective. Influencers and active social media users can make campaign messages go viral, increasing the visibility and appeal of a candidate. Viral content like videos, memes, or persuasive posts can create buzz around a candidate, shaping public perception positively or negatively. Such content often simplifies complex political issues, making it easier for voters to connect with a candidate's message. Influencers and peer groups can frame political issues in ways that resonate with specific demographics. When these groups explain how a candidate's policies impact particular communities or issues, they can bridge the gap between political messaging and personal relevance. Voters may then see a candidate as directly beneficial to them, making them more likely to support that candidate.

Peer groups and influencers often spark discussions on political topics, engaging their followers in debates or Q&A sessions about candidates. These discussions can provide voters with different perspectives or clarify doubts, often impacting how they view candidates. Being part of these conversations can influence voters to choose candidates they feel are validated by collective opinion. When influencers endorse or advocate for candidates, it often creates a trend, making it "cool" or socially acceptable to support that candidate. This popularity effect can especially influence younger voters, who may value the opinions of influencers they admire, leading them to support candidates endorsed by these figures. Influencers and peer groups also play a crucial role in voter mobilisation, urging followers to vote for

particular candidates. By sharing voting information, deadlines, and candidate endorsements, they can motivate followers who might otherwise remain passive to become active participants in the election.

Overall, campaigns on Facebook and X allow influencers and peer groups to make politics more relatable and accessible, amplifying a candidate's reach through trusted voices. This dynamic shapes voter behaviour significantly, as it combines personal relevance with the power of social validation, ultimately influencing the choice of candidate in the election.

The sixteenth item analyses whether Facebook and X offered a wide range of information about the candidates through political campaigns that educated and enlightened voters which influenced their choice of candidate. Out of the 371 respondents used in this study, 98% (n=367) of the total respondents agreed that political campaigns on Facebook and X offered a wide range of information about the candidates, which political campaigns that educated and enlightened voters and influenced their choice of candidate. In contrast, 2% (n=4) of the total respondents disagreed. Political campaigns on Facebook and X gave peer groups and social media influencers the room to influence electorates on their choice of candidate in the election. Facebook and X provide spaces for candidates to share their backgrounds, campaign promises, and policy details directly with voters. Through official profiles, posts, videos, and policy summaries, candidates can clearly outline their platforms. This transparency allows voters to make informed decisions based on a deeper understanding of each candidate's stance on important issues.

Campaigns on these platforms often include infographics, Q&A sessions, and issue-focused videos that break down complex topics, making it easier for voters to understand candidates' views on issues like healthcare, education, and the economy. This type of content educates voters on policy impacts, helping them align with candidates who represent their values and concerns. Facebook and X offer live streaming and video capabilities, which many candidates use for debates, interviews, and Q&A sessions. Voters can watch candidates respond to questions in real-time, gaining insights into their positions, communication styles, and responses to public concerns. These live interactions often provide a more genuine look at candidates than pre-prepared statements. Both platforms are hubs for various perspectives, where media outlets, independent analysts, and fact-checking organizations share information about candidates and their claims. This diversity allows voters to access different viewpoints and verify information, helping them avoid misinformation and make informed choices.

By following candidates' social media posts and interactions, voters get a sense of their personality, ethics, and values. This "behind-the-scenes" look allows voters to evaluate candidates' sincerity, consistency, and empathy, all of which can influence how relatable or trustworthy they find each candidate. Facebook and X are social spaces where candidates interact with supporters and critics alike. Voters can read and participate in discussions about candidates' policies and records, seeing how each candidate engages with public opinion. These discussions can highlight strengths or weaknesses, providing voters with a fuller picture. Facebook and X enable candidates to update followers on their activities, campaign stops and new endorsements, keeping voters informed and engaged throughout the election cycle. This constant flow of updates can reinforce a sense of connection, influence voter perception and strengthen loyalty to a candidate. The platforms provide a space where public figures, activists and community leaders share their support or critiques of candidates. These endorsements often come with explanations that can educate voters on why certain community members support particular candidates, potentially influencing undecided voters.

Overall, Facebook and X act as comprehensive platforms for political education, giving voters tools to explore, understand and analyze candidates from various perspectives. Through this vast informational landscape, voters become more knowledgeable, confident and motivated to choose candidates whose policies and values align with their own.

Findings

- a. Social media significantly boosted civic participation in the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State by creating platforms for political discussions, awareness campaigns, and real-time election updates.
- b. During the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State, political campaign messages on social media that appealed to voters' emotions—such as messages of hope, change, or addressing local grievances—had a significant influence on voting choices. Candidates used narratives and visuals that resonated with the electorate's frustrations or aspirations, particularly around issues like job creation, security, and infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

This study on "Social Media and Electoral Consciousness in Rivers State: A Study of the 2023 Presidential Election" reveals the transformative impact of social media on voter awareness, engagement, and behaviour in Rivers State. Social media platforms played a pivotal role in promoting electoral consciousness, primarily by providing accessible information, facilitating real-time updates, and creating a space for political discourse. Voters, particularly younger demographics, became more aware of their civic duties and more informed about candidates and issues, which translated into increased political participation.

However, the study also highlights challenges, including the spread of misinformation, cyber harassment, and the digital divide affecting older voters. Despite these challenges, social media campaigns by political actors, INEC, and other bodies effectively fostered electoral awareness and encouraged voters to participate in the democratic process. Overall, the study underscores the dual-edged role of social media in elections, emphasizing its potential for positive civic engagement and the need for regulatory and educational measures to mitigate its limitations. As social media continues to grow as a tool for political mobilization, understanding its influence remains essential for strengthening democratic processes in Rivers State and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Given that social media has proven effective for political discussions, awareness campaigns, and real-time updates, state and local authorities, NGOs, and community organizations should leverage these platforms to maintain ongoing civic participation. Establishing regular digital forums, educational campaigns on political rights, and transparent information-sharing systems can keep citizens engaged in governance issues year-round.
- b. Given that emotionally charged campaign messages significantly influenced voters in the 2023 Presidential Election, there is a need to ensure these messages are used responsibly to avoid manipulation or exploitation of sensitive issues. INEC, in collaboration with political parties and social media platforms, could develop guidelines for digital campaign content that promote ethical practices. These guidelines would emphasize transparency, fact-based messaging, and accountability in the use of emotional appeals, especially on critical topics like security, employment, and infrastructure.

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