

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN ISSUES AND VOTERS' VOTING DECISIONS ON THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

The study set out to investigate if exposure to online political advertising was responsible for voting decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State and also to ascertain if campaign issues in online political advertising were responsible for voters' decisions during general elections in Akwa Ibom State. The study was anchored on the technological determinism theory. The survey research design was adopted, with the questionnaire serving as instrument for data collection from 400 sampled respondents. Findings from the study showed that majority of the respondents were exposed to online political advertising messages, which had contributed to their decisions in making a choice of candidates, which influenced their decision to vote for the candidates that were advertised. The study also showed that at least one of the campaign issues, which is road infrastructure in online political advertising was responsible for voters' voting decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. It was concluded that, online political advertising had played a major role in voters' voting decisions in Akwa Ibom State. It was also found that, online political advertising can be used to help voters gain exposure to policy statements of candidates and their political parties. The study recommended that voters' education should be intensified by political parties and candidates, to enable voters' gain more exposure to online political advertising. Campaign issues by political parties as part of campaign tools, should be more realistic in convincing voters to vote for political parties.

Keywords: elections, political advertising, social media, voters', voting decisions.

Introduction

Online political advertising has become an important element in elections because it reaches a great number of voters at the comfort of their homes or offices giving the people choices or preference to make. It is cheaper, durable, faster, and retrievable, with a larger reach of its target audience. Online advertising provides voters with the opportunity to be exposed to campaign promises and utilise this as a basis for judging the capacity of the candidate seeking for a political position. It is imperative, therefore, to examine the efficacy of online advertising in shaping the voting decisions of voters in Akwa Ibom State during the 2019 general elections.

Statement of the Problem

Online Political advertising has consistently served as a tool for marketing political parties and their candidates who seek for elective offices. Its aim is to use online political advertising to influence the outcome of the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. This has shifted the target of political communication, from news to advertising, and with this, voters can have more online political advertising exposure than conventional political news, which was obtainable in the past.

Considering the youthful demography that dominates the online space in Akwa Ibom State, political parties such as the Peoples Democratic Party, All Progressives Congress, Young Progressives Party, Young Democratic Party, and Abundant Nigeria Renewal Party and their candidates

had designed political advertising messages in form of pictorial graphics, short videos, promotional interviews, and jingles, which were posted through online channels like Facebook, Websites, YouTube, Twitter, Blogs and Instagram with the intention of swaying voters during general elections in Akwa Ibom State.

The main aim of these political advertising messages posted through online channels was to elicit responses from potential voters' in Akwa Ibom State and their willingness to vote for a candidate based on convictions. Another aim of these messages was to ensure that, voters' who had more online political advertising exposure, would be opened to behavioural patterns of voting a particular candidate, based on perceived influence by the messages. Online political advertising has been known to affect people's voting choices, but in the 2019 general elections, it was not ascertained, because several studies focused on previous elections, and perhaps, Presidential elections and other Gubernatorial or House of Assembly elections, leaving the gap for this research to look at the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State holistically. Looking specifically at campaign issues, this study, therefore, is undertaken to examine if campaign issues were responsible for the voting choices of voters in Akwa Ibom State during the 2019 general elections.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent was exposure to online political advertising responsible for voters' voting decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State?
2. What campaign issues in online political advertising were responsible for voters' decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State?

Theoretical Framework

The central idea that surrounds the technological determinism theory is that

when new systems of technology are developed, the culture or society becomes adaptable to the technology to reflect the senses needed to use the new technology. The term 'technological determinism' was coined by Thorstein Veblen and this theory revolves around the proposition that technology in any given society defines its culture. Technology is viewed as the driving force of culture in a society and it determines its course of history. (Rogers, 2014).

Technological determinism theory, owes its grounding to Marshal McLuhan in 1964. The basic premise of the technological determinism theory is that the media are the extension of the human body; it holds that the media not only alter the environment or immediate society, but the very message they convey. The media bring new perceptual habits while their technologies create new environments. The theory states that technology, especially the various forms tagged new media, decisively shape how individuals receive the message which are produced by the media.

Adler (2006) avers that, "technological determinism holds the idea that technology has important effects on our lives. This idea figures prominently in the popular imagination and political rhetoric, for example in the idea that the Internet is revolutionizing economy and society. Technological determinism has also had a long and controversial history in the social sciences in general."

In essence, the crux of the technological determinism theory is that technology contributes significantly in shaping the society. Online platforms, specifically, have altered the political space with the creation and dissemination of political messages through these platforms. The aforementioned concretizes the suitability of the technological determinism theory as a framework for this thesis. Specifically, political advertising as examined by the study is done through online channels.

Based on the technological determinism theory, these online platforms can change the voting decisions of Akwa Ibom State voters.

Conceptual Review

Political Advertising Campaigns in Nigeria

Political campaigns are part of established models in any democratic atmosphere all around the world. Campaigns are a window through which politicians reach out and market their ideas to potential voters. The most common way of doing this is through political advertising which Erahuyi (2014) describes as a process through which advertisers' package and present election aspirants and their parties before the electorate through different channels. While it has become rooted as a way of life in Western states, it is just recently becoming widely accepted in developing democracies such as Nigeria. Obot, et al. (2013), noted that, "candidates and their parties in Nigeria have recently come to terms with the efficacy of political advertising." Thus, vast resources are targeted towards packaging and selling a political candidate and his manifesto through advertising. Edogoh, et al. (2013) observed that, political advertising is one of the ways through which politicians and their parties mobilises voters into politics in modern times. As much as political advertising has gained more relevance, its mode and scope has been impacted on in recent times by the prevalence of Information and Communication Technology (Arulchelva, 2014; Oyebode, 2014). This simply implies that the channels to get across to potential voters have multiplied in recent years. Apart from the traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers, bill boards, posters and handbills, politicians also have the benefit of the new and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and Google Plus (Nworah, 2011).

In Nigeria, political advertising has come to be identified with the political sphere of the country (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012). From the first republic up until the administration of Muhammadu Buhari, evidence of political advertising campaigns during electioneering periods abound. Political advertising campaigns in Nigeria are now deemed issue-based as political candidates sell themselves and their programmes to the person, which has seen a spike in negative political advertising in the country. Opeibi (2005) ascribes the nature of political advertising to the more competitive nature of election and the winner-takes-all attitude of Nigerian politicians noticeable since the 2003 General Elections. Ojekwe (2015) advances that aggressive political advertising campaigns were reported to have characterised recent elections in the country.

Social Media, Voter's Behaviour and Political Participation

There is a relationship between the use of social media and the participation of citizens in the electoral process. Greenhow and Li (2013) argue that there is a relationship between social media, civic engagement, and political participation. This is corroborated by Lee (2018) who explained that, unlike people who do not use social media, active users are more likely to engage in political activities. This has a higher tendency to cause political-ideological radicalisation of such people through partisan preferences. However, the study did not consider the connections that people have with social media political activists and the combined effect on voting patterns. Berg (2017) also agrees that the Internet and social media have higher voter participation because it has made it possible to address the challenges facing traditional offline democracy. Voter participation is quite different from voting patterns. According to Berg (2017), "the platform offers an entirely new and innovative channel missing in conventional social interactions." Chen (2016) also explained that, "due to the network effect of social

media, there is the possibility of increasing political participation due to the youthful demographic that constitute users of social media. There appears to be an understanding that using social media for political purposes and paying attention to traditional media have a higher chance of increasing civic participation” (Bosnjaket. 2007; Holt, 2013). Cited in Chen (2016). The relationship between online political participation in social media concerning connections with political activists and the impact on voting patterns appears unclear. Greenhow and Li (2013) explained that, “the level of political participation through social media appears to be highest among young people, especially students.” Kushin and Yamamoto (2014) argued that, “online social media expression is significantly related to situational political involvement.” The effect of social media on online political participation seems to correlate with that of traditional, offline political participation, as argued by Skoric (2011). The benefit of the positive relationship between social media and civic responsibility is a shared one among political stakeholders, especially political parties and the general public.

Pandey (2016) points out the relationship between social media and political participation by observing that social media correlates positively with an increase in social capital on the one hand and a reduction in the cost of the involvement on the other. Similarly, Zhang and Lin (2018) cited in Pandey (2016), aver that social media use facilitates political engagement. The cumulative benefit of the use of social media is higher participation in online political activities. Hofmann (2017) cited in Pandey (2016), makes reference to what is called escapist Facebook use, that is, a temporary escape from one’s routine lifestyle and compensated for by accessing media. This means that the escapist use of Facebook could influence users to increase their political participation through accidental civic engagement. The reason for this, according to Choi (2017), cited in

Yang (2017), is the existence of news sharing features in social media. He agreed with the heterogeneity and social media network effect as a contributory factor in boosting people’s political participation, especially when there is active news sharing by peers. News sharing can emanate from news and disagreement with political discourse Yang. (2017) showed that exposure to news and political affairs content is positively related to political disputes, which, in turn, act as a catalyst to political participation.

Research Methodology

The study adopted the survey research design. The survey is also useful to researchers in gathering relevant data from a large audience to arrive at an objective conclusion.

The population of the study include registered voters in Akwa Ibom State during the 2019 general elections who have an online presence. The total number of registered voters in Akwa Ibom State as at the 2019 elections stood at 2, 119,727. INEC (2018). Therefore, the population of the study was the 2, 119, 727 voters’ in the state.

The sample size for the study was 400. The figure was arrived at using the Taro Yamane formula for sample size determination. The purposive sampling technique and Multi stage sampling technique were used. The questionnaire served as instrument for data collection. The researcher administered the questionnaire with the help of four research assistants who were trained by the researcher on the objectives of the study and on the sampling procedure. Quantitative data collected was presented in statistical tables and analysed using simple percentages. Data obtained from the responses to the questionnaire were presented in statistical tables using simple percentages.

Simple percentage is determined thus:
Number of the respondent to a question
X100

number of respondents
 Weighted Mean Score (WMS) was also used in order to justify the use of the four-point likert scale.
 Formula for weighted mean score: $X = \frac{\sum (f \cdot x)}{\sum f}$
 —
 Where X = Arithmetic mean
 \sum = Summation
 x = 4 point Likert scale

Total
 f = Frequency
 $\sum f = N$ (population)
 Average weighted mean score is determined thus: Summation of all item mean scores
 Number of items.
 The scores 4-1 were assigned with Strongly Agree (SA) as 4 points, Agree (A) as 3 points, disagree (D) as 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) as 1 point.

Data presentation

Table 1: Exposure to online political advertising

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	298	4	1192		
Agree	93	3	274		
Disagree	06	2	12		
Strongly Disagree	04	1	4		
Total	400	10	1487	3.71	Accepted

Data in table 1 point to the idea that respondents' choice of candidates was based on exposure to online political advertising during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. This choice was responsible for voting decisions of respondents. This is attested to by a weighted mean score of 3.71.

Table 2 Exposure to online political advertising influenced and persuaded me to vote during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	103	4	412		
Agree	216	3	648		
Disagree	48	2	96		
Strongly Disagree	33	1	33		
Total	400	10	1189	2.97	Accepted

Data in table 2 show the fact that respondents were persuaded to vote and voting decisions were influenced during general elections as a result of exposure to online political advertising. This is attested to by an accepted response value of 2.97.

Table 3: Voting decisions during the 2019 general elections were based on messages from online political advertising

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	131	4	524		
Agree	180	3	540		
Disagree	75	2	150		
Strongly Disagree	14	1	14		
Total	400	10	1493	3.04	Accepted

Data in table 3 point to the idea that respondents' voting decisions were based on messages from political advertising which respondents were exposed to. This is attested to by an accepted response result of 3.04.

Table 4 Rural electrification campaign promise was responsible for voting decisions during general elections in Akwa Ibom State

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	115	4	460		
Agree	190	3	570		
Disagree	67	2	134		
Strongly Disagree	28	1	28		
Total	400	10	1192	2.98	Accepted

Data in table point to the idea that rural electrification campaign promise was the online political advertisement respondents were exposed to, and was responsible for the voting decisions of Akwa Ibom State voters. This is attested to by an accepted response result of 2.98.

Table 5: Improved power supply as a campaign theme was responsible for voting decision during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	110	4	440		
Agree	185	3	555		
Disagree	72	2	144		
Strongly Disagree	33	1	33		
Total	400	10	1172	2.93	Accepted

Data in table 5 point to the idea that improved power supply as a campaign promise was significant in the online political advertisement's respondents were exposed to. This theme was responsible for the voting decisions of Akwa Ibom State voters. This is attested to by an accepted response result of 2.93.

Table 6: Campaign promises on road infrastructure was responsible for voting decision during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State.

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	62	4	460		
Agree	99	3	570		
Disagree	211	2	134		
Strongly Disagree	28	1	28		
Total	400	10	1192	2.48	Rejected

Data in table 6 indicate road infrastructure as a campaign promise was not significant in the online political advertisement’s respondents were exposed to. Therefore, the theme was not responsible for the voting decisions of Akwa Ibom State voters. This is attested to by a rejected response result of 2.48.

Table 7: Better Economic policies outlined through online political advertising was responsible for voting decision

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	86	4	33		
Agree	81	3	243		
Disagree	151	2	302		
Strongly Disagree	82	1	82		
Total	400	10	971	2.42	Rejected

Data in table 7 reveal that economic policies as a campaign promise was not significant in the online political advertisements respondents were exposed to. This theme was not responsible for the voting decisions of Akwa Ibom State voters. This is attested to by a rejected response value of 2.42.

Table 8: Voting decision was based on online political advertising messages on job creation.

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	109	4	460		
Agree	188	3	570		
Disagree	59	2	134		
Strongly Disagree	44	1	28		
Total	400	10	1192	2.48	Rejected

Data in table 8 point to the fact that campaign promises on job creation was important in the online political advertisement’s respondents were exposed to. Data show that job creation

campaign promise was responsible for the voting decisions of Akwa Ibom State voters. This is attested to by an accepted response result of 2.48.

Table 9: Improved security as a campaign theme was responsible for voting decision

Nature of response	Frequency	W(X)	FX	WMS	Decision
Strongly Agree	149	4	596		
Agree	36	3	108		
Disagree	208	2	416		
Strongly Disagree	07	1	7		
Total	400	10	1127	2.81	Accepted

Data in table 9 show that improved security campaign promise was integral in the online political advertisements respondents were exposed to. It was a campaign promise which was also responsible for the voting decisions of Akwa Ibom State voters. This is attested to by an accepted response value of 2.81.

Discussion of Findings

Research question one: To what extent was exposure to online political advertising responsible for voters’ voting decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State.

Data in table 2 showed respondents strongly agreed that exposure to online political advertising was responsible for their choice of candidates during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. Data obtained and presented identified respondents’ level of influence and persuasion to vote, through exposure to online political advertising, during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. Most respondents agreed to the influence and persuasion to vote, through exposure to online political advertising, during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. Fewer respondents had disagreed to the influence and persuasion to vote, based on their exposure to online political advertising during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. Data also indicates that respondents had most

significantly agreed that messages from online political advertising had contributed to their voting decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State, while an insignificant number of respondents disagreed to voting decisions based on messages from online political advertising. Therefore, in answer to the research question, to what extent was exposure to online political advertising responsible for voting decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State, respondents attested to their far-reaching exposure to online political advertising, during general elections in Akwa Ibom State, which influenced their decision to vote for the candidates that were advertised.

This finding in research question one, aligns with McNair (2003), whose study defined political advertising as “the purchase and use of media space, paid for at commercial rates, in order to transmit political messages to a mass audience” (p.97). On the basis of this definition, political advertising is a form of communication that supports a candidate for nomination through the use of

pamphlets, billboards, fliers, bumper stickers, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet. As proposed by Alawode and Adesanya (2016), how electoral messages are actually designed is dependent on a country's political culture, which, at the same time, is reflected in political advertising. Gbadeyan (2010), also aligns with this study, that, political advertising is the use of media by political candidates to increase their exposure to the public. The findings showed that, majority of the respondents had high exposure to online political advertising, which improved voters' political knowledge of candidates. The reliability of the knowledge gained from the information on political advertising, helped voters' understanding of the voting process. This study agrees with Uwalaka and Nwala (2022), that the most effective political strategies for motivating, mobilizing support and attracting voters during elections is by exposure to political advertisements, which provides information to voters' as they weigh their voting options.

In the light of the above, messages from online political advertising was a major determinant in voters' exposure and decisions to vote during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State.

Research question two: What campaign issues in online political advertising were responsible for voters' decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State?

In addressing this research question, the researcher identified campaign issues in online political advertising that were responsible for voters' decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State. Respondents had opined that, some of the

campaign issues listed by candidates of political parties, were factors that determined their voting decisions.

Therefore, the answer to research question two, what campaign issues in online political advertising were responsible for voters' decisions during the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom State, is that, majority of the respondents had agreed that, at least one of the campaign issues, from job creation, to improved power supply, to rural electrification, road infrastructure in online political advertising was responsible for their voting decisions during general elections in Akwa Ibom State.

Conclusion

Relying on the findings of the study, it was concluded that, online political advertising had played a major role in voting decisions in Akwa Ibom State. It was also found that, online political advertising can be used to help voters gain exposure to policy statements of candidates and their political parties. The awareness and usage of online platforms in projecting political messages, further presents an opportunity for youth employment through advertisement, and holding political parties and its candidates accountable, through documentation of advertised policies. It can also be concluded that, campaign issues are responsible for voting decisions of eligible voters.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that voters' education should be intensified by political parties and candidates, to enable voters' gain more exposure to online political advertising. campaign issues by political parties as part of campaign tools, should be more realistic in convincing voters to vote for political parties.

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