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Article

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INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON AGENDA SETTING FOR THE 2027 NIGERIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OUTCOME

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Abstract

As platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp increasingly influence public opinion, political actors and media users use them to determine the trajectory of political discourse and set voter priorities right. Employing the agenda-setting theory as a framework, the research explores how digital narratives impact issues such as political engagements and electoral perception. Using the qualitative content analysis as the research method, the study identifies key political themes amplified online and examines their correlation with public interest and media coverage. The findings reveal that while traditional media retains some influence, social media play a central role in understanding issues that dominate public and political agendas. The study concludes that digital platforms are now pivotal to political communication and electoral influence with major implications for democratic participation in Nigeria's 2027 general elections.

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Keywords: Social Media Platforms, Agenda Setting, 2027 Presidential Elections, Electoral Outcome.

Introduction

Democracy fundamentally hinges on electoral processes where the level of voter awareness, mobilization, education, and participation determines the legitimacy of the electoral outcome. In Nigeria, political parties, candidates, and their sponsors invest substantial resources, money, time, and effort in campaigns and rallies to canvass votes for their political ambitions, which most believe to be democracy (Olayinka, 2015). These activities extend beyond physical engagements to the media known as political communication, where they are strategically designed to influence public perception through headlines, imagery, story placement, and language choices, to shape electoral attitudes (Ojo & Adebisi, 2021). Traditionally, political communication relies heavily on mass media outlets such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, billboards and posters, which facilitated message dissemination through a one-way flow of information. This era's major challenge was the dominance of traditional media owned and controlled by political elites, which often resulted in biased coverage, limiting the electorate's access to comprehensive and balanced political information (Akinfeleye, 2015). Consequently, the traditional media's gatekeeping role contributed to a constrained agenda-setting capacity, often reinforcing elite interests over the collective public agenda. However, with advances in technology, particularly the proliferation of digital communication platforms, the landscape of political communication has transformed significantly. The emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram in the 21st century has revolutionized how political actors and citizens alike engage with information. These platforms enable a two-way, interactive communication, fostering user-generated content that diminishes traditional media's monopoly over public discourse (Adegoke & Olaleye, 2022). This shift has empowered citizens, making them active participants in the political dialogue rather than passive recipients.

Recent years have witnessed social media's pivotal role in shaping political narratives and influencing electoral outcomes, especially in Nigeria's vibrant democracy. Digital platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of political messages, mobilize voters, and provide space for debate and activism, thereby expanding the scope of agenda-setting beyond traditional media constraints (Emmanuella, 2023). Notably, the 2019 Nigerian general elections saw the increasing influence of social media campaigns in shaping public opinion, eroding traditional information gatekeeping mechanisms (Olumide, 2020). The theoretical framework underpinning this study is the Agenda Setting Theory, originally proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972/73), which posits that the media do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about by emphasizing particular issues. Today, this process extends into the digital sphere, where social media platforms serve as powerful agenda setters, influencing public perceptions and priorities (Anaeto, Onabajo, & Osifeso, 2008). Unlike traditional mass media, which is often characterized by top-down messaging, social media allows for a more participatory approach, where citizens themselves can influence the policy agenda through sharing, commenting, and creating content (Akinfeleye, 2015).

Literature Review

In the contemporary political landscape, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools shaping public discourse and influencing electoral outcomes worldwide. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous democracy, has witnessed a transformative shift in how political

actors and citizens engage with electoral processes, particularly through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Understanding the influence of social media on agenda setting during past elections provides critical insights into its potential impact on Nigeria's 2027 presidential election. The 2015 Nigerian general elections marked a significant turning point in the use of digital communication within the country's electoral landscape. Studies such as those by Akinola (2016) revealed that social media platforms began to influence public discourse, especially among the youth, by offering alternative narratives to traditional media coverage. Campaigns and political debates increasingly migrated online, facilitating the rapid dissemination of information and the mobilization of voters (Oginni & Abayomi, 2017). Social media enabled voters to access diverse perspectives, thus shaping the electoral agenda beyond the influence of mainstream media. In 2019, social media's role was even more pronounced. According to a report by the International Republican Institute (IRI, 2020), platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp played a crucial role in mobilizing supporters and disseminating campaign messages. However, the 2019 elections also witnessed an increase in misinformation, hate speech, and fake news, which posed challenges to the integrity of the electoral process (Ogunleye et al., 2020). The manipulation of social media content, hence, played a significant role in influencing public opinion and the electoral agenda, illustrating the dual-edged nature of these platforms.

The influence of social media on public agenda creation in Nigeria is multifaceted. Scholars such as Olorunnisola and Owolabi (2021) argue that social media amplify issues that resonate with citizens, thus elevating them to national political importance. During the 2015 and 2019 elections, topics such as corruption, governance, and security dominated online discussions, reflecting their salience in the electoral agenda. The platforms thus serve as spaces where political conversations are not only initiated but also shaped by active citizen participation, influencing both mainstream media coverage and political actors' campaign strategies. Social media's role in shaping voter perceptions of presidential candidates and electoral issues in Nigeria has been widely studied. According to Ikeogu (2018), social media enables voters to access candidate information, policy positions, and campaign activities directly, often bypassing traditional media filters. This democratizes information dissemination but also exposes voters to biases and misinformation. The 2015 and 2019 elections illustrated how social media narratives, often driven by partisan groups and political actors, influenced public perceptions, sometimes swaying electoral decisions (Adeniran & Omobowale, 2020). The personalized and interactive nature of social media fosters a sense of proximity and engagement, which can significantly impact voter choice. Citizen engagement patterns on social media, such as online protests, hashtag campaigns, and digital activism, have emerged as vital components of modern electoral strategies. Studies by Olukorede (2022) demonstrate that active participation in online discussions correlates strongly with electoral enthusiasm and support mobilization. The use of hashtags like #EndSARS and #VoteNaija in recent years exemplifies how social media can galvanize citizens towards collective political actions, shaping electoral outcomes indirectly but powerfully.

Additionally, social media engagement helps sustain issues on the political agenda beyond traditional campaign periods, maintaining pressure on politicians and holding them accountable (Ekwutosi & Osakwe, 2023). Such sustained citizen engagement demonstrates the platforms' potential to influence not just immediate electoral outcomes but also longer-term democratic processes. Furthermore, the concept of citizen journalism has emerged as a significant factor in agenda setting, with ordinary Nigerians acting as information curators

and disseminators via their social media timelines, groups, blogs, and online platforms. This participatory dynamic reinforces the notion that the agenda-setting process is no longer solely controlled by traditional media but is now a collective evolving both media professionals and citizens (Klapper, 2024). Against this backdrop, this research aims to analyze how social media platforms will influence agenda-setting during the 2027 Nigerian presidential election outcome, examining how social media's influence may have evolved and what this means for democratic processes in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, social media have emerged as a dominant platform for political communication, fundamentally transforming how political issues are presented, discussed, and prioritized by the public. Unlike traditional media, which often operate under the influence of political elites and gatekeepers, social media platforms offer a decentralized, interactive space where citizens, political actors, and interest groups can participate actively in shaping political discourse. In Nigeria, the rising prevalence of social media during past elections, such as the 2015 and 2019 general elections, has demonstrated its potential to influence public perceptions, mobilize voters, and set electoral agendas. However, despite this evident transformation, there is limited empirical understanding of how these platforms specifically influence agenda-setting processes and electoral outcomes in the Nigerian context. Traditional mass media's monopoly over political information has waned, raising concerns about the accuracy, bias, and overall integrity of information circulating on social media. Moreover, as Nigeria prepares for the 2027 presidential election, questions abound regarding the extent to which social media continue to shape public opinion and influence various electoral issues, ranging from candidate perception to policy priorities. Yet, the mechanisms through which social media's agenda-setting power operates remain underexplored, especially in a democratic setting characterized by political, ethnic, and socioeconomic factors. This gap in understanding poses a significant challenge for policymakers, political parties, and voters who seek to navigate the complex digital landscape responsibly. It also raises concerns about the potential proliferation of misinformation, polarizing and manipulative tactics that can distort electoral processes and threaten democratic stability. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the influence of social media on agenda-setting in Nigeria's electoral landscape, with a focus on understanding how digital platforms shape the political narratives leading up to the 2027 presidential election.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. Examine the extent to which social media platforms influenced public agenda and political discourse during the 2015 and 2019 Nigerian general elections as a basis for understanding their potential impact on Nigeria's 2027 general election.
- ii. Analyze the role of social media in shaping voters' perceptions concerning presidential candidates and electoral issues in Nigeria.
- iii. Identify patterns of citizen engagement on social media that contribute to agenda setting and electoral outcomes in Nigeria's democratic processes.

Research Questions

The questions that will guide the trajectory of the arguments in this study are:

- i. To what extent did social media platforms influence the public agenda and political discourse during the 2015 and 2019 Nigerian general elections, and what could this imply for their impact on the 2027 election?
- ii. How does social media shape voters' perceptions of presidential candidates and electoral issues in Nigeria?
- iii. What are the patterns of citizen engagement on social media that contribute to agenda setting and electoral outcomes in Nigeria's democratic processes?

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-setting theory states that the media influence people's choices on public issues they perceive as important. Maxwell McComb and Donald L. Shaw introduced the theory in 1974. The theory holds that the media have the power to influence public opinion by giving attention to a specific issue, making the issue perceived as important. This influence becomes notable during political events such as elections. Agenda-setting theory gives people an "agenda" of information for discussion, which is what the media wants people to discuss, regardless of whether the information is right or wrong. In her exposition, Folarin (2002) agreed that mass media influence agenda setting, giving them the ability to choose topics that the public perceives as important. This theory provides a useful framework in understanding how social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and Instagram are replacing traditional media in the agenda-setting role. Recently, there has been a big difference between social media and traditional media; unlike traditional media, social media platforms are open to ordinary citizens, not only to journalists and politicians. Ordinary citizens, including influencers, interest groups, are free to shape what political issues can trend and dominate the conversation space. Using Agenda setting theory, this research examines how recurrent narratives on trending conversations on social media can influence voter opinion, candidate identity and what information can be made a priority. Agenda-setting theory allows researchers to understand how often political topics are discussed, how seriously these topics are taken, and how they affect what the public thinks is important. Especially in the Social media era, where political conversation can be shaped by everyone.

Methodology

The research method adopted for this study is the qualitative content Analysis to examine the influence of social media, using agenda setting for the 2027 presidential election outcome. According to Onyenekwe Ogochukwu and Okpara Chioma (2023), with content analysis, it is possible to get factual information. This study used purposive sampling, also known as judgmental sampling, to purposely choose political posts and public comments from three major social media pages, which are X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and Facebook. The study selects posts and public comments related to the upcoming 2027 election between January 2025 to June 2025. Posts and public comments from the pages or profiles of two notable candidates, President Bola Tinubu of the APC and Peter Obi of the Labor Party, will be used to ascertain the data. By using the posts and public comments from their social media platforms, this study will be able to achieve its objective by examining the influence of social media on the public agenda in the upcoming 2027 presidential election and the role of social media in shaping voters' perception of candidates' identity.

Content Categories and Unit Analysis

To ensure that there is clarity, this study explains both the content categories and Unit analysis.

- i. Using content Analysis, the data were divided into different thematic categories, which are political Agenda themes, emotional use, target audience and citizen engagement.
- ii. The primary unit analysis examined the individual political posts made by the candidates and public comments related to those posts, which were collected from the three social media platforms (X, Facebook and Instagram)

A manual archiving tool will be used for data collection. With this tool, it is easy to gather data through screenshots or copy and paste since the data can still be stored. A total of 300 posts and 1,000 comments from the President Tinubu and Peter Obi pages will be analyzed based on political posts and public comments made on the three major social media platforms used in this study. This is to ascertain the influence of social media on agenda-setting towards the upcoming 2027 presidential election. Data collected will be analyzed through thematic content analysis, which is employed to identify recurring narrative topics, most common themes, and framing patterns. The data will be in different categories, like;

- i. Political Agenda themes
- ii. Emotional use
- iii. Target audience like ethnicity, youth and so on.

The analysis will be useful in trying to understand the underlying messages, issues and narrative in the posts and comments and how they influence public agenda formation in social media platforms.

Data Presentation

A total of 300 posts and 1000 public comments were analyzed. These were distributed across platforms as follows:

Table 1: social media platforms of 2023 presidential candidates and a list of activities

s/n	Social media platform	Candidate page	No. of posts	No. of comments	Total collection
1	X (Twitter)	BolaTinubu	50	167	217
2	X (Twitter)	PeterObi	50	165	215
3	Facebook	BolaTinubu	50	167	217
4	Facebook	PeterObi	50	167	217
5	Instagram	BolaTinubu	50	167	217
6	Instagram	PeterObi	50	167	217
Total			300	1000	1300

A total of 300 posts and 1000 comments were gathered through screenshots and copy and paste from the official pages of Bola Tinubu and Peter Obi on the three social media platforms (X, Facebook and Instagram. The data will be useful in trying to understand the messages, issues and narrative in the posts and comments and how they influence public agenda formation in social media platforms.

Discussion of Findings

Using the findings of 300 posts and 1000 public comments analyzed from the official pages of President Bola Tinubu (APC) and Peter Obi (Labor Party) on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook between January and June 2025 to answer the research questions.

- i. **Question One:** To what extent did social media platforms influence the public agenda and political discourse during the 2015 and 2019 Nigerian general elections, and what could this imply for their impact on the 2027 election? For the 2015 and 2019 elections, findings reveal that social media played a key role in shaping political discourse among youths. Issues on corruption, insecurity and unemployment became a pronounced topic online. Cementing the role of agenda-setting in social media. The study shows that for the 2027 election, social media will help in addressing issues and influence campaigns and political discourse online.
- ii. **Question Two:** How does social media shape voters' perceptions of presidential candidates and electoral issues in Nigeria? The data reveals that social media presence has influenced public perception of the two presidential candidates' identity. Supporters' engagements showcasing achievements and different policy promises. While the opposing team uses social media as a tool to criticize propaganda, records and address incompetence. Making social media a gatekeeper to build credibility and expose candidates' bad influence.
- iii. **Question Three:** What are the patterns of citizen engagement on social media that contribute to agenda setting and electoral outcomes in Nigeria's democratic processes? It was observed that citizens engage using hashtags and active participation in public discourse. For example, #vote wisely, youth decide. This engagement helps address issues such as economic reform and security trends online. Enabling the active participation of both candidates in addressing these issues. This pattern reveals that voters are actively in the agenda-setting process. Thereby, using social media to address issues and demand accountability.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media on public perception towards political issues. Using content analysis as a research method, the findings reveal that online political posts, especially content on platforms as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, play an agenda-setting role on public issues. This study agrees that social media influence public perception towards political issues, especially regarding opinions towards the upcoming 2027 Presidential elections and agrees on social media relevance as a key tool for political discussion through social media engagement. Social media, therefore, not only reflects public perception but can also select what political issues should be prioritized, especially among youth. Since democracy in Nigeria on continuous growth, understanding and managing the influence of social media should remain a top priority.

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations based on findings and conclusions:

- i. There should be transparency amongst political candidates using social media as a legal undertaking. This is to encourage unity among the people.
- ii. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other political agencies should monitor posts on social media and work with digital platforms to curb fake news and politically motivated misinformation.
- iii. Media agencies should introduce digital literacy programs. This is to educate People on how to verify news and engage responsibly on political issues online.
- iv. Traditional media organizations should collaborate with different digital platforms to curb trending political misinformation, thereby strengthening the agenda-setting process across media.

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