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DIGITAL COMMUNICATION REVOLUTION AND THE CHANGING NARRATIVE OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES: FOCUS ON THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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***Detailed author information and related declarations are provided in the final section of this article.*

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ABSTRACT

Throughout pre-colonial Africa, communication technologies have played an important role in determining the capabilities and limitations of political players and the process of bringing political change. With the advent of digital communications, narrative of governance across the globe, Africa inclusive continues to witness transformation. In Nigeria, the role of digital platforms has continued to impact the electoral processes. Nigeria's democratic transition has witnessed massive use of social media, digital communication tools by electorates, contenders and contestants since 2015. Thus, this study investigates the function of digital revolution (social media) and the changing narrative of electoral processes in Nigeria. It adopted the cognitive mobilization theory of Russell Dalton which posits that the interplay between political participation, education and enlightenment plays a crucial role in shaping political awareness, driven by psychological factors inbuilt in human characteristics. Through the use of quantitative research method, 250 respondents in Jos, Plateau State, were sampled for the study via the adoption of random sampling technique. Data was collected through questionnaire. Five-Point Likert Scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Don't Know was adopted. Results indicated among others that social media significantly enhanced the participation of Nigerians in the 2023 general elections. The study thus recommends for increased usage of the social media and the strengthening of online communication forums in Nigeria during election to realize its full potentials.

Keywords: Digital, Revolution, Electoral, Social Media, Uses and Gratification.

Introduction

Right from the time that the social media was invented, the structure of democratic debate has altered. This implies that the prevalent of social media has transformed how people share information, discuss, and obtain messages concerning their development. Put differently, the nexus between the government and social media appears to have a bright future in Nigeria as it is used for communication, campaign launching, initiative awareness-raising, and support during other

democratic processes. Keane-Dawson (2024) notes that social media has reshaped how politics is played in the United States of America, allowing political actors to talk directly with those who will vote during elections. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, X, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and the likes have been deployed by political gladiators and their supporters to create a political movement (Nwafor, Ugwuanyi & Amatu, 2023). Gil de Zuniga et al. (2010) concur that availability of social media communication tools has affected how people participate in political activities. Social media platforms allow people to proficiently organize and strengthen their collective interest and authority in a way that made political figure head more answerable and accountable because their activities are continuously observed and examined on social media. This means that through the instrument, citizens can and do engage in political affairs of their countries, thus allowing more citizens to be involved in the governance of their countries (Jimada, 2019). Salzman (2019) opines that the deepening of democracy principles requires the participation of the people, and social media has widened the scope citizens' contribution to democratic culture.

Governments, politicians, development strategists, have all recognised the significant impact social media has on their communication strategies since its invention as a viable platform for the transformation of societies due to its potential of breaking hitherto one-way communication. Daily, people use social media to demand good governance from government officials (Alfakoro, Ismaila & Ayodeji, 2021). Udoka (2015) agrees that the open nature of social media has led to increased participation of the populace. Similarly, Fournieris (2022) contends that a lot of door-to-door canvassing for votes, monitoring of elections, posting of polling units results and the likes by electorates, politicians and their supporters has been carried out on YouTube, Twitch, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, X and other social media platforms in this digital age. For instance, available data from the United States of America reveals that former President, Barrak Obama and his supporters massively used the social media to propagate what they can do if given the mandate by the American people (Nwafor, Ugwuanyi & Amatu 2023). In the same way, Barthel (2016) contends that social media platforms were the second information sources that politicians and their advocates deployed to woo voters during the U.S. 2016 elections. Similar scenario has played out in France. Fournieris (2022) states that through the instrumentality of the social media platforms, French Presidential election candidates and their followers were able to reach all categories of voters. Tech Policy Press (2022) concur that social media played key role in shaping the French 2022 election.

In Africa, social media remains a powerful force in changing electoral processes. For example, in South African during the 2024 election, social media was deployed to a large extent in all the electoral processes (Dabula, 2024). Right from 2015, Nigeria's democratic transition has witnessed massive deployment of social media by the electorates, aspirants and candidates all aimed at changing governance narrative in the country. For instance, Aideloje, Olorogun and Dibia (2024) note that the 2023 general elections in Nigeria witnessed a huge use of social media by the people. This point to the fact that digital communication platforms such as social media appear have been used to change the electoral processes in Nigeria. Therefore, the concern of this study is to investigate the role of digital revolution (social media) and the changing narrative of electoral processes in Nigeria dwelling specifically on the participation of Jos residents in the 2023 general elections.

Statement of the Problem

Social media in recent times has emerged as a strong force in changing the narrative of electoral processes across the world. No doubt, the posting and re-posting of electoral messages on social media platforms and sometimes the manipulation of these messages have sparked worries among scholars and the democratic institutions. In view of this, scholars try to find out how the use of social media affects electoral processes. For instance, the study of Basak (2024) investigated the how social media has impacted voters choice of candidates during elections. Salzman (2019) concentrated on the application of social media and change of democratic attitudes in Latin America. Similarly, Spinner (2011) examined the impact of social media in promoting democratic principles. Valdez (2018) assessed how social media is changing democratic practice in Mexico. Ceron and Memoli (2016) explored the debates on the impact of social media on democracy, while the study of Dommett and Verosek (2021) paid attention to the use of digital space to promoting democracy. However, none of these studies dwelled on the role of digital revolution (social media) and the changing narrative of electoral processes in Nigeria focusing exclusively on the participation of residents of Jos South Local Area, Plateau State, Nigeria in the 2023 general elections.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to investigate digital communication (social media) revolution and the changing narrative of electoral processes in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Find out the social media platforms that residents of Jos South Local Government Area use to change governance narrative in Nigeria.
2. Explore the degree of the use of social media to change governance narrative in Nigeria in the 2023 general elections.
3. Find out the areas in which social media was used by the respondents to change governance narrative in the 2023 general elections.
4. Assess the effects of the use of social media to change governance narrative in Nigeria in the 2023 general elections.
5. Find out the challenges of the use of social media to change governance narrative in Nigeria in the 2023 general elections.

Review of Literature

The Nexus between Social Media and the Evolving Discourse on Governance

Today, information has become easily accessible due to the instrumentality of social media. The messages disseminated via social media have become strong means for people to engage in discussions that shape their political lifestyle. Through social media, people debate issues rather than coming together physically. Jenkins (2006) contends that social media communication platforms have enabled people to build consensus on government policies and programmes while allowing the youths to interact among themselves, especially as it concerns political dealings. Porter, Scott and Green (2015) corroborate that the open characteristics of social media has increased youth participation in governance as citizens now have means to air their views and opinions, which sometimes lead to consensus on political matters. Asongu et al, (2019) admit that the impact of Social media concerning change of governance narratives in both developed and

developing countries is very much needed especially in Nigeria because of reasons ranging from political apathy to bad governance

Furthermore, as a subset of Information Communication Technology (ICT), social media assists in terms of quick access to information generation and circulation. It facilitates openness and accountability in government circle, deepening information needs of various segments of government institutions (Hellstrom, 2008). Social media has served as watchdog tool in the hands of the government officials and the citizens (Bailard, 2009). Since its invention, social media has become the mirror and medium which reflects and also bring to hearing the issues happening in society.

Challenges of the Use of Social Media in Change of Governance Discourse

Though social media has continued to play positive role in promoting democratic ideals, its usage in political-related discourse has also attracted some negative comments from scholars across the globe. Paladino (2018) states that unsubstantiated, fake and misleading political messages have been spread on social media. The author further argues that the absence of strong legal framework on the usage of social media has brought about the dissemination of rumours and falsehoods with so many consequences. Such circulation of fake messages has caused political hatred between and among political gladiators, their supporters and even communal conflicts. In the Nigerian context, this manifests in posting or dissemination of information, which created high level of primordial identities like ethnicity and religion as witnessed in the 2023 general elections.

The ubiquity of social media and its attendant influence are being used as manipulation tools by influencers, political interests and groups to spread hate information and fake content with the intention of wining people to their advantage. In Nigeria, examples are the ethnic profiling in Lagos gubernatorial poll, IPOB social media messages. Accordingly, hate speech, has become pronounced in Nigeria due to social media platforms. It suffices to recall that a presidential adviser called Reno Omokri around 2013 created fake name called Wendell Simlin to propagate fake information against political adversaries of his principal through social media. Nielsen and Fletcher (2020) averred that more extensive empirical research has argued that, in deeply diverse and disputatious, irreducible plural societies, open and permissive systems are open to abuse, and many of the ways in which we use social media are deeply ambivalent. There are issues also such as online harassment, cyberbullying/stalking.

Review of Empirical Studies

Valdez (2018) studied how digital facilities such as social media and the Internet are promoting democracy. The public sphere theory served as the foundational framework for the arguments presented in the study. Data was gathered through a survey research design. Findings showed that younger citizens may be influenced in their decision-making by the information they receive from digital platforms. Additionally, the research identified three key dimensions of democracy that the internet enhances; electoral, minitoral, and deliberative. The study advocated for the strategic employment and deployment of the social to perpetually advance democratic principles and values.

Aideloje et al (2024) investigated how social media was deployed to mobilise voters during 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Qualitative research method was used, and data was collected from secondary sources. Findings revealed that social media played a key part in encouraging the youthful segment of Nigeria to engage in the electoral activities of 2023. Consequently, the research

advocated for candidates seeking political positions and current officeholders to enhance their utilisation of social media as means of engaging with public, because social media facilitates a more effective and efficient nexus between political actors and the citizens. Asongo and Odhiambo (2018) concluded in a study on the use of social media and governance in 49 African countries that Facebook as a platform of social media was positively changing governance dynamics in Africa.

Ezema and Ezema (2023) focused their study on the employment of social media during the 2023 presidential election. The study was conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria. The researchers made use of the quantitative survey research approach. Purposive sampling was adopted to collect data from 375 sampled populations. Public sphere theory was used to explain the thrust of the investigation. The study found that social media posts largely influenced the participation of the people in the election. The study concluded that social media tools have become important for mobilising people dwelling in urban centres to take part in political activities. It was recommended that government, civil society organisations and other critical stakeholders in election-related matters should continue to encourage the adoption and utilisation of social media communication platforms to educate and enlighten the voters before, during and after elections. A study by Alakali, Akpan and Tarnongo (2013) on the usage of social media to mobilise the youth to participate in elections, conducted in Benue State, further affirmed that social media remains an important tool for creating and sharing political messages among the youth because it allows them to express their opinions on electoral matters and to choose candidates they want.

Igbashangev et al (2023) examined the social media impact on deepening democracy in Nigeria. The study utilised agenda setting theory and technological determinism theory. A qualitative research approach was employed, with data collected via interviews method. The research indicated that officeholders often react positively to allegations of misconduct made by rivals; however, social media platforms provide a wide array of avenues for such responses. The study recommended initiatives aimed at encouraging content creators on social media to substantiate their claims in public settings like workshops and seminars where all service providers, political office holders, and authors of social media content would be present to debate pressing issues affecting Nigeria's good governance.

Adams et al (n.d) assessed social media in political debate, awareness creation and strategies for improved electoral activities. The study adopted the social media engagement theory. The study utilised the qualitative research strategy and found that social media has been pivotal as its significance lies in its reshape the governance process, providing a platform for increased citizen participation by fostering awareness of government activities and to change bad governance. It was therefore concluded that the increase and employment of social media platforms have had a strong impact on individuals, communities, institutions, and governments worldwide. The study recommended strong legislation to curtail areas of misuse of social media.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of cognitive mobilisation was used. Russell Dalton was the theorist that introduced the cognitive mobilisation theory in 1984. The theory posits that the interplay between political participation, education and enlightenment plays a crucial role in shaping political awareness, driven by psychological factors inbuilt in human characteristics. Converse (1964) argues that those who are politically enlightened possess a greater degree of political sophistication compared to the

general audience, attributing the disparity to the mobilising effects of political engagements. Campbell (1960) suggests that an increase in enlightenment and education of members of the society through the instrument of media will increase the masses knowledge of political activities in their domains. Popkin and Dimock (1999) concur that individuals with limited information are generally less inclined to engage in the political development of their society, but an increase in information supply by the media could help to encourage them to participate in development issues.

Two distinct developments are associated with this theory. The first part deals with the electorates' increased political education and enlightenment, which invariably leads to the public's capacity to think and absorb political messages or information. The second aspect suggests that the price of learning about political issues in any society today has come down due to the growth and advancement of the mass media as citizens are better equipped to handle the difficulties of politics and make their own political decisions without depending on the elites. This made possible because of cognitive mobilisation. (Inglehart, 1988).

The fundamental principles of this theory found relevant to this research include: Educating the citizens is crucial to enabling the people access and participate in political matters; the availability of political enlightenment fosters greater political engagement and involvement by the citizens; individuals with low level of political messages are likely to demonstrate attitude of not taking part in political activities, compared to those that are politically enlightened; an increase in the educational attainment within the society is expected to gradually elevate the ideological awareness of the citizens (Adamson, 2006; Jacobs 2006; Denny & Doyle, 2008).

Relevance of the cognitive mobilisation theory to this study is on the fact that concept of elections and change of governance narrative, emphasises the importance of political literacy and participation through the mass media initiative. The theory suggests that individuals receive cognitive cues that guide their voting decisions aimed at changing the way governance is operated in their environments, which is largely influenced by the education and enlightenment that they get from the mass media. Social media has proven to be a powerful medium for disseminating vast amounts of information, particularly relating to political development issues and how they citizens want their country to be governed. Nigeria's 2023 general elections was characterised by extensive use of the social media to educate and mobilise the people to change the governance narrative of the country. Thus, this study regards the social media as vital instrument cognitive mobilisation.

Methodology

The researchers made use of the survey research design. Survey research was adopted due to the fact that it enabled the collection of data by the researcher from representatives of the whole population as well as to generalise the results collected (Nworgu, 1991 cited in Ayodele, 2019). The population of the study were all the residents of Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State. According to statistics obtained from city population, the total projections of population of Jos South LGA in 2023 is 407, 900 respectively. From the total population, a sample size of 384 was drawn through the use of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table method of getting sample size from a total population.

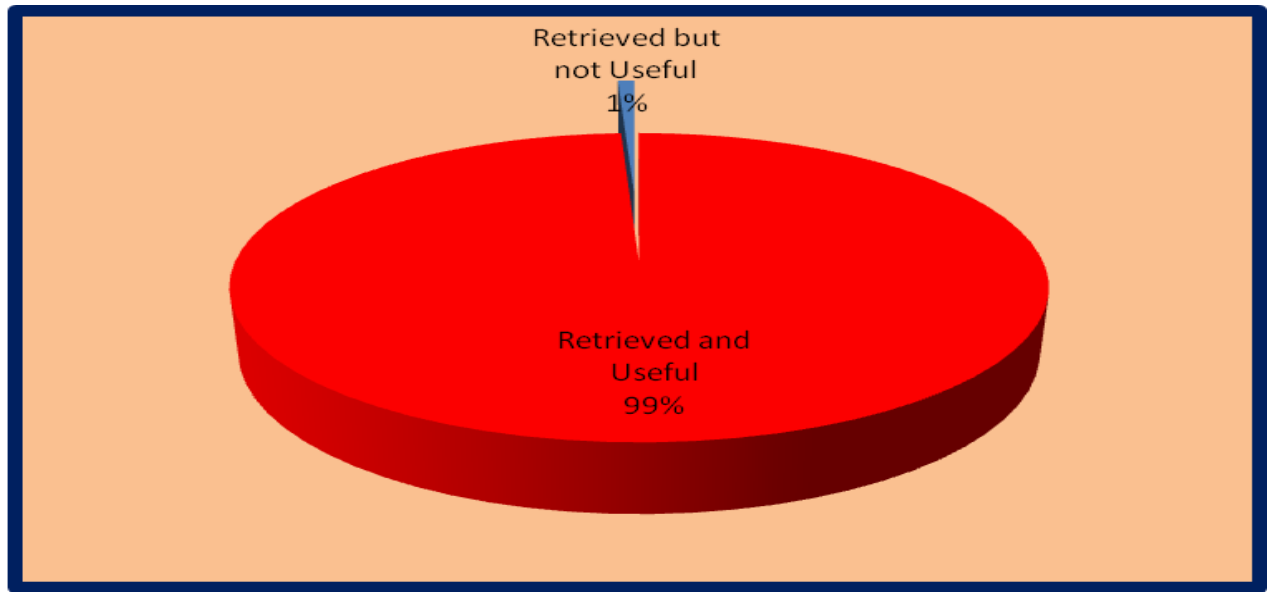
Data was presented and analysed through the simple percentages and frequency tables and charts. Also, five-Point Likert Scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree

(D) and Undecided (UD), which the criterion mean was put at 4 point and above is accepted result, while 2 point is rejected result was used.

Data Presentation

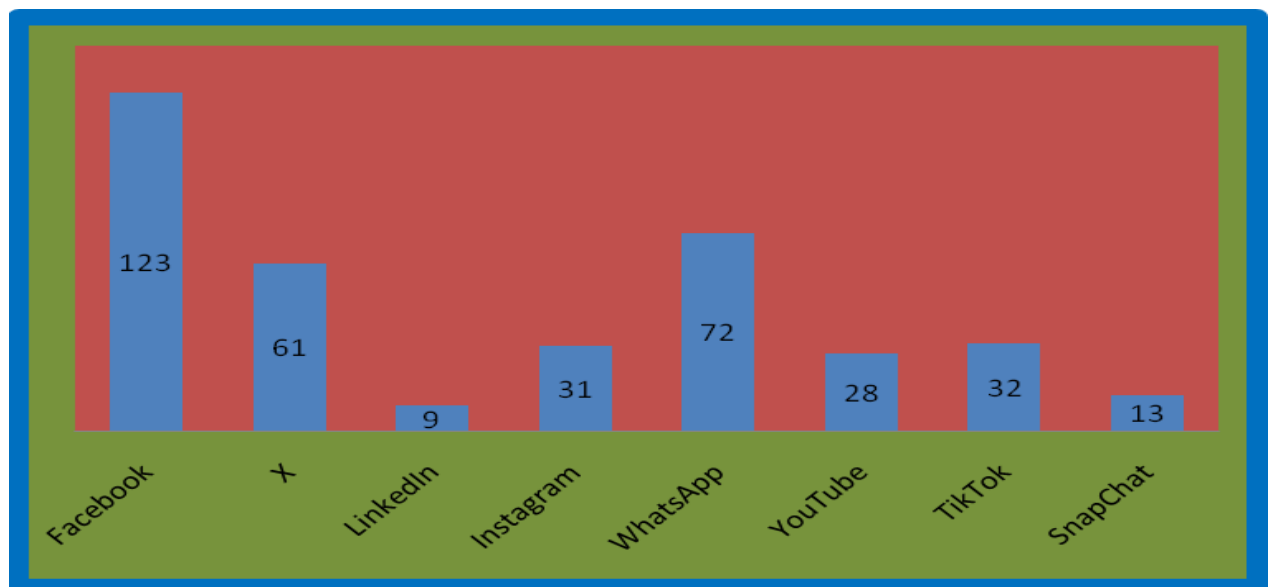
The researchers distributed a total of 384 copies of questionnaire; however, 372 were returned out of which 369 were found valid for analysis as represented in the Chart below:

Figure 1: Analysis of Response Rate



Source: Field Survey, 2024

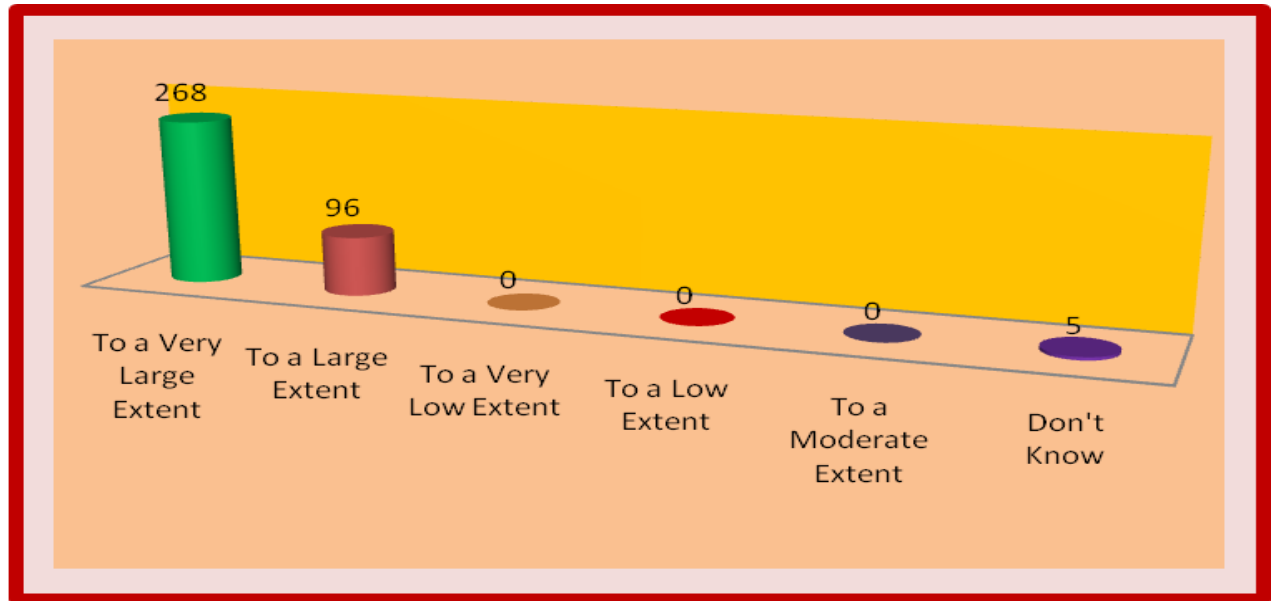
Figure 2: Social Media Platforms Used by the Respondents during the 2023 Nigeria’s General Elections



Source: Field Survey, 2024

Although Facebook, X and WhatsApp are the most prevalent social media platforms utilised by the respondents, data presented in the Figure above suggests that social media tools have evolved into powerful channels of information dissemination geared towards societal transformation.

Figure 3: Degree of the Use of Social Media to Change Governance Narrative in Nigeria during the 2023 General Elections



Source: Field Survey, 2024

The data presented in the Chart above indicates that the utilisation of social media for the transformation of Nigeria’s governance narrative during the 2023 general elections was significantly high among the citizens.

Table 1: Areas in Which Social Media was used by the Respondents to Change Governance Narrative in the 2023 General Elections

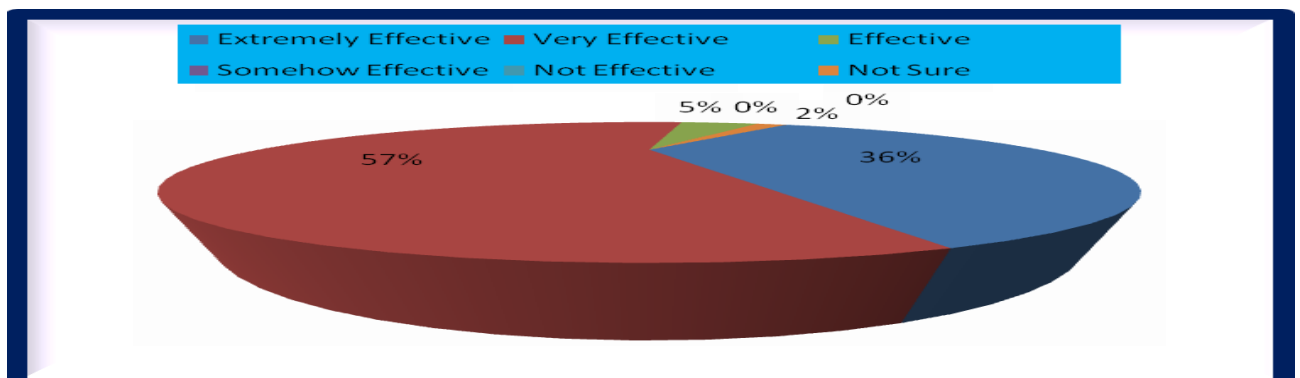
Variables	SA	A	SD	D	UD	Total	Mean Rating	Decision
Social media was used to mobilise people to go and register and collect their permanent voter cards	313	56	0	0	0	369	4.8	Accepted
Social media was employed to share information on the need to change the way governance is run in Nigeria	258	111	0	0	0	369	4.6	Accepted
Social media was used to collaborate and create like-minds groups to discuss new ways of governance in Nigeria	275	92	0	0	2	369	4.7	Accepted

Social media utilised to educate and enlighten the people on the need to come out and vote candidates that will bring the desired development Nigeria aspires	266	103	0	0	0	369	4.7	Accepted
Use social media to monitor and post-election voting process, collation and results at polling units to ensure that no manipulation was done	298	68	0	3	0	369	4.7	Accepted
To report bribery and corruption issues during the 2023 general elections	248	121	0	0	0	369	4.6	Accepted
Connecting and talking with other Nigerians across the country during the 2023 on how to better governance activities in the country through electing credible candidates	281	88	0	0	0	369	4.7	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The data presented in the table above shows the manner in which social media has provided Nigerians with a venue to express their views on issues related to changes they wish to see in their country. It can also be deduced that these online communication platforms have facilitated a shift for users from mere consumers of content to active creators and distributors, particularly concerning issues that are in the interesting of Nigeria’s advancement.

Figure 4: Effects of the Use of Social Media to Change Governance Narrative in Nigeria during the 2023 General Elections



Source: Field Survey, 2024

The result above implies that Nigerians are increasingly utilising social media platforms to advocate for the governance they desire.

Table 2: Challenges of using social media platforms to change governance narrative in Nigeria

Variables	SA	A	SD	D	UD	Total	Mean Rating	Decision
The open nature of social media networking sites can turn out to be an intense and deadly weapon in the hands of dubious people who will use it to disseminate fake video, voice lines, feature reports, headlines, and broadcasts just to tarnish the image of credible people who want to bring the needed governance change in the country	112	254	0	0	3	369	4.2	Accepted
Fake and unsubstantiated messages were largely spread during the 2023 general elections unchecked on social media platforms, which had a devastating effect on Nigeria’s change of governance aspirations	154	215	0	0	7	369	4.4	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The data illustrated in the table above indicates that individuals utilising social media during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria encounter specific challenges in leveraging the platform to promote the objectives of effective good governance in the country.

Discussion of Findings

The finding from the study indicates that Facebook, X and WhatsApp were the predominant social media platforms utilised to promote governance change in Nigeria during the 2023 general elections. This observation is likely linked to the substantial number of Facebook, X and WhatsApp users in Nigeria. O’Peters (2021) confirms that over 33 million Nigerians actively engage with social media, WhatsApp, X, Facebook and YouTube being the most frequently utilised platforms.

The study also found that social media platforms were largely used and were the leading communication platforms that were used to change governance narrative in Nigeria during the 2023 general elections (See Figure 3 and Table 1 above). The findings revealed that those who participated in the study employed social media during the 2023 general elections to mobilise people to go and register and collect their permanent voter cards; share information on the need to change the way governance is run in Nigeria; collaborate and create like-minds groups to discuss new ways of governance in Nigeria; educate and enlighten the people on the need to come out and vote candidates that will bring the desired development Nigeria aspires; and to monitor and post-

election voting process, collation and results at polling units to ensure that no manipulation was done. These findings align with that of Alakali, Akpan and Tarnongo (2013), who established that social media provided an ample opportunity for Nigerians to participate in social and political interaction/debates, with a view to bringing socio-economic and socio-political development. Nduka (2021) further corroborates that changing governance narrative is a product of the availability of information to the people. Through communication facilities like the social media, citizens now demand that governments are “wired” to the civil society as they use these communication technologies to ask for good political activities, good service delivery, among others. Adams et al (n.d) in their finding, further affirm the result of this study by stating that one of the notable contributions of social media is its role in disseminating information about state political systems, political activities, and political mobilisation.

On the challenges of the employment of social media to change governance narrative in Nigeria during the 2023 general elections, results showed that the open nature of social media networking sites can turn out to be an intense and deadly weapon in the hands of dubious people who will use it to disseminate fake video, voice lines, feature reports, headlines, and broadcasts just to tarnish the image of credible people who want to bring the needed governance change in the country. Also, fake and unsubstantiated messages were largely spread during the 2023 general elections unchecked on social media platforms, which had a devastating effect on Nigeria’s change of governance aspirations (See Table 2 above). Nielsen and Fletcher (2020) support the findings of this study by stating that, in deeply diverse and disputatious, irreducible plural societies, open and permissive systems are open to abuse. Adams et al (nd) equally found that misuse of social media has the potential to sow chaos and division, threatening national unity and stability, thereby retarding development issues.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The concern of the study was to examine digital communication revolution and the changing narrative of electoral processes, focusing on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Upon detailed analysis of the findings, the study concluded that social media such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp and the likes played pivotal role during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, consequently affirming social media role in changing democratic process of the country. Thus, it is imperative to strengthen the use of online communication platforms in Nigeria as this will pave way for more voices regarding the country’s democratic changes. Also, it is important for citizens to thoroughly evaluate and verify the credibility of information sources on social media prior to taking any action. A rigorous compliance with laws and regulations concerning the dissemination of false and misleading information is essential, and those who violate these standards must be held accountable for their actions.

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The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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