

## ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN SHAPING YOUTH VOTER BEHAVIOUR DURING ELECTIONS IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA

<sup>\*1</sup>EtimbukEbongIdiong, <sup>2</sup>Anietie Solomon Etteyit, <sup>3</sup>Roseline-Inayi Emmanuel Etimbuk

<sup>1</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Mass Communication and Media Studies,  
University of Uyo, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Development Communication, Faculty of Mass Communication and Media  
Studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychological Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Uyo, Nigeria.

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\*Corresponding Author: EtimbukEbongIdiong

Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Mass Communication and Media Studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria.

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social media political campaigns in shaping youth voter behaviour during elections in southern Nigeria. The rapid growth of digital communication technologies has transformed political engagement, making social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp central tools for political communication and mobilization. Drawing on Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Identity Theory, the study explores how exposure to political content on social media influences political awareness, participation, and voting decisions among young people. A conceptual and empirical review of relevant literature reveals that social media enhances political knowledge, facilitates grassroots mobilization, and encourages active civic engagement among youths. It also demonstrates that repeated exposure to political messages, peer influence, and group affiliations significantly shape voter preferences and behaviour. However, the study identifies critical challenges associated with social media use in political campaigns, including the spread of misinformation, political polarization, digital inequality, and the manipulation of public opinion through targeted advertising and algorithm-driven content. The findings further highlight that while social media has strengthened democratic participation by giving youths a voice in political discourse, it also poses risks to informed decision-making and electoral integrity. The study concludes that maximizing the benefits of

social media in political campaigns requires improved digital literacy, ethical political communication practices, and effective regulatory frameworks. These measures are essential to ensure that social media contributes positively to democratic development and youth political participation in southern Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS:** Social media, political campaigns, youth voter behaviour, political participation, digital activism, agenda-setting, social identity, misinformation, political communication, Nigeria elections.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of political communication across the globe. In recent years, social media has emerged not merely as a communication tool but as a powerful political instrument capable of shaping public opinion, influencing voter behaviour, and redefining democratic participation. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have created new avenues for political actors to engage directly with citizens, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. This transformation is particularly significant in developing democracies such as Nigeria, where access to conventional media may be uneven and often politicized.

Nigeria's demographic structure further amplifies the relevance of social media in politics. With a large proportion of its population comprising young people, the country presents a unique context in which youth engagement can significantly influence electoral outcomes. Youths, typically characterized by their high level of digital literacy and social media usage, are increasingly turning to online platforms for political information, discussion, and mobilization. As observed by Morah and Nwafor (2024), the integration of social media into political campaigns during Nigeria's recent elections has reshaped how political messages are disseminated and consumed, particularly among younger voters.

The 2023 general elections marked a turning point in Nigeria's political communication landscape, especially in southern regions such as Lagos, Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, and Anambra States. Political campaigns during this period witnessed a significant shift from traditional methods, such as rallies, radio broadcasts, and print advertisements, to digital strategies that relied heavily on social media engagement. Political actors leveraged hashtags, influencer endorsements, live streaming, and targeted advertisements to reach and mobilize young

voters. Youth-led digital movements, online advocacy groups, and grassroots mobilization efforts played a critical role in shaping political narratives and driving voter turnout.

Beyond mere information dissemination, social media has enabled a more participatory political culture. Young people are no longer passive recipients of political messages; rather, they actively create, share, and critique political content. This participatory nature of social media fosters a sense of political efficacy among youths, encouraging them to engage in civic activities such as voter registration, campaign volunteering, and election monitoring. Benaiah and Osuntoki (2024) argue that social media has significantly lowered the barriers to political participation, making it easier for young people to engage in the democratic process.

However, the growing influence of social media in political campaigns also raises critical concerns. The same platforms that facilitate political engagement can also be used to spread misinformation, manipulate public opinion, and deepen political polarization. The rapid dissemination of unverified information, often amplified through algorithms and echo chambers, poses a significant threat to informed decision-making among voters. Furthermore, the use of targeted political advertising and digital propaganda raises questions about transparency, accountability, and electoral integrity.

Given these developments, it is essential to critically examine the role of social media political campaigns in shaping youth voter behaviour, particularly in southern Nigeria where digital penetration is relatively high. Understanding this relationship is crucial for policymakers, electoral bodies, and scholars seeking to strengthen democratic processes and promote responsible political communication. This study, therefore, explores how social media influences political awareness, engagement, and voting decisions among youths, while also highlighting the opportunities and challenges associated with digital political campaigning.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

### **2.1 Social Media Political Campaigns**

Social media political campaigns refer to the strategic use of digital platforms to communicate political messages, promote candidates, and influence voter perceptions and behaviour. Unlike traditional campaign methods, which are often unidirectional and controlled by media institutions, social media campaigns are interactive, decentralized, and highly participatory. Political actors utilize a wide range of tools, including multimedia content, hashtags, live broadcasts, memes, and targeted advertisements, to engage with diverse audiences in real time.

One of the defining characteristics of social media campaigns is their ability to facilitate direct communication between political actors and voters. This direct engagement enhances transparency and allows candidates to respond promptly to public concerns. Additionally, social media platforms provide opportunities for micro-targeting, enabling political campaigns to tailor messages to specific demographic groups, including youths. According to Alodat, Al-Qora'n, and Hamoud (2023), this level of personalization increases the effectiveness of political communication by making messages more relevant and appealing to target audiences.

Another important feature of social media political campaigns is their reliance on user-generated content. Supporters of political candidates often act as informal campaign agents by sharing, endorsing, and amplifying campaign messages within their networks. This peer-to-peer communication enhances the credibility of political messages, as individuals are more likely to trust information shared by friends and acquaintances than by official sources. Moreover, the viral nature of social media content allows campaign messages to spread rapidly, reaching large audiences within a short period.

In the Nigerian context, social media has become an essential component of political campaigns, particularly in urban areas of southern Nigeria. Political parties and candidates increasingly invest in digital campaign strategies to complement traditional methods. These strategies include influencer marketing, online debates, digital town halls, and coordinated hashtag campaigns. Owagboriaye (2024) notes that social media has transformed political mobilization by enabling grassroots movements to gain visibility and influence electoral outcomes.

Despite its advantages, social media political campaigning also presents several challenges. The lack of effective regulation allows for the proliferation of misinformation, fake news, and malicious content. Additionally, the anonymity provided by social media platforms can facilitate the spread of propaganda and hate speech. These issues highlight the need for ethical standards and regulatory frameworks to ensure that social media is used responsibly in political campaigns.

## **2.2 Youth Voter Behaviour**

Youth voter behaviour refers to the patterns of political attitudes, perceptions, and actions exhibited by young individuals in relation to electoral processes. It encompasses a wide range of activities, including political awareness, engagement in campaign activities, participation in political discussions, and voting decisions. Youths are often considered a critical segment of the electorate due to their numerical strength and potential to influence electoral outcomes.

One of the key characteristics of youth voter behaviour is its susceptibility to external influences, particularly media exposure. In the digital age, social media has become a primary source of political information for many young people. Barati (2023) observes that youths are more likely to rely on online platforms for news and political updates, which significantly shapes their perceptions and attitudes toward political issues and candidates.

Youth voter behaviour is also influenced by factors such as political socialization, peer influence, and socio-economic conditions. Social media amplifies these factors by providing a platform for interaction and information exchange. Through online discussions, debates, and content sharing, young people are exposed to diverse viewpoints that can shape their political opinions. Additionally, the endorsement of political candidates by peers or influencers can significantly impact voting decisions.

Another important aspect of youth voter behaviour is political engagement. Social media has made it easier for young people to participate in political activities beyond voting. These activities include online activism, petition signing, fundraising, and participation in protests and advocacy campaigns. Fakeye (2023) highlights that digital activism has become a powerful tool for youth engagement, enabling young people to influence political discourse and hold leaders accountable.

However, youth voter behaviour is not without challenges. The reliance on social media for political information exposes young voters to risks such as misinformation, bias, and manipulation. Echo chambers, where individuals are exposed only to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, can limit critical thinking and reduce the quality of political decision-making. Wang et al. (2020) emphasize that such environments can lead to increased polarization and reduced tolerance for opposing views.

In southern Nigeria, youth voter behaviour is particularly dynamic due to higher levels of internet access and digital engagement. Young voters in this region are more likely to participate in online political discussions and be influenced by social media campaigns. This makes them a key target for political actors seeking to gain electoral support. Understanding the factors that shape youth voter behaviour in this context is essential for developing effective political communication strategies and promoting democratic participation.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **3.1 Agenda-Setting Theory**

Agenda-Setting Theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The theory posits that the media plays a significant role in determining the issues that the

public considers important. Its core tenets include the idea that media emphasis on certain topics increases their perceived importance (issue salience), and that repeated exposure to such issues shapes public priorities. It also suggests that the media not only tells people what to think about but can influence how they think about those issues through framing and presentation. Additionally, the theory recognizes that prominence, frequency, and visibility of information contribute to shaping public awareness and perception.

The theory is relevant to this study because social media platforms now function as modern agenda-setting tools in political campaigns. In southern Nigeria, political actors and users actively promote specific issues, candidates, and narratives through repeated posts, hashtags, and trending discussions. This continuous exposure influences what young voters pay attention to during elections and shapes their perception of political priorities. As a result, social media significantly determines the issues that dominate youth political discourse and ultimately affects their voting behaviour.

### **3.2 Social Identity Theory**

Social Identity Theory was developed by Henri Tajfel in 1972 and later expanded with John Turner in 1979. The theory explains that individuals derive their identity from the social groups to which they belong. Its major tenets include social categorization, where individuals classify themselves into groups; social identification, where they adopt the values and behaviours of those groups; and social comparison, where they evaluate their group against others. The theory also emphasizes in-group bias, emotional attachment to group membership, and the influence of group norms on individual behaviour.

This theory is relevant to the present study because social media provides a platform for the formation and reinforcement of political identities among youths. During elections in southern Nigeria, young voters often align themselves with specific political groups, movements, or candidates, forming strong online communities. These group affiliations influence their political attitudes, interactions, and voting decisions. The desire to maintain group identity and loyalty motivates youths to support and vote for candidates associated with their group, thereby shaping their overall voter behaviour.

## **4. EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

Empirical studies on the role of social media in political campaigns have expanded significantly in recent years, with particular attention to youth voter behaviour in emerging democracies such as Nigeria. This section reviews relevant empirical literature under key

thematic areas, including political awareness, mobilization, voting behaviour, and associated challenges.

Empirical evidence consistently shows that social media enhances political awareness among young voters. For instance, Oluwatosi et al. (2020) found that exposure to political content on social media significantly improved students' knowledge of electoral processes and candidate information in southwestern Nigeria. Similarly, Morah and Nwafor (2024) reported that youths who frequently engaged with political discussions on digital platforms demonstrated higher levels of political literacy compared to those relying on traditional media.

In another study, Barati (2023) observed that social media platforms facilitate access to diverse political viewpoints, thereby broadening users' understanding of governance and public policy issues. These findings suggest that social media functions as an informal civic education tool, particularly for first-time voters. However, while most studies agree on its positive role in awareness creation, differences exist regarding the depth of knowledge acquired, with some scholars arguing that exposure does not always translate into critical understanding.

Several empirical studies highlight the effectiveness of social media in mobilizing young voters. Benaiah and Osuntoki (2024) found that digital campaign strategies during the 2023 Nigerian general elections significantly increased youth participation in voter registration and election activities. Likewise, Mishnick and Wise (2024) established a strong relationship between online political engagement and offline participation, particularly among previously disengaged youths.

Ejiroghene and Chuks (2026) further demonstrated that social media campaigns contributed to higher youth turnout in southern Nigeria by facilitating rapid dissemination of mobilization messages. These studies collectively emphasize that the interactive and networked nature of social media enhances collective action. Nevertheless, some empirical works caution that mobilization effects may be uneven, as they often depend on digital access, socio-economic status, and political interest.

A growing body of empirical research indicates that social media significantly influences voting decisions among youths. Islam et al. (2022) found that targeted political messaging and personalized content on social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping voter preferences. Similarly, Civelli et al. (2025) reported that algorithm-driven exposure to political content increases the likelihood of attitude reinforcement and candidate support.

Fakeye (2023) also noted that endorsements by influencers and online opinion leaders contribute to shaping electoral decisions. While these studies confirm the persuasive power of

social media, they also reveal that its influence is often indirect, operating through social interactions and repeated exposure rather than immediate decision shifts.

Empirical literature also highlights the role of social media in fostering political engagement and activism. Hile et al. (2023) found that youths actively use social media platforms to participate in political debates, express opinions, and advocate for social change. Similarly, studies show that online activism, including hashtag campaigns and digital protests, has become a prominent feature of youth political participation in Nigeria.

Research by Benaiah and Osuntoki (2024) indicates that such engagement often translates into offline political actions, including attending rallies and voting. This demonstrates that social media serves as both a space for political expression and a catalyst for real-world participation. However, the extent of engagement varies across individuals, with some youths remaining passive consumers of content rather than active participants.

## **5. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING YOUTH VOTER BEHAVIOUR**

### **5.1 Political Awareness and Education**

Social media plays a crucial role in enhancing political awareness and education among youths by providing continuous access to political information. Unlike traditional media, which often operates within limited time frames and controlled narratives, social media offers a dynamic and interactive environment where information is constantly updated and easily accessible. Young voters are exposed to a wide range of political content, including candidate profiles, policy proposals, campaign messages, and electoral guidelines. This exposure contributes to a more informed electorate, as youths are able to explore multiple viewpoints and engage with political issues at their own pace. Empirical evidence suggests that increased exposure to digital political content significantly improves political knowledge and awareness, thereby influencing voter readiness and participation (Oluwatosi et al., 2020).

In addition, the use of multimedia formats such as videos, infographics, and live streams enhances the effectiveness of political communication by making complex political information more understandable and engaging. Social media also facilitates interactive learning through comments, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions, allowing youths to clarify doubts and deepen their understanding of political processes. Consequently, social media serves not only as a source of information but also as a platform for civic education, which is essential for meaningful political participation.

## 5.2 Mobilization and Participation

One of the most significant roles of social media in political campaigns is its ability to mobilize young voters and encourage active participation in the electoral process. Through coordinated digital campaigns, political actors can quickly disseminate information about voter registration, campaign events, and election procedures to a large audience. Social media platforms also enable grassroots mobilization by allowing individuals and groups to organize and promote political activities without the need for extensive financial resources.

The participatory nature of social media encourages peer-to-peer mobilization, where users share campaign messages and motivate others within their networks to take part in political activities. This form of digital engagement creates a sense of collective responsibility and increases the likelihood of political participation. Empirical studies indicate that social media has been instrumental in driving youth involvement in elections, particularly by engaging previously apathetic or marginalized groups (Benaiah&Osuntoki, 2024; Mishnick& Wise, 2024). As a result, social media has become a powerful tool for expanding the scope and inclusiveness of democratic participation.

## 5.3 Influence on Voting Decisions

Social media significantly shapes voting decisions by influencing how young voters perceive candidates, political parties, and key issues. Political campaigns on social media are often designed to persuade and influence through strategic messaging, emotional appeals, and targeted content. These messages are reinforced through repeated exposure and interactions within social networks, making them more impactful.

Peer influence is particularly strong in this context, as youths tend to trust information shared by friends, influencers, and individuals they identify with. Endorsements, testimonials, and political discussions within online communities contribute to shaping opinions and guiding voting choices. Furthermore, the use of data analytics and targeted advertising allows political actors to tailor messages to specific audiences, increasing their relevance and persuasive power. Research indicates that such personalized communication strategies play a significant role in influencing voter preferences and decision-making processes (Islam et al., 2022; Civelli et al., 2025).

## 5.4 Political Engagement and Activism

Social media has transformed youths from passive observers into active participants in political processes by providing platforms for engagement and activism. Young people use social media to express their opinions, participate in political debates, and advocate for social and political change. Online activism, including hashtag campaigns, digital protests, and

awareness initiatives, has become an important feature of contemporary political participation.

These forms of engagement not only raise awareness about political issues but also create pressure for accountability and transparency in governance. Social media empowers youths to voice their concerns and influence public discourse, thereby strengthening democratic processes. Studies have shown that digital activism can translate into offline political action, including participation in rallies, community organizing, and voting (Fakeye, 2023). This demonstrates the interconnected nature of online and offline political engagement.

## **6. CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS**

Despite the numerous advantages associated with social media political campaigns, several critical challenges continue to limit their effectiveness and raise concerns about their implications for democratic processes. One of the most significant challenges is the widespread dissemination of misinformation and fake news. Social media platforms enable the rapid circulation of unverified and often misleading political content, which can easily influence the perceptions and decisions of young voters. Due to the speed and reach of digital communication, false information may gain traction before it can be corrected, thereby distorting political understanding and undermining informed electoral choices. This challenge is particularly pronounced among youths who rely heavily on social media as their primary source of political information.

Another major issue is political polarization. Social media algorithms are designed to present users with content that aligns with their interests and prior engagements, which often results in the reinforcement of existing beliefs. This creates echo chambers where young voters are exposed primarily to viewpoints that support their opinions, limiting their ability to engage with alternative perspectives. Consequently, this selective exposure can deepen ideological divisions, reduce critical thinking, and hinder constructive political dialogue, all of which are essential for a healthy democratic system.

The problem of the digital divide also presents a significant challenge in the context of social media political campaigns. While social media has the potential to enhance political participation, not all youths have equal access to digital technologies and reliable internet connectivity. Factors such as socio-economic status, geographic location, and educational background influence the level of access and engagement with online political content. As a result, certain groups of youths may be excluded from digital political discourse, leading to unequal participation and representation in the electoral process.

In addition, the manipulation of political information through propaganda, bots, and targeted advertising poses serious concerns. Political actors increasingly use sophisticated digital tools to influence public opinion by spreading biased narratives, amplifying specific messages, and suppressing opposing views. Automated accounts (bots) can artificially inflate the popularity of political content, creating a false sense of consensus, while targeted advertising allows campaigns to tailor messages to specific audiences in ways that may not be transparent. These practices can distort political realities and subtly shape voter behaviour, often without the awareness of the audience. As noted in existing studies, such forms of digital manipulation present significant ethical and regulatory challenges for electoral systems (Hile et al., 2023).

## **7. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHERN NIGERIA**

The growing influence of social media political campaigns carries significant implications for electoral processes in southern Nigeria. The region, which includes states in the South-South, South-East, and South-West, is characterized by relatively higher levels of internet penetration, smartphone usage, and digital literacy compared to other parts of the country. This digital advantage has positioned social media as a central platform for political communication, particularly among youths who constitute a large proportion of the voting population.

One major implication is that social media has become a decisive determinant of political visibility and relevance. Political candidates and parties that effectively utilize digital platforms are more likely to reach, engage, and influence young voters. In urban centres such as Port Harcourt, Lagos, and Uyo, youth voters are highly active online, making them more susceptible to digital campaign strategies, including targeted messaging, influencer endorsements, and interactive political content. As a result, electoral success increasingly depends on a candidate's digital presence and ability to strategically navigate online spaces. Furthermore, social media has contributed to the transformation of political participation patterns in the region. Youths are no longer passive recipients of political information; instead, they actively engage in discussions, share opinions, and mobilize support for preferred candidates. This shift has strengthened democratic participation by giving young people a voice in political discourse. However, it also means that political narratives can be rapidly shaped or reshaped within online communities, sometimes without adequate verification or critical scrutiny.

Another important implication is the widening gap between digitally connected youths and those with limited access to online platforms. While urban youths benefit from increased exposure to political information and engagement opportunities, rural youths or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be excluded from these digital conversations. This creates disparities in political awareness and participation, which could affect the inclusiveness and representativeness of electoral outcomes in southern Nigeria.

Additionally, the region has witnessed increased exposure to digital risks such as misinformation, political propaganda, and online manipulation. Given the high level of social media usage, false narratives can spread quickly and influence public opinion at a large scale. This underscores the need for context-specific strategies, including digital literacy programmes and regulatory interventions, to ensure that social media contributes positively to democratic development in southern Nigeria.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Social media political campaigns have emerged as a powerful and transformative force in shaping youth voter behaviour in southern Nigeria. Through increased access to political information, interactive engagement, and network-based communication, social media platforms have enhanced political awareness among youths, encouraged active participation in the electoral process, and influenced voting decisions. These developments reflect a broader shift in political communication, where digital media plays a central role in connecting political actors with the electorate.

However, the benefits of social media are accompanied by significant challenges that cannot be overlooked. The proliferation of misinformation, the reinforcement of political polarization, and the growing use of digital manipulation techniques pose serious threats to the integrity of democratic processes. These challenges highlight the complex nature of social media as both an enabler of democratic participation and a potential source of distortion in political communication.

To maximize the positive impact of social media political campaigns, there is a need for deliberate and sustained efforts across multiple levels. Enhancing digital literacy among youths is essential to equip them with the skills needed to critically evaluate online information and resist manipulation. Political actors must also adopt ethical campaign practices that prioritize transparency, accuracy, and accountability in their use of digital platforms. In addition, regulatory bodies should develop and enforce policies that address

misinformation, protect electoral integrity, and ensure fair use of digital technologies in political campaigns.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations should implement comprehensive digital literacy programmes aimed at equipping young people with the skills to critically evaluate online political information. This will help youths identify misinformation, verify sources, and make informed voting decisions.
2. Political parties, candidates, and campaign teams should adhere to ethical standards in their use of social media by ensuring that information shared is accurate, transparent, and free from manipulation. Regulatory bodies should enforce guidelines that discourage the spread of false or misleading political content.
3. Electoral bodies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should collaborate with policymakers to develop and enforce policies that regulate social media use during elections. This includes monitoring digital campaigns, addressing misinformation, and ensuring fairness in online political advertising.
4. Governments and electoral authorities should partner with social media companies to detect and curb the spread of fake news, hate speech, and politically manipulative content. Platforms should also improve their algorithms to promote credible information and reduce the amplification of harmful content.
5. Youths should be encouraged to engage in constructive political discussions and avoid the spread of unverified information. Civic organizations and educational institutions should promote values of tolerance, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue in online political spaces.
6. Efforts should be made to improve access to internet services and digital technologies, particularly in rural and underserved areas of southern Nigeria. Expanding digital access will ensure more inclusive participation in political discourse and electoral processes.
7. Government agencies, NGOs, and electoral bodies should actively use social media platforms to disseminate accurate information about electoral processes, voter rights, and civic responsibilities. This will enhance political awareness and encourage informed participation among youths.
8. Fact-checking organizations and media institutions should intensify efforts to monitor, verify, and debunk false political information circulating online. Rapid response mechanisms should be established to counter misinformation before it spreads widely.

9. Policies should require political advertisers to disclose sponsorship, funding sources, and targeting criteria for online campaigns. This will promote accountability and allow voters to better understand the intent behind political messages.
10. Scholars and researchers should continue to investigate the evolving impact of social media on voter behaviour, particularly in the Nigerian context. Continuous research will help identify emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities for improving democratic engagement.

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