Impact of Social Media Political Advertising on Voters Choice of Candidates in the 2024 Ondo State Governorship Election

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Abstract

This study evaluated the role of political advertising on social media and its influence on candidate's selection in the 2024 Ondo State governorship election. It explored the extent, effects, and challenges associated with candidates' use of social media for political advertising in the election. Grounded in the Social Media Engagement Theory, the study adopted the quantitative survey research design to gather data from 384 respondents using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table method of determining sampling size. The findings indicated that the electorates in Ondo State were cognizant of political advertisements on social media platforms. Additionally, it was found that the exposure level of voters to these political advertisements was significantly high. The result further demonstrated that political advertisements on social media substantially impacted the electorates' choice of candidates. On the other hand, the study also revealed that using social media for political advertising equally led to divisions among the population based on political, ethnic, and religious lines. The study, therefore, concluded that despite the opportunities presented by social media for political advertising, politicians have persistently utilised it to escalate political tensions during election periods. It was, thus, recommended that politicians and their supporters should use social media responsibly during election-related matters.

Keywords: Electorate, Social Media, Political Advertisements, Candidates

Introduction

Since the invention of mass media communication technology, political communication has continued to take advantage of this initiative to broaden its scope. In other words, the use of mass media by political candidates to reach out to would-be voters is dated from time immemorial. Nott (2020) posits that through the different types of traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio, billboards, television), political candidates canvass for support and votes from electorates who otherwise may not have been interested in the election. Aspiring political candidates use the media to build a name and reputation for themselves, tell the voters what they will do if elected, as well as call the attention of the electorates to the limitations or shortcomings of their opponents (Nott, 2020).

Both traditional and modern media play a vital role in promoting political candidates, along with their proposed manifestoes. Advertising serves as a tool for utilizing various mass media platforms to raise awareness about individuals, ideas, services, and products. Specifically, political advertising involves the use of mass communication channels such as newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio, television, posters, signs, brochures, flyers, and social media platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, among others, by political candidates and their parties to appeal to voters or seek financial support (Tejumaiye, Simon & Obia, 2018). This indicates that political advertising functions as a marketing communication strategy aimed at effectively packaging and

promoting a political party or its candidates. Essentially, it is a strategy designed to cultivate a positive image for a political aspirant and their party, thereby influencing public opinion regarding electoral issues. As noted by Olujide, Adeyemi, and Gbadeyan (2010) in Asemah and Onyeka (2012), political advertising involves leveraging various mass communication media to enhance the visibility, image, and prestige of political candidates among the public. Furthermore, political advertising seeks to establish connections between candidates, political parties, and diverse interest groups within society, while also serving as a means to either promote or oppose a registered political party or a candidate's election.

Social media refers to internet-based platforms and services that facilitate user interaction, content creation, information dissemination, and online searches (Arthur, 2012). According to Holloman (2012), the essence of social media lies in how individuals utilize technology, software, tools, and channels to engage in activities such as sharing images and videos, writing product reviews, curating content, reconnecting with old acquaintances, forming new friendships, and collaborating in professional settings. Users can establish personal profiles that connect them with family, friends, and colleagues, allowing for the exchange of information among these connections. This network of users enables anyone within the network to access and interact with the profiles of others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media employs highly accessible and scalable publishing methods, incorporating various online technological tools that facilitate seamless communication and the sharing of information and resources over the Internet (Greendhow, cited in Asemah, 2014, p. 57).

The Internet has further revolutionized political communication worldwide. It offers candidates unprecedented opportunities to engage with voters and garner support. This has led to the adoption of digital campaign techniques by political candidates. These aspiring political leaders and their supporters employ the Internet media to advertise their intended policies and programmes to the people. One of such Internet media is social media. According to Adams *et al* (n.d), social media, with its strong presence in today's modern societies, serves as a platform for political awareness mobilization, debate, and political advertising, thus guiding citizens in making informed choices among political candidates while disseminating information. Finucane (2022) opines that currently, one cannot succeed as a political aspirant without campaigning and advertising his or her intentions on social media. Fourneris (2022) corroborates that it seems a lot of door-to-door canvassing for votes by political aspirants and candidates has been replaced with YouTube, Twitch, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and other social media platforms. Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube and the likes, are the most commonly used political campaign platforms to go with: Facebook for the push, X for the thoughts, Instagram for the fun and YouTube for useful explainer videos (Finucane, 2022). Silas (2023) further asserts that digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube among others have been employed for political campaigns, electioneering crusades, ideological trumpeting exercises, and the mobilization of voters. Social media serves as a watchdog to the activities of government as much government information is easily accessible and publicized for citizens' consent and consensus (Ekoh & Elizabeth, 2021).

One of the elections that first witnessed the use of social media for selling political candidates was that of the United States of America in 2008. Barthel (2016) states that Barack Obama was one of the first political candidates in the US to engage with voters through the instrument of social media.

Ellis (2017) concurs that "social media have been applied in the US general elections; the 2016 elections became what is considered the most influential in terms of changing technology and personable online interactions. Nott (2020) also argues that in 2008 alone, political candidates in the US expended a sum of $22.25 billion on online political adverts, while in 2016, the figure stood at $1.4 billion. Since then, using social media for political advertising has exploded.

The use of social media for political advertising by aspirants, candidates, political parties and their supporters in India has come to stay. Rahul (2016) contends that social media is playing an important role in the political formation and opinion moulding of both candidates and supporters in India. Metkar and Aade (2020) agree that in India's 2014 general elections, the use of social media for advertising political actors played a vital part in influencing voters' behaviour. Safiullah *et al* (2016) add that during the 2015 Delhi Assembly election, social media proved to be a useful platform for aspirants, candidates and their followers.

The French political communication on social media is not different either. Scott and Herrero (2024) posit that social media was massively deployed for political advertising during the 2024 parliamentary election. The authors submitted that "France's far-right group bombarded voters with migrant images on social media to discredit President Emmanuel Marcron's candidacy (Scott & Herrero, 2024). Carollo (2022) further concur that 74% of France's electorates got informed about political candidates and their manifestoes during the April 2022 presidential election through social media. In the 2022 French presidential election, Fourneris (2022) remarks that social media networks allowed all political candidates to reach out to all categories of the population.

Additionally, the use of social media by political actors has also been witnessed on the African continent. Dzisah (2018) confirms that social media was significant for political candidates and aspirants to sell their proposed policies and programmes to would-be voters as during Ghana's 2012 and 2016 elections. Egypt, Senegal, Rwanda, South Africa, Nigeria, and other democratic countries in Africa have equally witnessed the deployment of social media by political aspirants and candidates to influence voters' choices.

For instance, in Nigeria, social media has become a powerful political platform. Records show that in 2024, the country has about 36.75 million social media users (Digital 2024 Nigeria, 2024). From this, it can be deduced that many voters in Nigeria have access to social media platforms, implying that social and internet-related tools have nearly supplanted the combined mix of traditional media as essential routes of communication in political and social discourse. The use of social media for election campaigns in Nigeria gained significant momentum starting in 2015. Taylor and Eshkeme (2023) assert that since that time, the prominence of digital media in electioneering activities in Nigeria has become increasingly evident. Ibrahim (2023) further concurs that political actors engaged voters in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections through social media.

Electioneering activities leading to the November 16th, 2024 Ondo State Governorship election in Nigeria, no doubt, witnessed the enormous use of social media for advertising candidates. Scholars have conducted studies in line with the use of social media and political advertising in Nigeria and outside Nigeria (Ngongo & Chukwu, 2022; Ogundiya, 2021; Dzisah, 2018; Gambarov, Zenelaj & Belba, 2015). For instance, the study of Dzisah (2018) focused on enhancing participation in elections and other democratic engagements through social media in Ghana. That of Gambarov, Zenelaj and Belba (2015) dwelled on social networking communication sites to enhance political campaigns. The study by Ngonso and Chukwu (2022) concentrated on social media and political

promotion: An analysis of Edo State APC gubernatorial candidate's promotion of Facebook. Ogundiya's (2021) research was on social media and youth participation in electioneering campaigns in Nigeria. Nevertheless, since research is a growing phenomenon, finding out the purpose, extent, impacts and challenges of the use of social media for advertising by candidates in the 2024 Ondo State election remains an interesting area of study. Therefore, the focus of this research is to fill the gap in knowledge by assessing the impact of social media political advertising on voters' choice of candidates in the 2024 Ondo State governorship election.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the research is to assess the impact of social media political advertising on voters' choice of candidates in the 2024 Ondo State governorship election. The specific objectives are to:

i. Investigate the degree of awareness regarding political advertising on social media by political candidates during the Ondo State 2024 governorship election among the participants.

ii. Examine the level of exposure that respondents have had to political candidates' advertisements on social media platforms.

iii. Evaluate the influence of social media political advertisements on the selection of candidates by the respondents.

iv. Identify the challenges associated with political advertising on social media as perceived by the respondents.

Review of Literature
Social Media and Political Advertising in Nigeria

Social media communication platforms have played a vital role in political advertising in Nigeria, offering opportunities for both the political candidates and electorate to market themselves and support political candidates and aspirants of their choice. The fast use of social media technology in Nigeria's elections begs the question of what may be motivating the country's political scene, which is dominated by older people in their 50s and elderly. (Akinyemi & Mobolaji, 2022). The first justification is that a lot of people think social media sites have political value. Since many Nigerians today obtain their political news from social media, social media political advertising has become important. On social media, information travels fast, and online advertisements could have an impact that goes beyond their intended audience. Digital media's capacity to instantly mobilize individuals and react to societal change is another factor for this. Similar to this, using digital platforms rather than traditional media makes it much easier to measure how much interaction and engagement a consumer has with an advert.

Perhaps the most important factor contributing to the rise in popularity of social media political marketing in Nigeria is the low cost of employing precision approaches to target voters (Agbulefu & Emeka, 2023). Politicians may now target certain demographics at particular moments with a particular language, making it simpler to specifically sway undecided voters. Comparatively speaking to conventional marketing, all of this may be done at a far lower financial outlay. This technique, also known as micro-targeting, has been deemed detrimental to democracy because it can change people's attitudes toward public discourse in ways that they are not consciously aware of.

Social media political advertising in Nigeria has grown in recent years, both in terms of its strategies and its reach, as a result of the public's increasing propensity for reading news online. As a consequence, social media sites have implemented more open use of guidelines for their systems and tightened restrictions on political advertising.

Review of Empirical Studies

Communication scholars have utilized both empirical and non-empirical literature to enhance the understanding of social media's role in political advertising, both within Nigeria and internationally. Metkar and Aade (2020) note that in India, politicians frequently leverage social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, and TikTok to interact with voters. Additionally, Ayankoa, Calitz, and Cullen (2015) discovered that in South Africa, the electorate extensively utilized social media to access political messages. Their research also indicated that voters were eager to engage with political information through social media channels. Rahul (2016) noted a significant increase in public participation and engagement in political activities, attributed to the opportunities afforded by social media. In the study, which employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods, he concluded that social media has created a platform for Indian voters, candidates, and aspirants to enhance their democratic values. Social media platforms function as channels for democratic and participatory communication, allowing users to share information in real-time (Chijioke, 2013). This participatory aspect empowers users to engage in discussions, offer insights, and interact with political processes, thereby making social media a vital component of contemporary political communication (Mariam, Nurazmallail & Miftachul, 2020).

Fadeyi and Dare (2023) found that political campaign managers and candidates must exercise caution when utilizing social media to communicate their messages to voters. The advent of social media platforms has significantly altered the realm of political communication, providing novel opportunities for engagement, interaction, and the dissemination of information. It is essential to comprehend the complex role of social media in politics to evaluate its effectiveness in influencing voter preferences and electoral results. Research conducted by Gambarov, Zenelaj, and Belba (2015) examined the utilization of online communication platforms by political parties. The study highlighted that since 2008, when Barack Obama effectively employed social media, numerous political candidates globally have adopted these digital tools to solicit votes and communicate their agendas. For example, the findings revealed that in 2013, the Socialist Party of Albania extensively utilized social media for political advertising and to sway voters in their favour. In Nigeria, the research indicated that the ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), ascended to power nine years ago largely due to its social media campaigning efforts. This development has enabled various political parties in Nigeria to leverage the interactive and accessible nature of social media to engage with potential voters (Gambarov, Zenelaj, & Belba, 2015).

Ferrara *et al* (2016) added that political aspirants, candidates, and contestants often exploit vulnerabilities in social media; they utilize bots and automated accounts to enhance their messaging or to undermine and discredit their rivals. The existence of these automated entities can skew online discussions and misrepresent public opinion. Kreiss (2019) confirmed in a study that the absence of regulation on social media platforms frequently hampers their ability to effectively manage political content, resulting in inconsistent policies and enforcement practices.

Furthermore, Agbulefu and Emeka (2023) assessed the implications and solutions to the use of digital media for political advertising in 2023 Nigeria's general elections. The study adopted the survey research design and was anchored on the Cultivation Theory. The findings of the study revealed that digital communication platforms were massively utilized by political stakeholders in projecting the agenda and ideologies of the political contenders in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The study's result further showed that digital media were employed for advertising candidates based on racism, ethnicity, religion, ethno-religious configurations, multiculturalism and gender issues.

Additionally, the study, along with Opeibi's (2019) research, referenced the role of social media in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Kaduna and Lagos states, where both the APC and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) utilized platforms such as X, in conjunction with traditional media, to promote their manifestos, discredit their opponents and to spread propaganda contents.

Ngonso and Chukwu (2022) conducted a study regarding the utilization of social media by the All Progressive Congress candidate during the 2021 Edo State governorship election, concluding that the party received significant backing from its posts on the Facebook platform. Furthermore, Zekeri (2019) conducted a study during the 2019 general elections that emphasized the enabling role of social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp, in facilitating direct political interactions between candidates and their constituents.

Asemah and Onyeka (2012) examined the challenges and opportunities associated with online media and political advertising in Nigeria. Utilizing a survey research design, the study was grounded in the theories of technological determinism and agenda setting. The findings revealed that emerging media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and X, although not extensively utilised, have become significant instruments for Nigerian politicians in their efforts to influence voters. Additionally, the data indicated that the potential for digital media in political advertising in Nigeria is substantial, as it allows for outreach to a wide audience of political supporters and followers. However, the study also identified challenges related to the consistent dissemination of information to the electorate via digital media. Consequently, the researchers concluded that the extent of new media usage by politicians in Nigeria for political activities remains limited. Furthermore, a report from the Centre for Democracy and Development (Nigeria) and the University of Birmingham (UK) in 2019 emphasized the formation of organizations such as the Buhari New Media Centre (BNMC) and Atikulated Youth Force (AYF) across various social media platforms to support the campaigns of President Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar and used the social media platforms to disseminate contents on racial discrimination, incompetency, and other negative elements about their opponents (Oluwole, 2019).

Okoro and Santas (2017) supported this view, indicating that social media has become essential for political candidates and aspirants, who utilize it to appeal to the public and seek support, recognizing the importance of citizens in achieving their political goals. Suntai and Targema (2018) also concurred that political figures across various platforms have established social media accounts to connect with voters, promote campaigns of hatred, fake and unsubstantiated content about their opponents, and use it for politics of sectionalism among others.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the Social Media Engagement Theory. The theory was propounded by Paul M. Di Gangi and Molly M. Wasko in 2016. This theory elucidates how individuals utilize social media to create, connect, and share content. It further delineates the engagement process that users undergo on social media, which includes activities such as commenting on others' posts, liking those posts, redistributing content, and contributing their thoughts or opinions (Koo, 2020). A significant element of the Social Media Management Theory is the sense of social presence experienced by users, which pertains to the degree to which they become engrossed in social media messages and establish connections with other users across various platforms. According to Koo (2020), this dynamic enables social media users to perceive themselves as part of a community, leading them to trust the messages circulated within these social communication networks.

An essential aspect of the theory is its significant influence on users. Users tend to engage with content on social media that resonates with their interests, is widely recognized, or is shared by individuals they trust, which often results in the re-sharing of such content across various platforms. However, Bessi and Ferrara (2016) contend that this behaviour can contribute to the development of echo chambers and confirmation bias, wherein users predominantly engage with ideas that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs and viewpoints. Furthermore, the Social Media Management Theory examines various factors that influence individuals' engagement with social media. It identifies elements such as the specific social media platform - be it Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, or X - the nature of the information or messages shared, the personality traits of the content creator, the relationship between the user and the content sharer, and the user's overall attitude (Lichtenstein & Williamson, 2017).

Understanding Social Media Management Theory is essential for leveraging the positive elements of social media while mitigating its negative impacts, such as the psychological effects associated with excessive usage (Alha-bash & Ma, 2017). The application of the principles of Social Media Management Theory can significantly shape and enhance social media users' perceptions of political candidates. This suggests that the underlying philosophies of the theory can foster greater engagement among social media users and highlight the role of social media in cultivating political awareness. Such awareness may encompass aspects such as voting procedures, candidate selection, and the overarching regulations governing elections. Consequently, Social Media Management Theory holds particular significance in this research, as political candidates in the Ondo State 2024 governorship election utilized social media platforms to connect with voters, share information about their policies and programs if elected, seek support, and challenge their opponents.

Methodology

The survey research approach was used by the study. This type of research design is apt for this study because, according to Creswell (2009), it can be used to obtain information or data from large samples of a given population and it is very suitable for gathering data that meet the objectives of a study. The population of the study were residents of Akure metropolis, Ondo State, Nigeria. The purpose of choosing Akure was based on being the State capital with a lot of political interests and tensions.

According to information obtained from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2024), the total number of registered voters for the 2024 Ondo State governorship election was 2, 053, 061 (Dada, 2024). However, for Akure North and South Local government Areas that make up the Akure metropolis, registered voters for Akure North 314, 709 and of Akure North was 87, 293 (INEC, 2024). Therefore, the total population of the study was 402, 002. The sample size of the study is 384, determined through Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table method of getting sample size. A stratified sampling technique was adopted to divide the study area into first local government, then districts, and polling units.

In addition, the snowball method was used in the distribution of the questionnaire. Tables, charts, figures, frequencies, percentages and mean deviation of a five-point scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD), which the criterion mean was put at 3 is accepted result, while 2 is rejected result was used to present the data.

The study administered 384 copies of the questionnaire of which 356 were returned and found valid for analysis. A percentage representation of this is shown in the Figure 1.
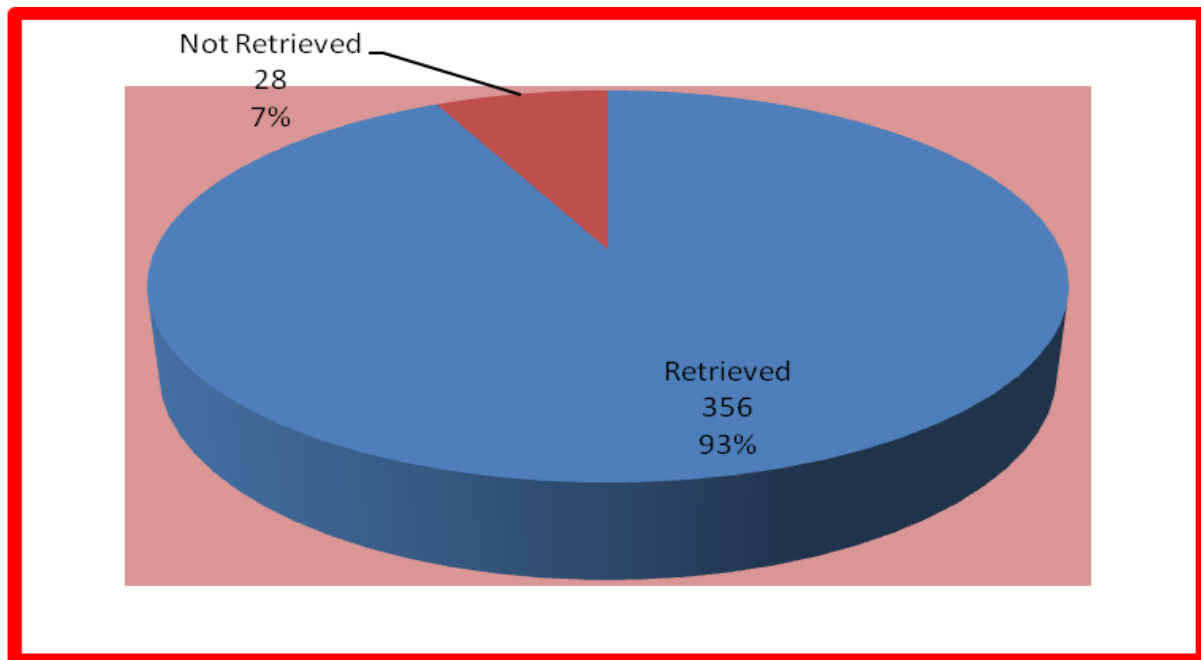

Figure 1: Response Rate Analysis

Result of the Findings

This segment deals with the presentation and analysis of data that were obtained according to the research objectives.
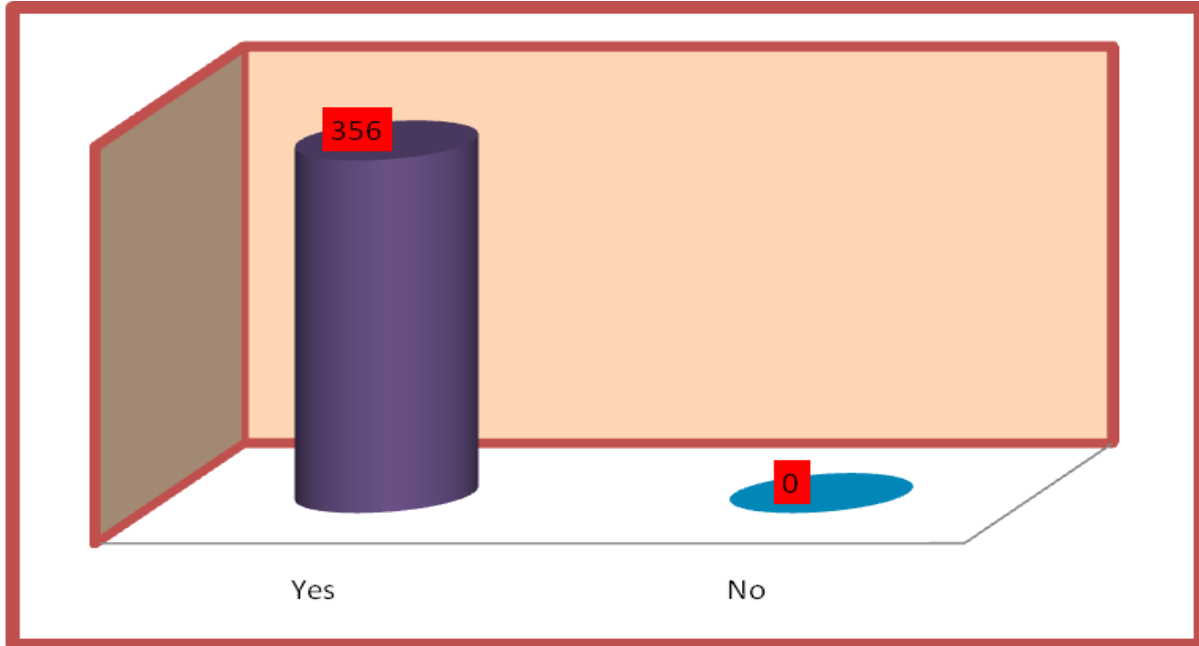
Figure 2: Respondents' Use of Social Media to Access Political Adverts

It could be inferred from the data in Figure 2 that social media has become important in political communication, especially as it concerns the selling of political candidates to the electorates. In line with the Ondo State 2024 governorship election, the data demonstrates that social media played a key role in the dissemination of political messages by the candidates.
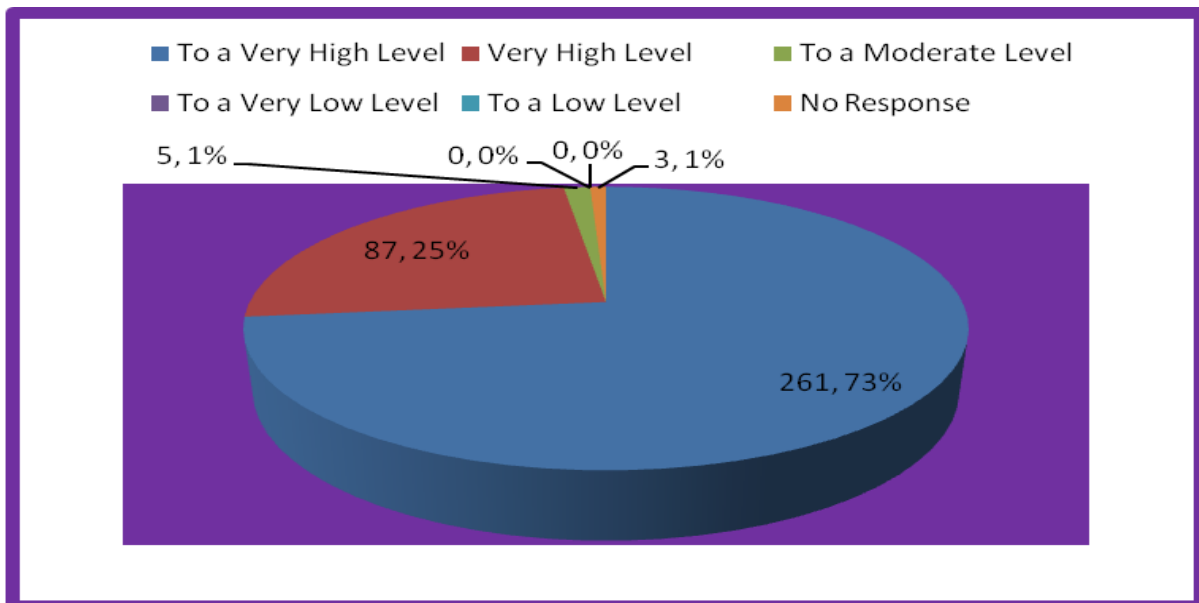

Figure 3: Extent of Exposure to Political Candidates' Advertisements on Social Media Platforms during the Ondo State 2024 Governorship Election

The data presented in Figure 3 indicates that the respondents were exposed to adverts on social media by the candidates. This is represented by 87% and 73% respectively.
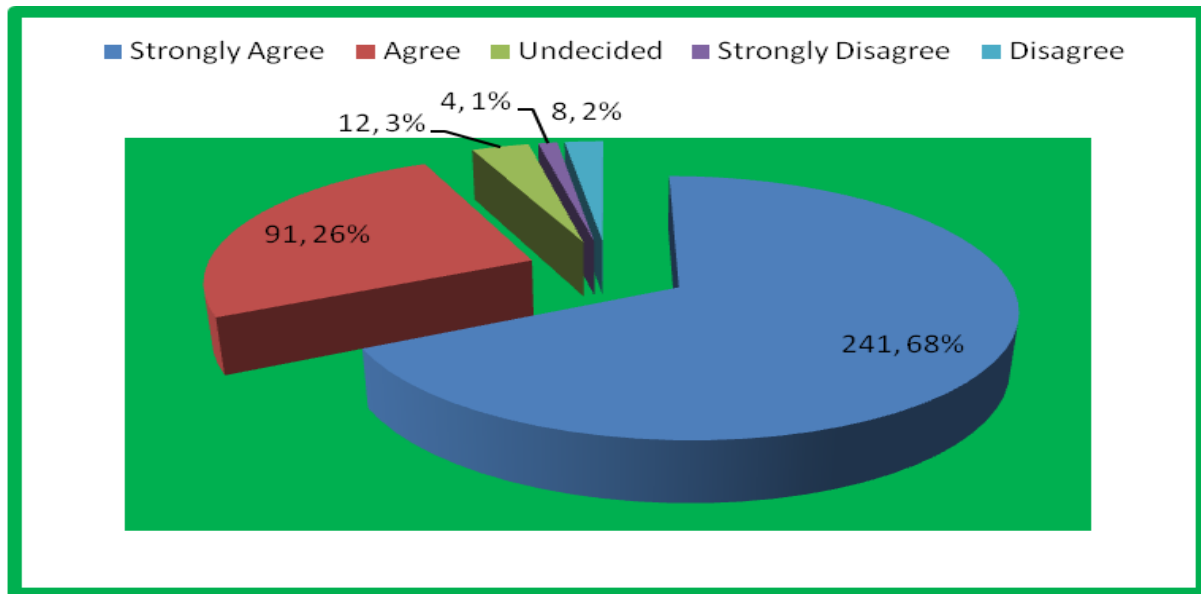
Figure 4: Political Adverts on Social Media Influence You during the Ondo State 2024 Governorship Election

The data in Figure 4 indicates that adverts on social media by candidates in the election influenced the decision of the electorate.

Table 1: Responses on the Challenges Associated with Political Advertising on Social Media during the Ondo State 2024 Governorship Election

Options	AS	A	U	SD	D	Total	Mean Rating	Decision
The dissemination of hateful, misleading, and inaccurate advertisements regarding political candidates on social media platforms	276	56	11	4	9	**356**	4.6	Accepted
Harassment via advertisements on social media concerning political candidates, their advocates, and their suggested policies and other initiatives if elected	259	88	9	0	0	**356**	4.7	Accepted
Political advertisements on social media were the basis for political, religious and ethnic divisions among the Ondo people.	247	94	15	0	0	**356**	4.6	Accepted

The finding suggests that, despite the influence of social media in advertising political candidates during the 2024 Ondo State governorship election, the same social media platforms were also employed to spread false information aimed at discrediting candidates and their proposed programmes and policies. The dissemination of this misleading content on social media contributed to the polarization of the populace along political, ethnic and religious lines. These are represented by mean scores of 4.6, 4.7 and 4.6 respectively in Table 1.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the investigation indicated that political candidates in the 2024 Ondo State governorship election extensively employed social media as a political communication platform to promote themselves, along with their proposed policies and programmes to the electorate (refer to Figure 3). Additionally, the study established that the awareness of political advertising on various social media platforms by different political parties was notably high among the electorates during the election. These findings underscore the reality that social media has become an essential instrument for political figures to showcase their intentions and aspirations to members of the public. It can further be inferred that the use of social media for political engagements by politicians, their political platforms, and their supporters has become an enduring aspect of the political landscape, significantly influencing public opinion, emotions, actions, voting patterns and choices.

It can further be adduced that social media has significantly contributed to increasing the political visibility of political candidates and aspirants. It is acknowledged as a potent interactive online communication medium that promotes community development and stimulates public engagement in political activities. Social media possesses the capacity to inform, unite individuals, and enhance awareness among citizens regarding political issues, serving as an interactive forum for discussion.

These findings are consistent with those of Ayankoa, Calitz, and Cullen (2015), who found that in South Africa, electorates and political actors comprehensively utilised social media for political activities. In addition, earlier research by Okoro and Santas (2017) confirmed that social media serves as an essential instrument for educating and informing the populace about various political dealings in their communities.

The research similarly revealed that political advertisements disseminated through social media significantly influenced the choices made by voters regarding candidates in the Ondo State 2024 governorship election (refer to Figure 4). Consequently, it can be inferred that the interactive, participator, and cost-effective nature of social media platforms, played a crucial role in the selection of candidates among the Ondo people in the 2024 governorship election. This finding aligns with the observations of Zekeri (2019), who noted that social media platforms have become vital tools for political aspirants and candidates to appeal to the public and garner support, as they recognize the importance of citizens' engagement in their political pursuits. Furthermore, this finding supports the Social Media Engagement Theory, which elucidates how individuals utilize social media to create, connect, and share content. It also describes the engagement dynamics on social media, including actions such as commenting on others' posts, liking content, sharing posts, and contributing personal insights or opinions.

The study's findings further showed the presence of unsubstantiated, half-truths, fake and misleading political advertisements on social media regarding the various candidates that contested the 2024 Ondo State governorship election. Such deceptive advertisements on social media contributed significantly to dividing the people along ethnic, political and religious lines in the 2024 Ondo State governorship election (refer to Table 1). This finding is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Asemah and Onyeka (2012), which highlighted that propaganda and misinformation remain serious challenges to political activities on social media. Ferrara et al

(2016) further stated that political candidates and their advocates usually capitalise on the shortcomings of social media platforms to discredit their opponents.

Conclusion

This study has assessed the impact of political advertising on social media on voters' participation and choice of candidates in 2024. From the findings of the study, it is concluded that despite the important role social media played in the election, it was used to discredit political opponents and to promote racism, ethnicity, religion, ethno-religious configurations, multiculturalism and gender issues.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made;

Since social media advertising has poor regulations and statutory control, unethical practices should be checkmated by the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) to avoid unhealthy and offensive adverts being churned out to the public and a clear statutory control body should be spelt out for political social media advertisers.

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