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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF THE LABOUR PARTY IN THE NIGERIAN 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Social media platforms are gradually replacing conventional media platforms such as radio, television, newspapers and billboards for business communication. The dominance of social media platforms in the communication process has extended to the political sphere as they have become pivotal tools for political engagement, mobilization, and communication, enabling political parties to reach and connect with a vast and diverse audience. Electoral performance is the measurable outcome and success of a political party and its candidates in an election. These outcomes include voter engagement, public perception of political parties, and voter behaviour during the election. Despite the growing recognition of social media's significance in politics, there is a noticeable gap in comprehensive studies that specifically investigate its impact on electoral performance in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. This study, therefore, aimed to examine the impact of social media on the electoral performance of the Labour Party in the Nigerian 2023 general elections. The specific objectives of this study were to: (i) assess the extent to which social media influenced voter engagement of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria; (ii) ascertain the effect of social media on public perception of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria; and (iii) evaluate the influence of social media on voter behaviour towards the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Three null hypotheses were formulated in line with the objectives to guide the study**.** The study adopted the cross-sectional survey design. The population of the study comprised 20,967,004 registered voters in six selected states of Nigeria. The study adopted the Taro Yamane formula for sample size determination which gave a sample of 400 electorates and the Bowley proportional formula for the allocation of the questionnaire. Data was analysed using simple linear regression to test the hypotheses at a 5 % level of significance. The result shows that social media had a significant influence on voter engagement of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Social media had a significant influence on public perception of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Social media had a significant influence on voter behaviour towards the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: Social Media, Electoral Performance, Voter Engagement, Public Perception, Voter Behaviour.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the pervasive use of social media has revolutionized the way information is disseminated, opinions are formed, and political engagement takes place. Social media platforms have become an integral aspect of any organization, governance, and electioneering campaigns, serving as powerful tools for governments to relate with their citizens; organizations to relate to their stakeholders; and candidates and parties to interact with voters to promote their agenda and mobilize support. With the growing significance of social media in shaping public discourse, understanding its influence on governance and electoral performance has become a critical area of study.

Social media is defined as "online platforms that facilitate the production, sharing, and exchange of user-generated content, encouraging social interaction and community building" (Boyd, 2014). According to Hinton and Hjorth (2013), social media refers to "internet-based tools that allow individuals and communities to connect, interact, and communicate with one another, sharing user-generated content and information in real-time."

Social media tools encompass a wide range of internet-based platforms and applications that facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of content among users. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, offer political parties and candidates new opportunities to engage with voters, disseminate their messages, and mobilize support (Boulianne, 2015). These platforms have become integral to modern political campaigns, playing a crucial role in shaping election performance around the world. Social media's relevance in election performance lies in its ability to transform political communication, mobilize voters, and influence public opinion (Apuke, 2016).

The importance of social media tools in ensuring favourable election performance cannot be overemphasized. Social media tools offer politicians and parties direct and instant access to voters, allowing them to communicate their messages without traditional gatekeepers like the media. Politicians can engage in real-time interactions with their constituencies, responding to questions, concerns, and criticisms promptly (Jungherr, 2016). This direct communication fosters a sense of accessibility and transparency, potentially increasing voter trust and engagement.

Additionally, supporters can act as digital advocates, sharing campaign content with their networks, thereby extending the reach and impact of the campaign. According to Vaccari (2013), social media's rapid dissemination of information can significantly impact public opinion during election campaigns. Messages can go viral, amplifying certain issues or candidates and shaping the political narrative (Vaccari, 2013).

Globally, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, social media has significantly impacted political campaigning and election processes more than any other form of media. During the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, social media platforms played a prominent role in disseminating political messages, engaging voters, and mobilizing support (Parmelee & Bichard, 2018). Similarly, in the UK, social media was greatly utilized

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by political parties to reach and connect with voters, especially during the 2019 General Election (Wolfe et al., 2020). The use of targeted advertising and micro-targeting techniques on platforms like Facebook and Twitter has allowed campaigns to tailor messages to specific voter segments (Vergeer et al., 2011).

Across Europe, there has been a slight departure from the use of traditional media in governance and political campaigns as social media has become an integral part of political communication. Social media usage in European elections varies among countries, thus, reflecting the differences in digital infrastructure and internet penetration rates (Larsson et al., 2017). Countries like France, Germany, and Italy have seen increased political engagement through platforms like Twitter and Instagram (Jungherr et al., 2015). European political parties use social media to disseminate campaign messages, engage with citizens, and recruit volunteers (Stier & Bleier, 2016).

In Africa, social media has emerged as a critical tool for governance, political campaigns and election performance. Countries like Kenya and South Africa have experienced increased social media usage in governance, political mobilization, and voter engagement (Kluver et al., 2017). Social media platforms have allowed government officials and politicians to connect with citizens especially the younger voters, who represent a significant portion of the electorate in several African nations (Nyarko, 2018). Additionally, citizen-led social media movements have played a role in raising awareness about political issues and fostering public debate (Dahir, 2019).

Asemah (2017) noted that social media usage has gained significant momentum in shaping governance, election campaigns and political discourse in Nigeria. During the 2019 General Elections, social media played a crucial role in political communication, with platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp being widely used for campaign messaging and mobilization (Apuke & Tunca, 2018). The Nigerian electorate, particularly the youth, has been actively engaged in governance and political conversations on social media, expressing their views, and participating in digital activism (Asemah, 2017).

Electoral performance thus, is defined as the measurable outcome and success of a political party, candidate, or entity in an election (Morgenstern & Richard, 2005). It encompasses various indicators, such as the number of seats won, the percentage of votes obtained, or other relevant electoral measures, depending on the specific context of the election. Electoral performance serves as a key metric for assessing the effectiveness and popularity of political actors within a democratic system, helping to gauge their level of public support and influence within the political landscape (Morgenstern & Richard, 2005). Globally, particularly in the USA and UK, these countries have well-established democratic systems with distinct electoral processes. Electoral performance in these countries is often evaluated based on party vote share, seats won in legislatures, and presidential or prime ministerial election outcomes (Jungherr, 2016). In Europe, especially in Germany and Italy, these two countries have unique electoral systems within the European context. Electoral performance is assessed through the allocation of seats in their respective parliaments (Gerring, Bond, Brandt, Moreno, &

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Thacker, 2005). In Africa, most especially with Ghana and Kenya in view, electoral performance includes measures like the number of parliamentary seats won and the presidential election outcome (Nyarko, 2018).

Nigeria on the other hand is known for its diverse political landscape and complex electoral processes. Electoral performance in Nigeria is typically evaluated based on the outcomes of parliamentary elections, gubernatorial elections, and presidential elections (Ahmed, Mozammel, & Ahmed, 2018). Despite its diverse political landscape, Nigeria has had an uninterrupted democratic dispensation for the past twenty-four years. This period has witnessed an increase in social media usage progressively during general elections, especially from 2011-2023.

For instance, Okoro and Tsgyu (2017) found out that social media played a relatively minor role in the 2011 general elections compared to traditional forms of media. However, they acknowledged that platforms like Facebook and Twitter were gaining popularity because political parties and candidates used them as means to disseminate information and engage with their supporters. By 2015, social media had become a more prominent tool in general elections. Political parties recognized the power of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in reaching a large audience and shaping public opinion. Candidates actively used social media to promote their campaigns, share policy proposals, and connect with voters. Political parties leveraged social media to engage with supporters, mobilize volunteers, and raise funds. However, while social media played a role in shaping public discourse, it did not have a decisive impact on the final election results (Olakunle, 2016).

In 2019, Onyebuchi, Obayi, and Amadi (2019) averred that social media played a great role in the general elections such that the widespread adoption of smartphones and increased internet penetration allowed for even greater engagement on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Political parties recognized the potential of social media for targeted advertising, micro-targeting specific demographics, and mobilizing supporters. Political parties invested heavily in social media campaigns to reach younger voters and promote their policies. However, despite the increased usage and influence of social media, the final election results were not solely determined by online activities (Onyebuchi et al, 2019).

In the general elections in 2023, social media played an even more significant role in party engagement, mobilization, and support. The continued growth of digital platforms, the increasing importance of online communication, and the potential for viral content to shape public opinion made social media an essential battleground for political parties. The Labour Party and its candidates prioritized social media campaigns to connect with voters, mobilize supporters, and counter opponents' narratives (Agbim, Etumnu, & Iredibia, 2023). Social media helped amplify messages and engaged supporters of the Labour Party (Obidients) such that the party which was not known in previous elections became not just a topic issue but a third force in the Nigerian political arena. From the foregoing, therefore, Agbim et al (2023) averred that available data indicate that social

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media tools are gradually replacing conventional media platforms such as radio, television, newspapers, and billboards, among others. He further stated that modern-day media consumers are tilting towards digital platforms and physical experiences; thus, for any public relations or media practitioner to become effective and successful in their roles and responsibilities, the individual needs to be proficient in the utilization of social media. With a young and tech-savvy population, the use of social media as a political campaigning tool gained momentum, promising a new dimension to the electoral process.

However, despite the importance of the critical role played by social media tools in governance and politics in general, it appears that many political communication practitioners seem not to have appreciated, let alone adopted fully, the utilization of social media tools in their programmes and activities. Meanwhile, social media has been regarded as a veritable tool for creating mutual understanding, ensuring the loyalty of citizens, swaying citizens' voting intentions, and garnering support and cooperation, among others (Kluver et al., 2017). Onyebuchi et al (2019) found that ignorance, apathy, prejudice, scepticism, and lack of finance may be responsible for the underutilization of social media tools by public relations practitioners in Nigeria. These have affected the growth, survival, and sustenance of their activities. The consequences of the aforementioned are that media practitioners who utilize traditional media methods more than social media tools experience and record low or dwindling followership/readership, low popularity, little or no visibility, low or no penetration and insignificant spread of the messages. This has an overarching influence on the political parties they represent and governance in general.

Despite the growing recognition of social media's significance in politics, there is a noticeable gap in comprehensive studies that specifically investigate its impact on electoral performance in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. While some studies have explored the broader role of social media in Nigerian politics, a focused examination of its influence on party electoral performance remains limited. This research aims to bridge this gap by providing empirical insights into the intricate relationship between social media engagement and electoral outcomes in the context of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. From the foregoing, this research aimed to examine the impact of social media on the Labour Party's electoral performance in Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

The specific objectives of this study were to:

(i) Assess the extent to which social media influenced voter engagement of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria;

(ii) Ascertain the effect of social media on public perception of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria; and

(iii) Evaluate the influence of social media on voter behaviour towards the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

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Three null hypotheses were formulated in line with the objectives to guide the study**:**

(i) Social media had no significant influence on voter engagement of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

(ii) Social media had no significant influence on public perception of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

(iii) Social media had no significant influence on voter behaviour towards the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social Media

Social media is an evolution of the internet which was initially created as a channel or medium to exchange information between the users (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre, 2011). Networking dates back to the 1980s with the name of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). This BBS permitted the users the software and data that is shared and also allowed them to send messages from one individual to another (private) and messages that can be posted on public boards (Zarrella, 2009).

Social Media can be defined as online resources that people use to share content such as videos, photos, images, text, ideas, insight, and opinions (Janusz, 2019). According to Acar and Polonsky (2017), social media sites allow users to participate in social media promoting the contribution and feedback from the users who are interested in participating while social media channels are open for comments no matter what the opinion. The conversation is the basis for developing a community and that is what social media channels provide, open communication.

Communication Expert Joseph Thornley (2008) noted that social media is an online communication in which individuals shift fluidly and flexibly between the role of audience and author. To do this, they use social software that enables anyone without knowledge of coding, to post comment on, share or mash up content and to form communities around shared interests. Simply put, social media is an umbrella term used to describe the various types of internet-based applications that lend themselves to content creation sharing, exchange, collaboration and social networking within a website.

Yang, Kim, and Dhalwani (2018) highlight the various forms of social media as collaborative projects (eg Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (eg Twitter), content communities (eg YouTube, Picasso), social networking sites (eg Facebook, MySpace), virtual game worlds (eg world of warcraft) and virtual social worlds (eg second life). The AP Stylebook (2013) has a slightly different categorization of social media as: blogs, social networking sites, microblogging sites, wikis, content sharing sites, online forums, check-in services and all sorts of other sites. Singh and Sinha (2017) noted that irrespective of the categorizations, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Vine have become quite

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popular, especially among the youth who utilize them to socialise, network, mobilise, for entertainment purposes amongst other uses.

Although social media platforms can be accessed via the web (e.g. desktop computers, and laptops) they are mainly accessed via mobile devices like cell phones, tablets, and iPods. According to Facebook's 3rd quarter (2015) report, over 70% per cent of total Facebook active users access it through mobile devices. The numbers are growing for Facebook and it's from mobile. To bring it home, the same Facebook report reveals that 15 million Nigerians access the website via mobile devices monthly. In essence, the compatibility of social media with mobile internet is a key advantage which dovetails neatly with the ever-mobile lifestyle of the youth and working-class adults.

Social network sites can be attractive channels for various activities, as they are organized around people and their relationships and they allow people of various interests to engage in some form of social interaction via comments and sharing (Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze, 2018). Through such communication, people voluntarily display their preferences and potentially influence their personal or brand awareness and image. Hence, members on social network sites can create and disseminate brand-related information to their social networks composed of friends and other acquaintances (Ridings, et al, 2018).

On social network sites, consumers are given the power to filter, choose, and exchange information with one another or with the company (Deighton, Henderson, & Neslin, 2017). As a result of this participatory media, the audience is not simply a receiver of media content but also a simultaneous creator of content. Consumers have as much power as the advertiser in determining the message and the cultural meaning of the brand (Deighton, et al, 2017).

Social media has made life easier as organizations, groups, individuals, and entrepreneurs can improve their products with the help of comments people but at the same time, people can destroy the goodwill of the company's products (goods and services) to boost their rival's products (goods and services) through bad review (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2018). Evans (2019) avers that social media plays another important role by bringing innovation to businesses and products. The use of social media gives new thoughts and ideas to discover new horizons of products through new technologies and other experiments according to their target audience or stakeholders' demands.

Social media has many key characteristics that make it valuable to businesses, individuals and groups, and further differentiate it from traditional media. The interactive nature of social media is a key characteristic that distinguishes it from the traditional mass media or Web 1.0 internet. Anyone could post content online and get feedback or contributions from other members and vice versa. The interactive nature of social media has basically "democratized" the internet (Ellison, 2017). According to Casteleyn, Mottart and Rutten (2019), social media is accessible to virtually everyone with a cellphone and

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internet connection nowadays. They are not bound by location or time as some of the mass media are.

The coverage of social media is quite enormous and far wider than conventional mass media as the internet is available on a global scale. Information posted on the internet will travel further than it will on national TV or newspapers. Social media platforms lend themselves to great adaptability with many of their inbuilt features e.g. the “Retweet” function in Twitter now “X’, attachment of photos, short videos to tweets and Facebook posts, links and “favouriting” of tweets. All those features aid the diffusion of information on social media (GAO, Luo, & Zhang, 2021).

Using social media to broadcast messages is far cheaper than doing the same via conventional mass media. Setting up an account is free on social media and many users can afford to buy data bundles which are getting cheaper due to competition among the internet service providers. This is perhaps the most key characteristic of social media. Although social media is accessible from the web, the majority of users access it via mobile internet mainly through their cell phones (LaDuque, 2017).

2.2. Social Media as Political Campaign Tools

According to Baran (2010), the internet is characterized by freedom and self-governance, which are also the hallmarks of true democracy. It is no surprise then that computer technology is often trumpeted as the newest and best tool for increased democratic involvement and participation. Since the 2000 U.S. elections, more and more Americans have begun using the Internet to receive their news and political information. As a result, politicians as a whole have begun using the internet more and more for campaigning (Deluca 2009). However, in 2008, the Democratic Presidential candidate, Senator Barrack Obama took it to another level entirely.

Senator Obama was aspiring to accomplish what had never been achieved before in U.S. politics; someone from a minority race (Afro-Americans, Hispanics, Jews,) becoming the President of the United States of America. To stand a chance at all, Sen. Obama had to find a way to reach out to a critical segment of the electorates that were hitherto "unreachable" (i.e. the youth and minorities). He found the 'bridge' in the form of social media. Being internet-savvy, he put his skills to good use by opening and operating a Facebook account, My Space account, Twitter account, and YouTube, where he uploaded his speeches; and further created a website “mybarackobama.com” which he used for mobilizing supporters and campaigning.

Obama's utilization of social media for campaigning proved to be very popular not only among the youth, grassroots and minorities but also among the majority of Whites in America. According to Twitaholic.com, Obama had about 9 million followers on Twitter, while he had 22 million 'friends'' on Facebook. He is credited as having 'cultivated' the largest number of volunteers and also setting a new record of largest campaign donations in the history of American politics.

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In the U.S., the 2008, presidential election witnessed an unprecedented mass participation of youths and minority groups in the electoral process which eventually led to the epoch-making victory of internet-savvy Sen. Obama over his internet-deficient rival Sen. John McCain.

According to Deluca (2009), the Obama campaign's usage of the internet and blogosphere was a resounding success. Without the internet support, other well-known and more powerful opponents within both his party and the Republican Party would have certainly left Obama in the dust.

In Nigeria, politicians including Ex-President Goodluck Jonathan joined the social media bandwagon for political purposes. As if seemingly taking a cue from President Obama's successful use of the internet to win his election, Ex-President Jonathan also made aggressive use of social media to connect with millions of electorates on both Facebook and Twitter. It would be recalled that Ex-President Jonathan finally declared his intention to run for the post of president in the 2011 presidential election on Facebook, three days before formally announcing it at a rally. He had about 590, 190 followers on Facebook as of the 14th of July. He also tweets updates and reactions on his Twitter profile to his 16,486 followers.

Ex-President Jonathan’s utilization of social media proved to be a hit with youths in particular, and the populace in general. Igbinidu (2011) notes that the increasing penetration of Internet and telephone technology has culminated in an embrace of social media platforms by the Nigerian electorates, especially the youth who are increasingly becoming very vibrant and technology saviour- faire. To connect with this target group, Nigerian politicians had no choice but to leverage the media platform through which they could breached easily.

2.3. Electoral Performance

Generally, performance refers to the total expected outcome from every operation or activity (Ahmed, Mozammel & Ahmed, 2018). Electoral performances of political parties refer to their success or failure in achieving their political objectives during elections.

Electoral performance is often measured by the ability of political parties to secure votes and win seats in elections.

Winning a majority of seats or forming a government after an election is a clear indication of electoral success. Conversely, parties that fail to win a significant number of seats or fail to achieve their electoral goals are considered to have performed poorly.

Various components make up electoral performance. The integrity of the electoral process assesses the fairness, transparency, and accountability of elections. Key components include the absence of fraud, voter suppression, and corruption, as well as the presence of safeguards to ensure a level playing field for candidates and voters.

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Voter turnout measures the percentage of eligible voters who participate in an election. High turnout is often seen as a sign of a healthy democracy, while low turnout can raise concerns about political engagement and representation.

The accuracy of election results is vital for electoral performance. It involves reliable vote counting, transparency in reporting results, and the ability to verify the accuracy of the outcomes.

The inclusivity of elections is assessed by how accessible the electoral process is to all eligible voters, including marginalized and vulnerable groups. This includes considerations for physical accessibility, language, and accommodation for disabilities.

The overall security and stability of an electoral environment are significant. A lack of violence and conflict during an election is a positive indicator of electoral performance. Electoral performance includes the assessment of campaign activities. A free and fair campaign environment allows candidates to present their ideas without undue restrictions.

Electoral performance is significant for several reasons. Fair and transparent elections are essential for the legitimacy of democratic governments. Citizens must have confidence in the electoral process and the outcomes.

Elections hold political leaders accountable for their actions and policies. They provide an opportunity for voters to express their preferences.

Several factors influence the electoral performance of political parties in Nigeria, these include: electoral strategies (effective campaign strategies, targeted messaging, and mobilization efforts); policy platform and voter appeal; overall political landscape and prevailing public sentiment towards incumbent parties; demographic factors: media and public perception: coalition building and alliances, among others (Gerring, Bond, Barndt, Moreno, & Thacker, 2005).

Several challenges can impact electoral performance, including voter suppression, fraud, gerrymandering, inadequate resources, political violence, and voter apathy.

On the other hand, political party electoral performance refers to the success, effectiveness, and impact of political parties in the context of elections. It encompasses a range of key indicators that assess a party's ability to mobilize support, win elections, and influence government.

Key components of political party electoral performance include: election result, vote share, seat share, performance over time, political dominance, party cohesion, campaign effectiveness, policy platform, and grass-root mobilization.

The most direct measures of a party's electoral performance are voter engagement, public perception of political party and voter behaviour.

These are described in the following subsections.

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2.3.1. Voter Engagement

Voter engagement encompasses a wide array of activities and behaviours in which citizens participate in the democratic process. It goes beyond the act of voting and includes various ways individuals interact with the political system.

Several definitions and connotations of voter engagement exist in the literature. Voter engagement is a term that encapsulates the most fundamental aspect of democratic participation, which is the act of voting in elections. It encompasses all activities in which individuals get involved to influence the decisions and policies of their government, which can include voting, attending public meetings, and contacting elected officials. Voter engagement may also extend to political activism, which involves more assertive and deliberate actions, such as volunteering for political campaigns, participating in protests, or lobbying for specific issues.

Voter engagement can be rooted in acquiring political knowledge and engaging in the education process, such as staying informed about current events and issues. Engaging with one's local community and participating in initiatives related to local governance and public service also falls under the umbrella of voter engagement.

The significance of voter engagement cannot be overemphasized. High levels of voter engagement contribute to a more representative democracy, ensuring that elected officials and policies align more closely with the preferences of the electorate. Voter engagement can influence policy outcomes by promoting issues and causes that resonate with an engaged citizenry.

An engaged electorate holds elected officials accountable for their actions and decisions, promoting transparency and responsible governance. Voter engagement can reduce political exclusion by encouraging historically marginalized groups to participate and have their voices heard. Engaged citizens are more likely to be informed about political issues, which empowers them to make well-informed decisions and influence political discourse.

Voter engagement activities vary, encompassing everything from voting and volunteering to attending public meetings and participating in civic organizations. The digital age has added new dimensions to voter engagement, with online activities such as social media campaigns and online petitions becoming increasingly prominent. Voter engagement can manifest differently at local, national, and international levels, reflecting the varying significance of issues and policy areas.

Registering to vote is often the first step in the engagement process, as it allows individuals to participate in elections. Political parties and advocacy organizations play a significant role in mobilizing voter engagement through voter registration drives, canvassing, and campaign activities.

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Globally, particularly in the United Kingdom, the nation has seen fluctuating levels of voter engagement, with higher turnout in general elections compared to local or European Parliament elections. In the U.S. voter engagement varies significantly, with presidential elections garnering greater participation than midterms or local contests.

In Europe, particularly in Germany, the country boasts of a strong tradition of civic participation, with high levels of voter engagement in national and local elections. In Italy, the nation has experienced periods of fluctuating voter engagement, influenced by political events and party dynamics.

In Africa, voter engagement varies widely across countries, with factors such as political stability, governance quality, and historical context shaping participation. In Nigeria, the nation grapples with voter engagement challenges linked to issues like voter registration, security concerns, and socioeconomic disparities.

Factors influencing voter engagement can include education, political awareness, electoral competitiveness, and individual motivation. Voter engagement has consequences for the representativeness of elected officials, policy outcomes, government accountability, and the empowerment of citizens. Encouraging voter engagement is essential for fostering a robust and accountable democratic system. It promotes political inclusion, strengthens civic knowledge, and ensures that governance is responsive to the needs of the people.

2.3.2. Public Perception of Political Party

This refers to the image, reputation, and public opinion surrounding political parties. It encompasses how the public views and interprets the ideology, policies, and behaviour of political parties.

There are several definitions and variations of political party perception in literature. Political party perception includes the general public's perceptions and attitudes towards political parties, reflecting their trust, approval, or disapproval of party actions and positions. Political party perception involves the image and reputation that parties have among the public, which may be influenced by past performance and communication strategies.

It reflects how voters perceive political parties in terms of their ability to fulfil campaign promises, implement policies, and address public concerns. Political party perception can be shaped by the alignment between a party's stated ideology and the values and beliefs of voters. There are several significances of having a positive party perception among voters. Political party perception significantly influences voter decision-making, as it impacts party identification, candidate choice, and the overall electoral outcome. Parties use perception research to shape their campaign strategies, messages, and candidate selection to align with voter preferences and concerns.

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The perception of political parties affects the level of trust and confidence the public has in the political system and governance. Parties with positive perceptions may have an easier time garnering public support for their policy agendas, while negative perceptions can hinder policy implementation Parties may adapt their positions and strategies to alter or enhance their perception, seeking to connect with new voter demographics or address concerns more effectively.

Political party perception is not static and can change over time, influenced by political events, leadership changes, and shifts in public sentiment. Media coverage and reporting play a significant role in shaping political party perception by influencing the public's understanding of party actions and policies.

How political parties communicate their messages and engage with the public can shape perception, as can the clarity and consistency of their policy positions. The charisma, credibility, and actions of party leaders can impact party perception, as leaders often become the face of the party. Voters often form perceptions of parties by comparing them to other parties and evaluating their relative merits and shortcomings.

Globally, with emphasis on the United Kingdom, the perception of political parties is influenced by their historical legacies, stances on key issues like Brexit, and the effectiveness of their campaigns. In the U.S., political party perception varies across the two major parties, with shifting public opinion influenced by electoral outcomes and policy debates.

In European countries like Germany, party perception is shaped by the established and long-standing party system, where parties have distinct policy positions and reputations. In Italy, their multi-party system often results in fluid and shifting perceptions of political parties, influenced by coalition dynamics and policy positions.

In Africa, especially in Kenya and Zimbabwe, political party perception varies widely, reflecting the diverse political landscapes, media environments, and levels of democracy. In Nigeria, party perception is shaped by regional and ethnic considerations, as well as the performance of parties in local and national elections.

Political party perception is influenced by factors like party performance, communication strategies, media portrayal, and voter experiences. Perception impacts party success in elections, public trust in government, policy implementation, and the overall functioning of the political system. Political party perception has significant implications for electoral outcomes, governance, and the responsiveness of political parties to voter needs and concerns. Parties must continually assess and manage their perception to remain competitive and relevant.

2.3.3. Voter Behaviour

Voter Behavior encompasses the various actions, attitudes, and decision-making processes that individuals undertake when participating in electoral processes. It is a complex field within political science, providing insights into why and how people vote.

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Voter behaviour refers to the act of casting a vote in an election, including the choice of candidate or party. Voter behaviour may be characterized by the motivations that drive individuals to participate in elections, such as issues, values, or party affiliation. Voter behaviour can be analyzed through patterns of voter turnout across different demographics and regions, shedding light on disparities in participation.

The significance of understanding voter behaviour cannot be overstated. Voter behavior influences policy outcomes, as elected officials respond to the preferences and demands of their constituents. Studying voter behaviour helps hold elected officials accountable for their actions, as it reveals what voters prioritize and expect from their representatives. Parties adapt their strategies based on voter behaviour insights to maximize their electoral success, such as crafting campaign messages and platforms.

Research on voter behaviour contributes to our understanding of democratic processes, enabling the refinement of electoral systems and voter education initiatives. Voter behaviour research informs civic education efforts, helping to equip citizens with the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to make informed voting decisions.

Voter behaviour is highly diverse, with individual choices shaped by a wide range of factors, including values, interests, and circumstances. Voter behaviour can be volatile, as political events, campaign dynamics, and candidates' performances can influence election outcomes. Voter behaviour often exhibits demographic patterns, with differences in voting behaviour based on age, education, race, and other factors.

Many voters engage in issue-based voting, prioritizing specific policy areas that align with their values or concerns. In some elections, voter behaviour may be more candidate-centric, driven by the personal attributes and qualities of the candidates.

Globally, particularly in the United Kingdom, voter behaviour varies in different types of elections, with factors such as Brexit, party dynamics, and regional variations influencing voting decisions. In the United States, voter behaviour is influenced by factors like party affiliation, ideology, and the specific issues or personalities in each election.

In Europe, particularly in Germany, voter behaviour is characterized by high voter turnout and the influence of party loyalty, as the political landscape is anchored by established parties. In Italy, the country has continually experienced shifts in voter behaviour due to the country's multi-party system and evolving political coalitions.

In Africa, especially in South Africa and Ghana, voter behaviour varies widely due to diverse political landscapes, historical contexts, and levels of democracy. In Nigeria, the nation grapples with issues of voter behaviour related to the role of ethnicity, religion, and regionalism in electoral choices.

Voter behaviour is influenced by factors like party identification, candidate appeal, issue salience, campaign messages, media exposure, and individual characteristics. Voter behaviour has implications for the composition of legislative bodies, the selection of leaders, and the direction of public policy.

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Voter behaviour research informs political campaigns, party strategies, and voter education initiatives, fostering a more informed and engaged electorate. It contributes to a deeper understanding of democratic processes and can help enhance the representativeness and accountability of democratic systems.

The figure below indicates that the various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp) were bundled together as the independent variable in the study. While political party performance was treated as the dependent variable and measured as voter engagement, public perception of political party and voter behaviour.

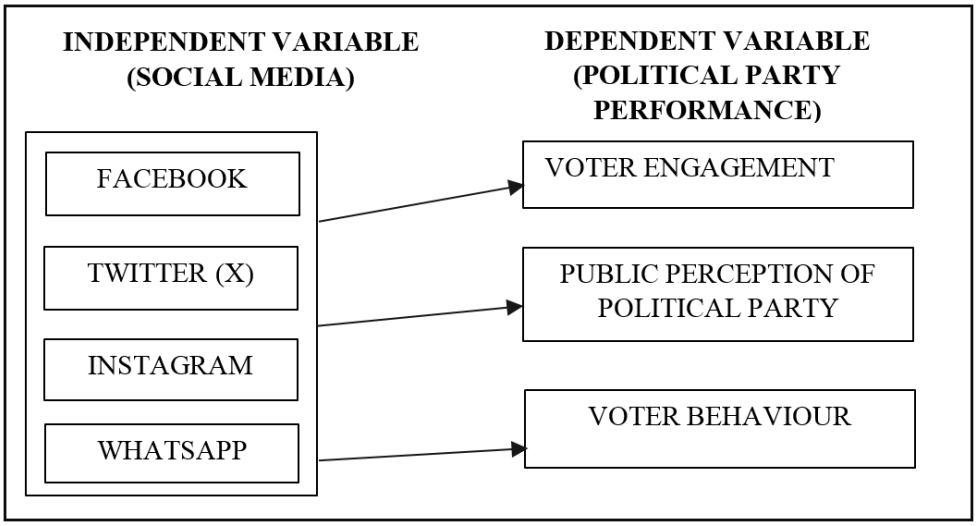

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the descriptive design and the survey method of data collection. This design is considered most suitable for the study given that it seeks to handle a practical issue. The study was conducted in the six (6) geopolitical regions of Nigeria.

One state was selected from each of the geopolitical regions. Hence, the study's area covered Enugu State (South-East), Rivers State (South-South), Lagos State (South-West), Kaduna State (North-West), Nassarawa State (North-Central), and Taraba State (North-East).

This wide coverage allowed the researcher to generate data from respondents with diverse political and sociocultural backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the findings of the study.

The primary source of data was used in the course of this research. The data was obtained through a structured questionnaire.

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A 5-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree was designed to enable respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree/disagree with each statement or item concerning the variables in this study.

The questionnaire was administered to the respondents through direct administration. We adapted the scale from previous related studies which include Boulianne (2015); Asemah (2017); and Larsson, Moe & Eliassen (2017).

The population for the study comprise the registered voters in the six selected states. The study's population is 20,967,004 as shown in the table below:

Table 3.1 Population of the Study

S/No.	State/Geopolitical Zone	Number of Voters
1	Enugu (South-East	2,112,793
2	Rivers (South-South),	3,537,190
3	Lagos (South-West)	7,060,195
4	Kaduna (North-West)	4,335,208
5	Nassarawa (North-Central)	1,899,244
6	Taraba (North-East)	2,022,374
	Total	**20,967,004**

Source: inecelectionresults.com

The sample size was calculated using the Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967) which is presented as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population of the study (20,967,004)

e = marginal/allowable error (5%)

Substituting numbers into the formula:

$$n = \frac{20{,}967{,}004}{1 + 20{,}967{,}004(0.05)^2}$$

n = 399.9; Approximately 400

Thus, the sample size for the current study is 400.

This study initially adopted the stratified sampling technique to share the sample among the six selected states proportionally based on their population as shown in table 3.2 below. Thereafter, the judgmental sampling technique was used to choose specific respondents concerning their ability to provide the needed information.

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Table 3.2: Allocation of Sample Size among the States in the Study

S/No	State	Population	Sample allocated
1	Enugu	2,112,793	2,112,793/20,967,004*400 = 40
2	Rivers	3,537,190	3,537,190/20,967,004*400 = 67
3	Lagos	7,060,195	7,060,195/20,967,004*400 = 135
4	Kaduna	4,335,208	4,335,208/20,967,004*400 = 83
5	Nassarawa	1,899,244	1,899,244/20,967,004*400 = 36
6	Taraba	2,022,374	2,022,374/20,967,004*400 = 39
	Total	**20,967,004**	**400**

Source: Researchers' Compilation

We conducted a pilot study to scrutinize the research instrument before full-scale use. This was done by administering 40 copies of the questionnaire to the sample respondents in one of the selected states to pretest the questionnaire and enable the performance of reliability tests. In testing for the reliability of the instrument, the data generated from the pilot study were subjected to construct reliability statistics using Cronbach's Alpha. All the constructs loaded above the popularly accepted point of 0.7.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data was analysed using Linear regression statistics to test the hypotheses at a 5 % level of significance.

4.1 Test of Hypothesis One: *Social media had no significant influence on voter engagement of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.*

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.931[a]	.867	.867	.25189

a. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIAL_MEDIA

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	164.637	1	164.637	2594.793	.000[b]
	Residual	25.253	398	.063		
	Total	189.890	399			

a. Dependent Variable: VOTER_ENGAGE

b. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIAL_MEDIA

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.296	.071		4.178	.000
	SOCIAL_MEDIA	.916	.018	.931	50.939	.000

a. Dependent Variable: VOTER_ENGAGE

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The model summary of this test indicates that there is a high correlation between work social media and voter engagement (R = 0.931). Also, the R^2 = 0.867 indicates that 86.7% variation in the dependent variable (voter engagement) was explained by the independent variable (social media). The ANOVA result shows that F=2594.793; P<0.05 is statistically significant. Likewise, the unstandardized coefficient, β =0.916; t=50.939; p<0.05) implies that social media is a statistically significant predictor of voter engagement. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis, which states, "Social media had no significant influence on voter engagement of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria".

4.2 Test of Hypothesis Two: *Social media had no significant influence on public perception of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.*

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.684[a]	.468	.467	.42434

a. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIAL_MEDIA

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	63.160	1	63.160	350.756	.000[b]
	Residual	71.667	398	.180		
	Total	134.827	399			

a. Dependent Variable: PUBLIC_PERCEPTION

b. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIAL_MEDIA

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.828	.119		15.328	.000
	SOCIAL_MEDIA	.567	.030	.684	18.728	.000

a. Dependent Variable: PUBLIC_PERCEPTION

The model summary of this test indicates that there is a high correlation between work social media and public perception (R = 0.684). Also, the R^2 = 0.468 indicates that 46.8% variation in the dependent variable (public perception) was explained by the independent variable (social media). The ANOVA result shows that F=350.756; P<0.05 is statistically significant. Likewise, the unstandardized coefficient, β =0.567; t=18.728; p<0.05) implies that social media is a statistically significant predictor of public perception. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis, which states, "Social media had no significant influence on public perception of the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria".

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4.3. Test of Hypothesis Three: *Social media had no significant influence on voter behaviour towards the Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.*

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.594[a]	.353	.351	.55215

a. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIAL_MEDIA

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	66.222	1	66.222	217.213	.000[b]
	Residual	121.338	398	.305		
	Total	187.560	399			

a. Dependent Variable: VOTER_BEHAVE

b. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIAL_MEDIA

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.689	.155		10.883	.000
	SOCIAL_MEDIA	.581	.039	.594	14.738	.000

a. Dependent Variable: VOTER_BEHAVE

The model summary of this test indicates that there is a high correlation between work social media and public perception (R = 0.594). Also, the R^2 = 0.353 indicates that 35.3% variation in the dependent variable (voter behaviour) was explained by the independent variable (social media). The ANOVA result shows that F=217.213; P<0.05 is statistically significant. Likewise, the unstandardized coefficient, β =0.581; t=14.738; p<0.05) implies that social media is a statistically significant predictor of public perception. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis, which states, “Social media had no significant influence on voter behaviour towards Labour Party in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria”.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the result of the data analysis above, we make the following conclusions:

Social media had a significant influence on voter engagement of the Labour Party. This implied that increased social media activities of the political party **motivated eligible voters’** overall involvement in the civic process in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Social media had a significant influence on public perception of the Labour Party. This implied that the more the electorates encountered information and discourse on social media platforms about the Labour Party, the better their collective beliefs, opinions,

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attitudes, and views held regarding the party and its candidates in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Social media had a significant influence on voter behaviour. This showed that the more the electorates encountered favourable information and stimuli about the Labour Party in social media, the better their actions and voting choices in favour of the Labour Party and its candidates in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Consequently, we hereby recommend that all registered political parties in Nigeria should be more proactive users of social media in electioneering campaigns and processes at large.

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