

Perception of South-East Residents on the Influence of Social Media Messages on Electoral Violence during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Electoral processes in Nigeria have been plagued by various forms of violence since the country gained independence, and social media has not been exempted from these spikes in electoral violence. Hence, the need to ascertain the Perception of South-East residents on the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria becomes inevitable. To conduct this study, the survey design was adopted. Questionnaire was used to generate data for the study. A sample size of 405 respondents were determined using the Modified Cochran formula from the population of 13,524,918 Internet/social media subscribers in South-East. The Multi-stage sampling technique was used. The findings, among others, revealed that social media messages, to a moderate extent, influenced electoral violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. Also, it found that the majority of the respondents moderately perceived the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. Based on these findings, the study recommends that INEC and other electoral bodies should educate the citizens that perceive social media content on electoral violence on how to fact-check information sources.

KEYWORDS: Perception, Influence, Social Media and Electoral Violence

I. INTRODUCTION

Elections are a prudent democratic process adopted for choosing a representative to hold public office. That notwithstanding, there are upheavals that impede the smooth conduct of elections in Nigeria. [1]. These disturbances are considered election-related violence, which includes threats of coercion, physical attacks, intimidation, hate speech, misinformation and voter suppression which have been a recurring challenges in the democratic process of Nigeria. In order to change the outcome of the election, these acts, which were witnessed in the run-up to the 2023 general election in Nigeria, included stealing ballot boxes, killing, kidnapping electoral opponents or stakeholders, and burning ballot boxes, collation centres, and offices [2].

Sequel to these spikes of electoral violence in Nigeria, [3] several factors were attributed as the cause, such as feeble governance, inefficiency of security agents, poverty and unemployment, abuse of power, tribalism and nepotism, corruption, godfatherism and the proliferation of small arms.

In response to the growing menace of electoral related violence, electoral bodies and stakeholders such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Civil Society Organization (CSO) and other government and non-governmental organisations through their respective media units launched extensive media campaigns and awareness messages through

traditional media (Radio, TV, Newspapers and Magazines) and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Whatsapp) to sensitise the electorate on the implications of electoral violence and its far-reaching effects on the political and economic growth of the country [4]; [5]; [6].

Social media, as the latest medium employed by INEC and other electoral bodies to raise awareness of electoral processes and mitigate violence during elections in Nigeria, is a powerful tool introduced in the country in 2011. They are interactive platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and TikTok) that have revolutionised the concept of elections in Nigeria by influencing political behaviour, shaping public opinion, and providing platforms for the public to express their views on political matters [7].

As a matter of fact, the influence of social media mobilisation for political activities in 2022 rose approximately to 45%, matching the levels seen in previous pre-election years. For instance, Peter Obi of Labour Party (LP), garnered significant popularity on social media compared to his competitors, such as Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). While Atiku and Tinubu adopted slogans like “#Atikulated” and “#Batified,” respectively, Peter Obi successfully introduced the slogan “#Obidient,” which resonates positively with the youth faction of the electorates [8].

Inasmuch as social media played a crucial role in the political sphere, they were also susceptible to the manipulation of content, serving as a breeding ground for fake news, hate speech, dissemination of unreliable facts, exchange of banter, and incitement of violence [9]. For instance, the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was overshadowed by intense political discourse, widespread social media engagement, and public reactions to electoral violence. This however, invigorates the public perception, as it is believed that social media inflame tensions and contributes to the diffusion of hate speech and provocation to violence [10].

In South East, Nigeria, social media executed a double barrel role of informing and sensitising the electorate while also serving as a channel for the dissemination of incendiary messages that may have heightened tension before, during and after the election. Given the historical and political landscape of the region, including ethnic sentiments, public opinion, and political behaviour; the influence of social media messages

on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election requires critical investigation.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The role of social media in spreading information, shaping public opinion and political activities have become increasingly relevant especially during the electoral processes in Nigeria. The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was designated by exacerbated political tensions, with social media serving as a fundamental platform for political activities, engagement, mobilisation and display of electoral violence. While social media provided an avenue for political activities, due to its unmonitored nature, it became a breeding ground for fake news, hate speech, denigration of opposition and incendiary messages, which may have contributed to electoral violence.

The misleading messages on social media platforms (Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram and Twitter) not only affect the credibility of social media and politicians, but also contribute to fictional angles of information within the society. Thereby shaping public perceptions, influencing voter behaviour and, exacerbating conflicts among political factions.

However, despite the growing concern about the role of social media messages on electoral violence, they appear to be little or no empirical studies conducted on the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election in synergy with the perception of residents of South East Nigeria, the researcher considers this as a fundamental knowledge gap that motivated the study.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general aim of this research is to investigate the perception of South-East residents on the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

Specifically this study addressed the following objectives:

1. Find out the extent to which social media messages influence electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria
2. Ascertain the extent South East residents perceive the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.
3. Determine the challenges faced by South East residents in their perception of the influence of

social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is an internet-based interactive media systems that enable users to exchange information, ideas, experiences, connections, and skills in real time, as well as interact with others who share their interests [11]; [12]. Social media refers to platforms that make use of web-based and mobile technologies to provide highly participatory spaces where people and groups may exchange, produce, discuss, and edit user-generated content [13].

[14]. Social media becomes an indispensable part of lives and it fulfills a variety of objectives that cut across communication, entertainment, news, and commerce as inclined to the uniqueness of its traits such as interconnectedness, content creativity, identity, interpersonal interaction and political participation. [15]; [16]. Identified types of social media as: Social networking sites (Facebook, Whatsapp, Snapchat), Microblogs (Twitter, LinkedIn), Social bookmarking (Blinklist, Simple), Image and video sharing platform (Instagram, YouTube). The influx of social media platforms on a regular basis is reshaping the global, relational, and interpersonal communication structure of the public.

OVERVIEW ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

One of the basic way to characterise the concept of electoral violence, is to appreciate it as a type of political violence that occurs before, during and after election [17]. Electoral violence is an act of violence committed during a presidential election with the sole purpose of manipulating the result or abusing the democratic process [18]. These electoral malpractices include: snatching and burning of ballot boxes, destruction of coalition centers, killing, kidnapping, inflicting of grievous body harm on perceived opponents, and burning of electoral offices to alter the process and outcome [19].

Also, electoral violence can be regarded as any kind of violence that is directed at the electorate, properties, electoral process with the intention of altering the process before, during and after a presidential election [20]. Its aim is to impede the voting process, manipulate the results, or inflict personal injury and destruction of properties. These actions are carefully executed with the intention of hindering and disrupting the

electoral process from the pre-election stage, election stage to the post election stage.

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

The concept of election in its etymological existence in Africa and specifically in Nigeria is a colonial scheme that was introduced as part of the structural institutional transfer to foster unrestricted democracy in the country, but its process till today is antithetical and paradoxical to the basic aim it was evolved due to the nature and character of colonialism; hence the room for electoral violence became inevitable in the electoral system of the country [21]; [22].

From time immemorial, electoral process in Nigeria has been worsened with communal, political and sectarian squabbles and narrow minded conflicts due to the issue of ethnicity, regionalism, religion, godfatherism and structural imbalance etc. The first republic experienced a death knell owing to the fact that the elections conducted within that period (1964/65) periled 200 lives and were marred with one manipulation to the other. As a matter of fact, it escalated into war that brought into extinction the first Republic [23]. In the second Republic, the country witnessed excessive post-election with the loss of 100 lives attributed to 1983 election [24].

After the military regimes from 1983 to 1992, the general election of 1993 that was regarded as the violence free election in the country, did not come out clean as the then Head of state, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida annulled the election which indeed spurred a wave of protest, leading to the death of 100 peaceful demonstrators [25]. Not much changed in the spikes in electoral violence, since Nigeria returned to Democratic rule in 1999, as the 1999 election that brought to power the former President Olusegun Obasanjo recorded a death toll of 80 lives [26]. In like manner, 100 people died during the events of violence caused by federal and state elections in 2003, and 300 lives were lost in connection with the electoral violence of 2007 [27].

The greatest electoral violence in Nigeria's political history followed in 2011. As a matter of statistics, the aftermath of that election claimed 800 lives within three days in the Northern Nigeria [28]. Consequently on the general elections in 2015 and after, International Crisis Group affirmed that more than 100 people lost their lives. Also based on the estimate of European Union Electoral Observation Mission on violence toll on 2019 general elections, they recorded the death rate of 150 lives [29].

The 2023 presidential election was far fetched from being peaceful, despite the signed Peace Accord by aspirants and leaders of the 18 political parties on September 2022 for a peaceful election that is free of violence, personal insults and intimidation on the opposition, the seed of hostility was sown from the build-up of the election to the aftermath of it thereby propelling an atmosphere that was marked with toxicity and tension [30]. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), recorded approximately 200 violent events with 100 reported casualties [31]. However, electoral process in Nigeria contradicts the principle of democracy. This is because when the act of intimidation, torture, murder and abuse are deployed to suppress free and fair contest, the essence of democracy becomes undermined and debased

SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

Social media without doubt is very useful in the electoral process of countries practising democratic system of government. Its utility cuts-across political development including shunning of electoral malpractices and raising of public awareness in discouraging electoral related violence. Notwithstanding the efficacies of social media in electoral process in Nigeria, it is good to acknowledge the fact that they have bestowed enormously to the menace of electoral violence, by serving as a breeding ground for hate speech, fake news, invasion of privacy, physical and psychological violence [32]; [33].

[34]. Social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram during the 2015 general elections were used for smear campaign and potent weapon for malicious attacks on the political opponents[35]. [36].The machination of violence incitement through social media, was on its recurring decimal in a build up and aftermath of 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. Vices such as misconstrued expression, death of not less than 39 persons, ethnic hate speech and online propaganda created an atmosphere of uncontrollably banter among politicians and supporters of the two prominent parties (APC and PDP).

Sequel to the issue of disinformation on social media, during the pre-election of the 2023 presidential election, an alleged letter claimed to be signed by an INEC spokesman on the alleged investigation of the APC presidential flag bearer over drug-related charges, circulated on social media platforms (Whatsapp, Twitter and Facebook),

was later discovered to be fake content. The reason being that there was no letter of investigation issued by INEC, rather it was used as a weapon of disinformation by party propagandists [37].

In as much as social media can be utilised to achieve free and credible election, the abuse of it by political parties, aspirants and hoodlums can incite violence and disrupt electoral process.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

[38].In a study on "The role of social media in electioneering: The case of the Nigerian 2015 presidential election", found that social media play key roles in mobilizing voters, creating the required awareness on political activities and generating a high level of citizens' participation in the 2015 electioneering process in Nigeria. Also the study found out that social media provided an unfettered avenue for the users to be involved in smear campaigns and use of denigrating messages on the opposition which were capable of inciting upheavals and violence in the country.

[39].In a study titled "Public perception of social media contributions to political participation processes in Delta State, Nigeria" revealed that the respondents largely perceived political contents on social media as false, unreliable and most times based on rumoured discussion. This is in conformity with the study of [40] in which social media were perceived to be promoter of half-truth and absolute falsehood.

[41]. In a study titled "Countering Online Hate Speech," revealed that false statements create significant ripples on social media, making it increasingly difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction. Moreover as part of the challenges of users' exposure to social media influence on electoral violence, [42].In a study titled "Social Media, Civic Vitality and Nigeria's 2019 General Elections" revealed that poor Internet connectivity affects full and sustained Internet access in most rural areas and some part of urban areas. From the few studies reviewed, it is obvious that social media messages exerted influence on electoral violence which indeed shaped the perceptions of the users towards the content.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories that provide the platform upon which this study is anchored are the Social Judgement and Technological Determinism theories.

SOCIAL JUDGEMENT THEORY

The idea behind this theory was initiated by Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif and Carl Hovland in 1961. This theory encapsulates the implicit factors that might motivate publics' acceptance, rejection or non-commitment to any communication activities as inclined to their perception and cognitive abilities. Relating this theory to this study, it could be stated that the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria invigorates in the South Easterners the ability to accept, reject or be non-committed to the content based on their feelings and thoughts about the event.

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM THEORY

This theory was developed by an American sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and Marshall McLuhan in 1964. It is a reductionist theory that created a causal link between technology and the nature of the society[43]; [44]). The theory evaluates the degree to which human thoughts or actions are determined by technological factors. As a matter of fact, the modern society thrives as a result of advancement in innovations, new technologies and their social and political implications[45]. Applying this theory to this study, social media as part of the technological innovation, influence the political activities of online users (political actors, parties, supporters and voters) therefore allowing them to post, tweet, and upload visual and written content related to electoral activities, including instances of electoral violence, whether true or false.

V. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey research design was used for this study because it allows the gathering of information that reflects the population's attitudes and behaviours, which cannot be observed directly [46]. A sample size of 385 was determined using the Modified Cochran formula, based on the National Bureau of Statistics' 2021 population of 13,524,918 Internet/social media subscribers in South-East Nigeria. But the actual sample size used for the study was 405 at the response rate of 95% through oversampling in

order to account for field mortality[47]. Respondents from the five states were selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. Firstly simple random sampling was used to select one senatorial zone from the three senatorial zones of the five South-East states namely Abia(Abia South), Anambra (Anambra North), Ebonyi(Ebonyi North), Enugu(Enugu East) and Imo(Imo East). Furthermore, the researchers adopted purposive sampling to select three local government areas from each of the five states senatorial zones making it a total of 15 LGAs, reason being that the local government selected have strong Internet penetration and concentration of social media users. Also to commensurate the Internet strength of the local government areas selected, the researchers purposively selected two communities from each of the local government selected thereby making the communities selected to be 30. The researchers further selected one street each from the 30 communities using convenience sampling due to the accessibility of the respondents within those streets. Above all, the researchers purposively administered copies of the calculated questionnaire to the respondents in selected household of each street that are within eligible voting age, social media savvy and accessible. The questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection and validated by a superior in this field. Copies of the questionnaire were administered by the researchers through the help of two research assistants that are conversant with the area of study. The researchers made use of mean statistic and SPSS version 23 for data analysis. The rule assumes that if the calculated mean is equal or greater than the criterion mean (2.5), then the decision is accepted but if the calculated mean is lower than the criterion mean (2.5), the decision is rejected.

VI. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The researchers distributed 405 copies of the questionnaire and 395 copies of the questionnaire were returned and used for the analysis of this study. The data generated was used to answer the research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE: TO WHAT EXTENT DID SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES INFLUENCE ELECTORAL VIOLENCE DURING THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA?

TABLE 1.1: EXTENT TO WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES INFLUENCED ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Items	SA	A	N	D	SDA	Total	Mean	Decision
Intensified electoral violence by providing platforms for false content, hate speech and denigration of oppositions by political actors	90	140	40	80	45	395	3.4	Accept
played surveillance role by informing the public about areas prone to violence	80	125	55	70	65	395	3.2	Accept
Served as a valuable tool in raising public awareness against electoral violence	70	150	50	80	45	395	3.3	Accept
Average Mean							3.3	Accept

TABLE 1.2: EXTENT TO WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES INFLUENCED ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Large extent	115	29.0	29.0	29.0
Moderate extent	190	48.0	48.0	77.0
Low extent	90	23.0	23.0	100.0
Total	395	100.0	100.0	

Based on the data presented in table 1.1 and 1.2, the study revealed that majority of the respondents agree to a moderate extent that social media messages influenced electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This finding is not in contrast with the findings of [48], who in their study found that social media play key roles in mobilizing voters, creating the required awareness on political activities and generating a high level of citizens' participation in the 2015 electioneering process in Nigeria. Also they indicated that social media provided an

unfettered avenue for the users to be involved in smear campaigns and use of denigrating messages on the opposition which were capable of inciting upheavals and violence in the country. This finding is connected to the technological determinism theory, where it was explained that social media, as a technological tool that enables users to post, tweet, and upload content, influenced electoral violence-related content perceived by South Easterners during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO: TO WHAT EXTENT DID SOUTH EAST RESIDENTS PERCEIVE THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE DURING THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA?

TABLE 2.1: EXTENT TO WHICH SOUTH EAST RESIDENTS PERCEIVE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Items	SA	A	N	D	SDA	Total	Mean	Decision
Social media messages about electoral violence were believed to be true	60	100	40	125	70	395	2.9	Accept
Social media messages about electoral violence were believed to be false	70	140	35	95	55	395	3.2	Accept
Social media messages were	110	150	30	70	35	395	3.6	Accept

seen to have heightened electoral violence through derogatory words exchanged among different political factions								
Average Mean						395	3.2	Accept

TABLE 2.2: EXTENT TO WHICH SOUTH EAST RESIDENTS PERCEIVE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
LargeMy extent	140	35.0	35.0	35.0
Moderate extent	170	43.0	43.0	78.0
Low extent	85	22.0	22.0	100
Total	395	100.0	100.0	

In line with the figures presented in table 2.1 and 2.2 above, the quantitative data showed that majority of the respondents agree to a moderate extent to perceive the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The study was able to establish the fact that the respondents perceive the social media messages on electoral violence as false. The study further reveals that the respondents agree social media messages exacerbated electoral violence through the portrayal of derogatory words exchanged among different political factions. This finding is in sync with the findings of [49], in a

study titled "Public perception of social media contributions to political participation processes in Delta State, Nigeria" where he revealed that the respondents largely perceived political contents on social media as false, unreliable and most times based on rumoured discussion.

The study can be linked to the social judgement theory of Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif, and Carl Hovland in 1961, which establishes that the acceptance, rejection or non-committed approach of the South-East residents to social media messages on electoral violence is dependent on their perceptions of the event.

RESEARCH THREE: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACED BY RESIDENTS OF SOUTH-EAST IN THEIR PERCEPTION OF THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE DURING THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA?

TABLE 3: CHALLENGES FACED BY RESIDENTS OF SOUTH-EAST IN THEIR PERCEPTION OF THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Items	SA	A	N	D	SDA	Total	Mean	Decision
Constraints in perceiving the difference between true and false information about the influence of social media messages on electoral violence	75	150	40	80	50	395	3.3	Accept
The evocation of emotional responses by social media messages on electoral violence leads to anxiety and fear among people	80	180	30	60	45	395	3.6	Accept
Poor internet services affecting the user's access to social media	160	130	30	50	25	395	4.0	Accept

messages on electoral violence								
Average Mean						395	3.6	Accept

The data on table 3 above indicate that the study revealed that with average score of 3.6 the residents of South-East agree that they experienced challenges in their perception of the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This finding draws analogy with the findings of [50], who in their study revealed that false statements created significant ripples on social media, making it increasingly difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction. [51]. In their study showed that poor Internet connectivity affects full and sustained Internet access in most rural areas and some part of urban areas.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is pertinent to acknowledge the fact that the influence of social media messages on electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria emphasizes a complicated relationship attributed by both positive engagement and negative consequences. While social media fostered democratic participation by providing avenues for public discussion and mobilization, it also invited conflict through false information and inflammatory messages.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its findings, this study recommends as follows:

1. A task force comprising law enforcement agencies, Independent National Electoral Commissions (INEC), National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), and the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) should monitor activities on social media and assess the extent of its influence on citizens during elections. This will enable them to sanction accounts or posts capable of inciting violence.
2. Social media administrators such as NITDA and NCC should sanction and block accounts or posts perceived to spread false information, hate speech and inflammatory content that could incite violence. This will assist to de-escalate the potential for both online and offline electoral violence.
3. Technological advancement should be harnessed by the NCC and NITDA to address the challenges of poor internet services and to verify the legitimacy of content posted on social media, thereby preventing the escalation of emotional

manipulation that may induce anxiety and fear among Nigerian citizens, particularly residents of the South East zone

4. Future researchers should undertake further studies encompassing the entire country.

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