Online Political Participation Among Younger Generations: A Case Study of the Nigerian Presidential Election

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ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNGER GENERATIONS:
A CASE STUDY OF THE NIGERIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Art
Department of Communication

by
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Accepted by:
Dr. Brandon Boatwright, Committee Chair
Dr. Erin Ash Committee Member
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ABSTRACT

The 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria represented a significant milestone in the nation's democratic progression, capturing the interest of observers both within the country and abroad. This study identifies the key online opinion leaders who participated in the electoral discourse, their generational affiliation, and the role of social media in facilitating youth engagement throughout the political process. Using Sprinkl, an online monitoring tool to harvest publicly available tweets containing the hashtag #NigeriaDecides2023 from February 11 to March 15, coupled with interviews, the study identified the prominent opinion leaders with significant influence, their types of messages and the motives behind youth engagement on SM during and after the elections. The results from this study yielded valuable insight into the role of opinion leaders, especially within the context of online political campaigns/communication in the strategic communications field. However, despite the high level of Twitter activity during elections, the presence of isolated conversations fails to develop meaningful connections with the younger population.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated foremost to God Almighty for His divine guidance and support. I also dedicate it to my immediate family, whose unwavering belief in my abilities propelled me forward, even in moments of doubt and adversity.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor and chair of this committee, Dr. Brandon Boatwright, for the special bond we created the support and advice that you have given throughout this process. It ignites me daily to keep reaching my goals as well as helping others within my capacity. Your constant aid and encouragement have helped shaped this project to reach its best version and I am so appreciative of the perspective and insight you offered. Also, to Dr. Erin Ash, your patience, kindness, impartation and guidance have meant so much to me and I cannot thank you enough. I sincerely value and thank you for all your time, kind words, and point of view that you provided to me. To Dr. Andrew Pyle, you make life seem so easy and I thank you for that service and guidance on this committee and helping me rethink how I present my research. Thank you to all of my other communication professors who impacted knowledge to me during this journey friends and fellow cohort members who spoke kind words and gave support to me. We have been through a great deal in these past two years and I will miss you dearly. I wish you the very best in all of your future endeavors.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has had an uninterrupted democratic system of government from 1999 through 2023, with numerous general elections administered by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC). One of the primary characteristics of democracy is the process of electing leaders through free and fair elections in which the people freely choose their leaders without being imposed on them by anyone or any other means. These elections are essential to any liberal democracy and frequently gauge whether democracy is advancing (Pastor, 1999). The 2023 Nigerian presidential election, characterized by constitutional changes and the enactment of the Electoral Act 2022, stands as a crucial juncture in the nation’s democratic progression. With the attention of both domestic and international observers, the outcome is anticipated to significantly influence Nigeria's political dynamics, economic trajectory, and global relationships. As the most populous African nation and a regional powerhouse, Nigeria's electoral process carries immense significance for its citizens and the broader continent.

On February 25, Nigerian citizens went to the polls to vote for the next president amid a host of issues facing the country, like high inflation rates, insecurity, and unemployment, to mention a few. In this section, I will briefly describe Nigeria’s political sphere, and the importance of the 2023 elections, the emergence of a significant disruption termed “the third force” that impacted the youth involvement and engagement on social media during this election.
Nigeria's Political Sphere

Nigeria became a sovereign country in 1960 and started practicing democracy in 1999. Since 1999, the country has operated a multi-party system, meaning that the existence of any number of parties is not constrained by law. When independent candidates are available, a multi-party system allows them to canvass the electorate for votes. The term "party system" describes the connection between a nation's constitution, electoral laws, and the potential number of political parties (Dode, 2010). The 2023 Nigerian presidential election was described as the nation's most hotly contested since the end of military rule in 1999 (ABC News, 2023; Premium, 2023), especially considering the prominence of identity-based voting - a phenomenon where individuals cast their votes primarily based on factors related to their identity, such as party affiliation, ethnicity, religion, rather than solely on the candidates' qualifications, policies, or party platforms - in the Nigerian political scene (Dode, 2010).

2023 Presidential Elections and The Third Force Disruption

During the 2023 presidential election, eighteen contenders or political parties contested heavily (Channels, 2023), but only three were believed to have a chance. These three candidates were Peter Obi of the relatively smaller Labour Party (LP), Atiku Abubakar of the major opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), and Bola Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC). Results from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) showed that Tinubu won with 36.6%- 8.79 million votes. Atiku came in second with 29.1%- 6.98 million votes, and Obi followed behind with 25.4%- 6.1 million votes. Before last year’s election, only two political parties have been major contenders since 1999. The first is the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which oversaw the country's affairs from 1999-2015. The opposition party, the All-
Progressive Party (APC), seized affairs in 2015 and rules to date under the leadership of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Since the onset of democracy in Nigeria, it is believed that if one of these two parties does not seize power, the other will do so virtually indefinitely, obscuring the existence of other minor, inconsequential parties (Dode, 2010).

Intense competition, deep-rooted issues, and a complex socio-cultural landscape characterize the Nigerian political environment. For the very first time in the history of Nigeria, the 2023 presidential elections, young Nigerians made history by becoming a significant and influential voting bloc in Nigeria's political sphere. This electoral process developed as a significant chapter in Nigeria's struggle for political stability and socioeconomic progress amid tremendous expectations, worries, and hopes in Nigeria (Kohnert, 2023). The hope for change and the birth of the disruptor or a third force as coined by citizens during the election, was brought to life by Nigerian youth when a presidential candidate named Peter Obi, the former governor of the southeastern state of Anambra, became a true contender for the presidency. Obi, who was once an active member of PDP, decamped to a lower party and won the ticket to represent the Labour Party at the presidential elections. Peter Obi is a wealthy businessman, a banker, and a two-time governor of one of the Southern states in Nigeria called Anambra. His campaign strongly focuses on the need for visionary and responsible leadership, promoting a culture of creativity and innovation to boost national productivity. He supports principles like openness, responsibility, and respect for differences. Additionally, he actively encourages political participation among young Nigerians (London School of Economics, 2023).

Even though Obi was a political outsider with little campaign donations and no foundation in Nigeria's populous north, his emergence underscores the strength of young people — and the depth of their discontent. According to analysts, some younger people have turned to
Obi out of dissatisfaction with the status quo in Nigeria and lingering outrage over the savage suppression two years ago of the #EndSars movement, which called for improved governance (Adetayo, 2023). Aside from this, the candidates for Nigeria's two major political parties are all septuagenarians who have been involved in politics for decades. Obi's pitch to younger people was that he is not like his old-guard adversaries and wanted to bring true change to Nigeria.

Nigeria has experienced severe economic hardship and multiple security concerns over the past ten years, contributing to a sense of national hopelessness. The enveloping atmosphere of dissatisfaction with the major political parties and the news of Obi's presidential run changed the country's political landscape. Obi’s involvement in the presidential race birthed a movement among the youth that was themed "Obidient." In a play on the word “Obedient,” which means submissive to a certain cause, “Obidient” is a marriage of the candidate’s name, "Obi," and "dient."

The movement #Obidient was a social media awareness campaign on numerous media platforms for Obi, and a wave of a new consciousness among the Nigerian youths, who were dissatisfied with the growing worries about corruption, insecurity, and subpar economic performance, among others, signature to the traditional ruling parties. This movement lacked a clear leader and was funded by the community or small groups of individuals. It is organized by several small organizations with the goal of toppling the current quo (Agbim et al., 2023). Before the political campaign season started, the Obidient movement organized sizable demonstrations nationwide to enhance political literacy. The movement established itself as a potent political force, substantially raising the stakes through its push for democratic change (London School of Economics, 2023). The movement was a call for change from young Nigerians who have risen beyond their complacency and showed they are unwilling to tolerate
any more political missteps just like the Arab Spring event (Maamari & Zein, 2014). This generated a true contest atmosphere in which the youngsters were involved and at the forefront in the election of their leaders for the first time.

However, despite the advent of social media, the Nigerian political sphere has been dominated by the entrenched political elite in ways that stifle young people's political interests and aspirations since the resumption of civil rule in 1999 (Mustapha & Omar, 2020). With the usage of the internet as a source of political information (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011), political disengagement among youths is also a global issue that raises significant concerns (Adebayo, 2018). However, this context changed during the 2023 presidential elections; for the first time in the country, there was a massive surge in online political participation (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023). As a result, Nigeria's youth utilized social networks to join political discussions and express their opinions to call for the change they desired (Uwalaka, 2021). As a result, this led to a higher offline civic engagement like voter registrations; of the 9.4 million newly registered voters, 7.28 million, or 76 percent, were young people aged 18-34 (Prenuim, 2023). The 2023 Nigerian presidential elections generated considerable attention, with a significant social media presence and buzz. This awakening of change among Nigerian youth served as an avenue for opinion leaders to actively share political content to inspire their social circle to engage in civic duties, which emerged from the give-and-take of knowledge in ordinary personal connections (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964).

This project seeks to identify young online opinion leaders in election discourse, analyzing their messages to understand their impact on political engagement, offering insights for enhancing civic participation. Through in-depth interviews and meticulous analysis, the project will uncover the political motivations driving the youth's involvement in online
discourse. Ultimately, the results will contribute valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and civic organizations, enabling them to formulate targeted strategies that resonate with and mobilize the younger demographic, thereby fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this segment, I delve into the realm of online political participation among younger generations. The exploration encompasses Twitter's evolution into a prominent platform for political interactions, the expression of online identities, and its role in facilitating political studies. Analyzing these interactions and engagements, communication frameworks such as the two-step flow/opinion leadership and the Uses and Gratifications framework serve as invaluable lenses. They aid in comprehending the flow of communication messages within an online setting and discerning the motivations underlying these engagements, particularly within the political context.

Online Political Participation Among Younger Generations

Social media platforms have evolved as a prominent online medium for civic-related activities, as evidenced by social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #EndPoliceBrutality in Nigeria (Hong & Kim, 2021) and the Arab Spring revolution (Maamari & Zein, 2014). Social media sites like Twitter have become a more integral component of daily communication, social interaction, and news consumption (Burgess & Bruns, 2012), as well as a pervasive tool in election campaigns where candidates, parties, journalists, and a steadily increasing share of the public are using Twitter to comment on, interact around, and research public reactions to politics (Jungherr, 2016). An example of this could be seen in how social media played a definite role in the Arab Spring revolutions by assisting in the assembly, execution, and global visibility of issues in the Middle East (Maamari & Zein, 2014).
The internet is considered essential in current politics (Mustapha & Omar, 2020), which begs whether the internet inspires new types of political activity among youth. A stream of research makes the argument that despite the high consumption of political content among youth, it is frequently viewed as a partial solution to the loss of youth participation in political and civic life, and this has manifested itself in low levels of electoral turnout, abysmally low levels of party membership (Martin, 2012; Sloam, 2016). Scholars have pointed out that low political participation can be attributed to limited political knowledge. Even with the high content from opinion leaders about political campaign messages, Piatak and Mikkelsen (2021) claimed that offline engagement is declining despite the engagement with online political content from opinion leaders. This means that many people only have a basic understanding of politics and often choose not to engage because they have little interest in it and may not consider voting as both a right and a moral responsibility (Blais et al., 2004; Mindich, 2005). Henn et al. (2005) found that young people in the United Kingdom are a generation apart regarding political attitudes and participation rates. Youth involvement in politics is critical for democratic societies to work properly, for political campaigns to be effective, and for anticipating future societal changes. It highlights the importance of policies and activities that involve and empower young individuals in the democratic process.

Despite these arguments, many studies emphasize the benefits of young participation in online political activities (Levenshus, 2010; Wahab, 2021). This boom in online political activity is open to more than just local communities; it has also gained popularity among persons outside of these areas. Understanding the causes and results of online activism is critical, as it is becoming increasingly clear that online and offline forms of political engagement are inextricably linked (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Other research shows that certain forms of online
participation from the younger generations are effective and provide accountability from the political office holders or the government. For example, Levenshus’ (2020) work showed how the internet (i.e. social media) helped specific political fundraising movements like "Yes We Can" by Barack Obama during his 2008 United States presidential campaign can increase and influence the youth both online and offline. Furthermore, Boulianne & Theocharis (2020) claims a relationship between political use of digital media and offline political activity among young adults. Another study by Valenzuela (2013) in Chile, found that frequent social media played a role in offline protest behaviors such as attending public rallies and political forums and signing petitions.

A Platform for Political Engagement Study

Amongst all social media platforms, Twitter remains one of the key platforms in exploring the political motivations during political communication and understanding political involvement. Bossetta (2018) elucidates the reasons why platforms such as Twitter continue to serve as arenas for political engagement, through their functionality and data utilization. Functionality entails how the platform is built i.e. how content is mediated, accessed, and distributed across the platform, which ultimately influences human behavior with an interplay to how the users engage within the platform. Therefore, shaping how political actors share their political views extensively on the platform. For example, the political candidates vying for Nigeria’s 2023 presidential position during the election window, used the platform to engage with the public on a regular basis thus making them active. Just with a random search on the platform, records show that Peter Obi has a total of 4.2 million followers, Bola Ahmed Tinubu has a following of 2.3 million while Atiku Abubakar has a following of 5.1 million followers.
Also, the functionality of the platform allows the Nigerian youths to engage with political accounts on social media in a one-way fashion post without requiring approval.

Datafication coined by Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier (2013) refers to the quantification of user activity on a social media site. This relates to how researchers or even political campaigns can monitor and collect users’ digital traces or analytics that help inform future strategies. Twitter functions as a microblogging network of real-time posts from individuals, interest groups of all types, and even traditional media news institutions, regardless of communication limitations (Pelletier et al., 2020). For this reason, it promotes greater levels of not only social usage intentions, and a satisfactory amount of information to fulfill informational usage intentions, while not overwhelming the user. For example, one-third of tweets from U.S. adults are political where ages 50 and older produce 78% of all political tweets from the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2022). By default, Twitter's connectivity is unidirectional, meaning users aren't required to confirm connections. This structural aspect encourages users to form networks primarily consisting of ties that may lack real-life connections (Pelletier et al., 2020).

From a political actor point of view, Stier et al. (2018) claims that most political campaigns use Twitter to target the most active users, as well as political elites and influential figures just like journalists because they see Twitter as more valuable for news reporting.

**Social Media & Identity Politics**

Twitter allows users to have access to unlimited amounts of information and be content creators, thus making identity at the convergence of how a person perceives oneself and how the society perceives the individual, formulating it as significant because it marks a step beyond simple attitudes or behaviors (Rogers & Jones, 2021). The term identity politics has primarily been used to characterize political engagement by various minority groups seeking to combat
prejudice and participate in the political process. For example, it has been used to describe these separatist movements in Canada and Spain, as well as violent ethnic and nationalist conflicts in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe (Noury & Roland, 2020). In this vein, the daily activities and an individual's understanding of themselves are imbued with political significance i.e. every aspect of ordinary life and personal identity are connected to, influenced by, or involved in political processes or ideologies, with a foundation of collective action involves a shared sense of unity and connection (Haenfler et al., 2012).

Twitter as a platform, has provided a global stage for individuals to amplify their voices, allowing marginalized or underrepresented groups to express their identities and perspective through the use of hashtags, identity-based narratives as seen in studies like (Bennett, 2012; Elmadagli & Machin, 2023; Uwazuruike, 2020). Personalization also fuels identity-based politics which is on the rise rapidly forming political participation. The rise of individualized political engagement shows a shifting landscape in which individuals have an increasingly important role in forming and expressing their political identities and preferences (Bennett, 2012). Users are more likely to engage with and share content that resonates with their identity, contributing to the reinforcement and polarization of identity-based political beliefs. With the help of algorithms, content is now tailored based on users’ preferences and interest creating echo chambers where individuals are exposed to information that aligns with their identity (Bossetta, 2018). This now translates to community building where the platform enables and facilitates the creation and strengthening of online communities based on shared identities either via the list or communities features on Twitter. In today’s world, users often derive their identity and meaning from online sources (Praet et al., 2022) and participation is the fuel to people sharing their own tales and concerns (Bennett, 2012).
Two-step Flow and Opinion Leadership

The news environment and news consumption habits are rapidly changing. The traditional news cycle, once dominated by journalists, is now evolving into a complex information cycle that includes regular people (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018), and these networks have provided several opportunities to voice ideas on politics and current affairs and to transmit information to a vast circle of friends. The opportunity to influence information among friends or peers, as outlined by Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) led to the establishment of the two-step flow theory. This theory elucidates how information initially passes from the media to opinion leaders before reaching the wider public. They recognized the importance of a few highly connected opinion leaders in the flow of information from mass media to individuals. According to the scholars, the actual information delivered as news and the interpretation of the news by influencers both impact mass media audiences. This assists in advancing the purpose of media beyond merely creating and disseminating information or entertainment to influence the public toward specific types of social objectives.

The term "opinion leaders" originally meant people who were likely to have an impact on others in their immediate environment (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964). These opinion leaders generate fresh data, ideas, and viewpoints before sharing them with the public. Few people were discovered to be more turned into mass media messages linked to their specific areas of interest or competence. These people received more confidence from their colleagues and were sought out for advice and information. By absorbing the most representative views in society, they frequently rise to the status of an influential node (Park, 2013). They have more significant influence over friends, coworkers, and family's decision-making and behavior through word of
mouth than the media. The flow underlines the need for human interactions in getting through various barriers to mass media's direct access to consumers (Alexandre et al., 2022).

Furthermore, some scholars have expanded on the initial idea of a two-step flow in the ensuing decades by highlighting the possibility of a multistep flow. For example (Park, 2013) argued that opinion leaders on some SNS like Twitter are more likely to be involved in a "multistep flow process," as opposed to the original "two-step flow process," because well-connected individuals play a significant role in creating and distributing information through a multi-step flow than those with less association. The multi-step flow depicts that communicated messages to the public are through complex interactions. These complex interactions or communication procedures might be direct or indirect. For example, within this broad audience, some individuals receive messages directly from mass media channels, while others acquire them through alternative sources or channels like opinion leaders, often through second, third, or subsequent intermediaries. In other words, it proposes a multi-step process in which opinion leaders are not the endpoint but rather intermediaries in the dissemination of information.

Scholars like Hilbert et al., (2017) also analyzed the nature of communication flows during social conflicts via the digital platform like Twitter, and supported that model stating that communication flow across digital platforms supports all the different steps of communication flow which is dependent from the several angles the flow is examined. Also, in the strategic communication field, Wright and Hinsonn (2010) report that public relations professionals have noted that the ascent of the social web has prompted increased endeavors to engage with opinion leaders who are active users of social media platforms. Despite both flows of communication, there have been some gaps in the theory identified by different scholars especially within the context of the two-step flow. For example, Bennett and Manhein (2006) disputed the existence of
interpersonal influence on the information flow in the two-flow models. They argued that social and technological advancements like social isolation, individualized media consumption, and narrowcasting technologies have made it possible for people to hear messages from the media directly and have diminished the importance of opinion leaders. Another scholar (Gitlin, 1978) criticized the model for the role it plays in legitimizing the elites who set agendas by using the two-step flow theory. More criticism of the two-step flow model and its understanding of the function of opinion leaders focuses on how these models ignore the reality of numerous steps and their neglect of the directions of information flows. For example, Weimann (1994) believed that there is a need to distinguish between the flow of knowledge and the flow of influence, which calls for significant changes to these models.

However, several studies found that opinion leaders are politically aware and active (Kelly, 2001), have the expertise and strategic social positioning (Katz, 1957), and frequently display a higher level of participation in societal or political issues (Park, 2013). They tend to develop and recommend specific agendas to influence how their fellow citizens react to political situations. Unlike previous traditional political debate forums, social ties can be mediated by SNSs in the new media environment, and the public can not only receive but also generate content such as photographs or video clips. Those who are most capable of eliciting contributions to the discussion from others play a distinctive social function as the topic introducers because of their ability to inspire other people's conversations (Himelboim et al., 2009). Opinion leaders with more knowledge resources may be more involved in content creation than non-opinion leaders.

Furthermore, because opinion leaders are seen as people positioned at the strategic location of the network into which important information and resources flow, their views are
more likely to garner attention (Choi, 2015). Due to this, researchers have investigated the impact of online political discussion on political involvement and political knowledge (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Cho et al., 2009; Eveland Jr, 2001). However, regarding content distribution on social media platforms, young adults quickly identify opinion leaders on the various SNSs. Studies like Choi (2015) established that opinion leaders have social power by having their messages propagated by others i.e. their content were regularly retweeted and their social influence was aided by technology affordance, giving them increased power in shaping and informing public opinion.

Online political users have a positive attitude toward these people and even regard them as necessary for keeping up with the news (Karlsen, 2015). Weeks et al., (2015, p. 216) term individuals who are heavily involved in social media and use the various tools available on these sites as "prosumers." They believe they are far more likely to try to persuade others to vote a specific way or influence others' thoughts about political issues or candidates. This points to the fact that when young people choose what to read in their SNS feed, the source and the topic are both of great importance (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). To examine online political participation among younger generations and two-step/multi-step flow - opinion leadership, this discussion informs the following research questions below,

RQ1: (a) Who are the opinion leaders within the conversation around the Nigerian presidential election, (b) and to what generational cohort do they belong?

RQ2: What content are these opinion leaders creating and sharing?
Uses & Gratifications in Social Media Scholarship

According to Katz et al., (1973), researchers defined the uses and gratification framework as a method of figuring out why and how people actively seek out and use particular media to meet certain goals. An approach was created early in the history of communication research to examine the pleasures that draw audiences to certain media and the sorts of material that meet their social and psychological needs (Cantril, 1941). The uses and gratifications approach, in particular according to McLeod and Becker (1981) makes the following assumptions: (a) that the audience is engaged; (b) that media use is goal-directed; (c) that media consumption can meet a variety of needs; (d) that people are self-aware enough to understand and articulate the reasons they use the media; and (e) that gratifications originate in media content, exposure, and the social context in which the exposure occurs. Also, Herzog (1942) utilized the term "gratification" to define kinds or dimensions of enjoyment that listeners to daytime radio programs reported feeling. The uses and gratifications framework is crucial for understanding social media because it emphasizes how people deliberately seek out media to satisfy their needs and desires. This framework helps to explain why people utilize different platforms, what they want to gain from their interactions, and how they use these platforms to meet certain requirements.

Although the uses and gratifications approach has typically been used to study the traditional mass media in general including the use of entertainment media, the theory is relevant to studying new communication technologies like social media platforms due to the advent of the internet. While traditional media consumers may fulfill their television needs by simply turning on the set and using the remote control, online technologies, such as social media platforms, email, and chat rooms, require active participation from users. Like this, users actively seek out information on the web by clicking links or using search engines, indicating that web use is
purpose-driven and that users are aware of the needs they are trying to satiate (Lin & Jeffres, 1998). These social enabled platforms have created mediums in which a higher level of interactivity from users is required (Ruggiero, 2000). Therefore, due to the wide range of material available on the Internet, those who use any of its functions should be able to fulfill a variety of needs (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). The UGT's fundamental premise—that users actively participate in media consumption—has made the theory more pertinent to research on media platforms that provide consumer choice and engagement, like social media.

Prior research has investigated the psychological and behavioral characteristics of internet users to establish a set of fundamentally consistent factors for internet consumption reasons. For example, research by Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) discovered that elements such as social escapism, transactional security and privacy, information, interactive control, socialization, nontransactional privacy, and economic motivation were factors that determined internet users’ motivations. In other words, the study proposed that people use the internet for amusement and escape in addition to searching for information. Furthermore, Boyle and Johnson (2010) have also discovered that one reason why people use social media is to portray themselves online, create and manage their social networks, and maintain relationships. Scholars like Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) also created a scale of reasons why people use the internet, which includes five main reasons: social usefulness, hobbies, information seeking, convenience, and enjoyment. Overall, the uses and fulfillment hypothesis has been very useful in understanding the needs and motives behind internet use.

Despite the lack of scholarship exploring a link between internet gratification and political attitudes, several researchers have examined the extent to which the internet is linked to political attitudes (Kipkoech, 2023; Matthes, 2022). Also, not only have scholars explored the
motivations from the user’s point of view, but few studies have also uncovered the motivations of politicians using social media platforms for their campaigns. From the user perspectives, scholars have found evidence in many ways, stating that internet users are model citizens, who express high levels of self-efficacy, the conviction that one can influence political figures and the government (Bonchek, 1997). These makes them extremely politically interested and rely on the internet because it provides individuals a forum to voice their views to government officials and like-minded individuals (Kaye & Johnson, 2002) and are more likely to vote (Hill & Hughes, 1998). Recently, researchers like (Abid & Harrigan, 2020; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Macafee, 2013) have looked into the rewards associated with a variety of online political behaviors like subscribing to political party e-newsletters, consuming political news on social media, reading political blogs, visiting candidates' social media accounts, etc. For example, Kaye and Johnson (2002) found that individuals' guidance was the main reason for using the web channel for how to vote and still trust web-based political information enough to rely on it for political advice. Also, this same study gives insight that participants in enabled chat rooms actively engage in political discourse, often develop ties with other chatters, and often rely on the information they receive from their online pals.

Furthermore, Kasirye (2021) exploring the political motivations using youths in Uganda has a case study, claims that strengthening interpersonal relationships with peers, freely debating politics, engaging with political parties, and learning about the politics of various political parties, are the identified reasons why youths value social media use in politics. In addition, Kim et al., (2021) uncovered three primary incentives for sharing political information on social networks during elections-socialization, informing and criticism. Also, Abid and Harrigan (2020) discovered knowledge, social interaction, and entertainment, as well as some evidence for needs
related to instrumental (guiding) and self-discovery where some of the uses and gratification for online political users. Kim and Johnson (2012) claim the need for entertainment and relaxation are some of the uses and gratification while Macafee (2013) claims self-expression is another motivation that drives political use of social media. Using Malaysia as a case study, Alivi (2023) indicates a link between online news and voter choice is apparent. Aside from information seeking, the findings show that guidance, social utility, and personal fulfillment, are gratification incentives users use online news to have an impact on voter choice. Furthermore, with the advent of live streaming on most social platforms, Yu et al., (2023) suggests utilizing such livestream features, encouraging individuals to become more politically aware, engaged that are related to political persuasion.

Despite the numerous motivations derived from using social media in a political setting, Matthes et al., (2023) claims the more users see entertainment-oriented content on social media, the less inclined they are to participate in time-consuming and effort-intensive activities. Such a distraction effect may emerge when entertainment-oriented information influences the relevance assessment of political content. As a result, high-effort forms of politics, such as participation, become less effective over time. Additionally, studies from (Johnson & Kaye, 1998) claims that these users who are politically active do not necessarily express confidence in the government to carry out policies therefore having high levels of political distrust. Furthermore, despite a high political self-efficacy, Abid & Harrigan (2020) reveals that major political entities are not offering young voters the interactions that they value, considering that young voters are disengaged, an unreliable segment, and less likely to participate in elections as buttressed by Mustapha & Omar (2020) revealing that the youths are more active in online political participation than offline politics. Moreover, despite the assistance provided by livestreaming
features in enhancing political awareness, Yu et al. (2023) argues that there is no notable correlation between communication visibility and political mindfulness i.e. awareness, attention, and understanding individuals have regarding political issues, events, and processes. In simpler terms, being more visible or prominent in communication does not necessarily result in increased political awareness or mindfulness probably due to information overload on such platforms. According to Mochla et al. (2023), audience segmentation is critical because it's challenging to comprehend the motives of a broad group of people on the platform. Delving deeper into segment profiles reveals variations influenced by individuals’ overall attitudes towards their consumption behaviors.

Since the U&G framework is exploratory rather than established that stems from participant communication and interaction, Pelletier et al., (2020) have argued that while a detailed analysis of a single-platform research provides valuable insights into consumer involvement on a certain platform, the data cannot be generalized across all social media platforms. Hence, the main aim of employing the uses and gratifications framework is to investigate the level of political interest among users utilizing this online forum for political information and to discern their underlying motivations. In view of the foregoing, I propose the following research question:

RQ3: How do social media users engage in the political discussion around the 2023 Nigerian election?
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This project employs a three-phased unique approach utilizing complementary methodological techniques to address the research questions given above: 1) Social network analysis helped to identify the opinion leaders in the conversation around the 2023 Nigeria presidential election, 2) thematic analysis to discover, organize, and provide insight into meaning patterns (contents) from the opinion leaders data set i.e. election conversations on Twitter and 3) in-depth interviews to better understand the ways in which Nigerian youth participated in online conversation around the presidential election on Twitter.

Data Collection

To identify the opinion leaders during the election, I chose Twitter as the social channel because it has become a more integral component of daily communication, social interaction, and news consumption for people worldwide (Burgess & Bruns, 2012). The platform has also become a pervasive tool in election campaigns as candidates, parties, and journalists, and a steadily increasing share of the public use Twitter to comment on, interact with, and research public reactions to politics (Jungherr, 2016). With its large and youthful population, Nigeria has seen a significant portion of its citizens, especially younger people, actively participating in political discussions on Twitter. According to data from (Kemp, 2024), Twitter had 5.75 million users in Nigeria as of early 2024.

Data for analysis were collected using Sprinklr, an online monitoring tool to harvest publicly available tweets containing the hashtag #NigeriaDecides2023 from February 11 to March 15. This was deliberate to explore the major conversation two weeks before and two weeks immediately following the election, which was held on the 25th of February 2023. A total
of 5,879 unique tweets from users with identifiable ages were collected that contained the hashtag #NigeriaDecides2023. Out of the total tweets, 78% (n=4,588) of the tweets analyzed came from millennials, and retweets were excluded from the data collection.

**Phase One: Social Network Analysis**

Social network analysis (SNA) investigates social systems using networks and graph theory. It defines networked systems as nodes (individual actors, persons, or things within the network) and the ties, edges, or links (relationships or interactions) that connect them. Social network maps depict social areas by highlighting subgroups and individuals who hold important positions within the network (Hansen, 2011). In simple terms, SNA analyzes connections and interactions between individuals, groups, or organizations to understand patterns of communication, collaboration, influence, and information flow.

The concept of social embeddedness reflects an opinion leader's strategic social placement, as defined by (Katz, 1957). This research aims to identify prominent users in the Twitter debate around Nigeria's presidential elections. Once the data for the time frame were collected, an adjacency list was used to represent relationships or connections between entities or nodes within the network. The adjacency list specifically describes which sources are connected to which targets. To perform SNA on each timeline, the spreadsheet tables were imported into Gephi, an open-source social network analysis tool. Constructed networks were directed (connections had a known origin and destination) and weighted (connection frequency was indicated).

Over time, network researchers have developed numerous centrality indices to gauge the diverse significance of vertices within a network. These measures have proven invaluable in analyzing and comprehending the roles enacted by actors in social networks, as well as by
vertices in networks spanning various domains, such as citation networks, computer networks, and biological networks. To address RQ1, SNA was utilized to assess the extent to which significant users accounted for the total network in online discussions about the presidential elections using an betweenness centrality and the brokering aspect to examine how information flows across the network through influential users. In social network analysis, betweenness centrality is a metric used to evaluate a node's significance or centrality inside a network. It measures the degree to which a node is located on the network's shortest pathways connecting other nodes. High betweenness centrality nodes serve as intermediates or bridges between various network segments. They are essential to the network's ability to communicate, disseminate information, and move resources. Understanding the structure of the network, identifying important influencers, and forecasting the diffusion of information or influence within the network all depend on the identification of nodes with high betweenness centrality. Betweenness centrality measures the extent to which a vertex lies on the shortest paths between pairs of other vertices (Kannan et al., 2014).

It's essential for any company to pinpoint individuals who act as brokers or bridges, facilitating the flow of news, information, perspectives, rumors, or falsehoods across the primary channels of a social network. Thus, the concept of brokering is frequently captured in the betweenness centrality metric (Hansen, 2011). Nodes with high betweenness centrality may significantly influence a network due to their control over information. Any account with a betweenness centrality score greater than zero has influenced the flow of information inside the network to some extent. Most users, on the other hand, have a betweenness centrality of 0 since they rarely act as information brokers (Boatwright, 2022). From the analyzed data set, results showed that 4,347 users in the network did have a betweenness centrality score of 0, meaning
users with a betweenness greater than 0 (21 users) account for less than .005% of the overall conversation (i.e., a very small group of users in this network were controlling the flow of information).

Phase Two: Thematic Analysis of Social Media Content from Opinion Leaders

To address RQ2, by examining what kind of content these identified opinion leaders in Table 1 were creating and sharing, I used thematic analysis to discover, organize, and provide insight into their disseminated messages to help provide themes from the data set. I specifically followed Braun and Clarke’s six-step guide for conducting thematic analysis for this process. I started with the first level by familiarizing myself with the data set, (i.e., immersing myself in the data by reading and rereading tweets the opinion leaders sent during the selected timeframe. The goal of this phase was to become intimately familiar with the content of my data set and to start noticing things that may be relevant to the research question. First step was to generate initial codes that are important to the research question. As I moved from codes to themes, my analysis began to take shape, searching for themes within my data set that capture something important about the data in relation to the research question. I reviewed the themes and defined the themes to produce an extensive report.

Phase Three: In-depth Interviews

To address Research Question 3 (RQ3) and gain a nuanced understanding of the diverse motivations of active social media users during the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections, I chose to employ in-depth interviews as a qualitative research method. Interviews are a structured form of question-and-answer sessions or an exchange of viewpoints between two individuals discussing a subject of mutual interest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this research project, qualitative interviews will be conducted with Nigerian youths who are active Twitter users and
actively participated in the presidential elections. The selection of the interviewees was
deliberate, where I focused on individuals within the ages of 18 to 35 i.e. Generation Z,
Millennials due to the purpose of the study. For a participant to be interviewed, they must have
voted during the elections, follow any of the presidential candidates Twitter accounts, and
engaged directly with other social peers within the platform to discuss the 2023 elections.
Participants were chosen using a purposive sampling method, ensuring that the data collected
aligns purposefully with the parameters of the research question. This sample selection provides
a valuable opportunity to examine the uses and gratifications theory within the context of
political campaigns on social media.

The choice of a qualitative approach for this phase is grounded in several epistemological
arguments. A qualitative technique is best suited since it can provide in-depth insight. By diving
depth into users' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors, qualitative approaches reveal the
complexities of participants' interaction. Firstly, interviews offer an organic, adaptive, and
intellectually stimulating approach to research (Tracy, 2019). Through interviews, participants
have the opportunity for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation, allowing
for a richer exploration of their subjectively held experiences, opinions, and motivations during
the presidential elections. Secondly, qualitative interviews prioritize allowing participants to
express their thoughts and beliefs in their own words and on their own terms (Avis, 2005). This
approach empowers participants to convey their perspectives authentically. Thirdly, qualitative
research relies on extensive interaction with the participants under study, enabling a thorough
exploration of the meanings they attach to their experiences and a holistic view of the social
world from the participants' standpoint.
Data Collection

The research engaged with a diverse group of 10 active Twitter users who actively participated in the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections. These participants were chosen through purposive sampling from various geographical regions across Nigeria, irrespective of their preferred political candidates. The intention was to capture a wide spectrum of perspectives and experiences related to social media engagement during the elections. Before conducting the interviews, participants received direct messages on Twitter, providing them with comprehensive information about the research study's objectives and the nature of their involvement. To ensure that the research adhered to ethical guidelines and standards, formal approval was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Given the potential dispersion of participants across Nigeria, interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times, considering the researcher and participants' availability. Also, to overcome geographical distances and time disparities, Zoom, a teleconferencing software, was used to facilitate the interviews effectively.

The interview sessions were semi-structured and open-ended in nature. Participants were encouraged to express their motivations, experiences, and perspectives regarding their use of social media, especially Twitter during the 2023 presidential elections. This approach provided an in-depth exploration of their engagement and its implications. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, these pseudonyms will be employed to ensure anonymity and data security. This measure is vital to guarantee the safety and privacy of participants. The interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' consent, to ensure the accuracy of data collection. Subsequently, the collected data was transcribed and analyzed thematically. This
analysis involved identifying common patterns and themes related to social media use during the elections.

**Thematic Analysis of Interviews**

I used thematic analysis to find, arrange, and provide insight into their distributed messages to address RQ3 by looking at the data set from the in-depth interviews. This helped provide themes from the data set. For this approach, I once again adhered to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis methodology. Following data collection and transcription, I read and reviewed each transcript, beginning with an initial inductive open coding process to identify codes and concepts. As more interviews were conducted, each was compared to the previous interview through a constant comparative method that identified similarities and differences in participant responses. This project engaged with 10 participants who were actively involved in political discourse. Data collection will continue until saturation is achieved, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of diverse perspectives. Once saturation is reached, the next steps involve transcription and thematic analysis, aligning with Braun and Clarke's six-step guide. This process ensures that the analysis reflects the entirety of the gathered information. By adhering to this systematic approach, the final output will unveil major themes derived from in-depth interviews, providing a nuanced understanding of the political landscape as voiced by the participants.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Identifying Opinion Leaders

RQ1 intended to determine the extent to which online opinion leaders comprise the overall network structure in the Twitter debate surrounding the Nigeria presidential elections in 2023 and the cohort to which they belong. Using betweenness centrality to estimate the importance or influence of a node within a network based on its position in connecting other nodes, it calculates the extent to which a node exists on the shortest pathways between pairs of other nodes in the network. A betweenness centrality score of zero signifies minimal influence or connectivity in the network, while scores greater than zero indicate increasing levels of influence, with higher scores suggesting more significant roles as intermediaries or bridges between other nodes. In this context, the betweenness centrality values signify the extent to which certain Twitter users act as intermediaries or bridges between other users within the network discussing the Nigeria presidential elections in 2023. The calculation of betweenness centrality scores for each user during the election timeframes helps to identify individuals who play a significant role in facilitating the flow of information or opinions within the network.

Betweenness centrality values were calculated for each user within the election timeframes. In all, 0.48% (n = 21) of the 4,368 users in the network had betweenness centrality scores greater than zero during the two-week timeframe. The total number of online opinion leaders identified by betweenness centrality values accounted for less than one percent of the total number of users in the networks shown in Table 1. This means that a small subset of users holds a relatively high level of influence in connecting other users within the network. It was evident within the data that several accounts with high betweenness centrality values were more
of the news/media channels with a good online presence, and one user no longer existed or had been suspended for violating Twitter’s terms of use. In addition, the data also showed that millennials were the opinion leaders during this presidential election. Results from the data showed that these sets of individuals are politically aware, active, and have the status of an influential node.

**Table 1**

*Opinion Leader Profile and Age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Handle</th>
<th>Betweenness centrality</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Bio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 catrionalaing1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 xtopherewesi</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Senior Writer, Photographer &amp; Community manager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 akomscopy</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 itssonjosh</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Account Suspended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 ibksports</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Award Winning Football Podcaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 aborisadeadeto1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>MEL Officer at Wikimedia User Group Nigeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 ayomairoese</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Arise TV Anchor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 albertjireh</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 wakajugbe</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Social Media Influencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 chiomakpotha</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 omonioboli</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Award Winning Actress &amp; Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 _justicebringer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 mrafobaje</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Strategic Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 ebklegacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Former President of Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advocacy and Calls to Action. One major theme from the thematic analysis was advocacy and calls to action for voter turnout and accessibility. This theme explains how online opinion leaders used Twitter to persuade individuals to promote advocacy and mobilization among their online audience and served as an element of election monitoring and transparency. Some tweets also emphasize the contributions of organizations and individuals to election integrity. This was emphasized via a series of sample tweets from @omoboli, “Power to the people. It is the people’s mandate or nothing #NigeriaDecides2023,” from @Saamu_Eleja, "Successfully cast my vote in Akure for @PeterObi, and I hope & pray he emerges!!! #NigeriaDecides2023. Tweets from opinion leaders like Ayomairose state, “Please exercise patience. Though late in some areas, @inecnigeria officials are arriving at Polling Units across the nation” and “@inecnigeria Chairman addresses concerns in Abia and Imo state. Assures Nigerians, as long as you are in the queue before 2:30 pm, you will vote no matter how late.”. Another tweet from this same user says, “Enugu South still waiting for @inecnigeria. It is now 21/2hrs to go to the end of the voting exercise” and "Materials are being deployed. Please be patient. You have come this far, you will vote. #NigeriaDecides." Also, Ebklegacy and CatrionaLaigng1 tweeted, “Nigerians have voted for their new leaders, as we await the official result from @inecnigeria, @ecowas_cedeao implores everyone to remain calm & peaceful. #NigeriaDecides #democracy”, “Great to witness Nigeria’s Presidential Aspirants sign the Peace
Accord for Nigeria’s elections. Strong commitments to conduct the election peacefully and to respect the results. #NigeriaDecides2023 @UKinNigeria”,

**Commentary and Opinions.** Some tweets feature election-related commentary, opinions, and personal observations. These tweets from the opinion leader contain their thoughts and opinions. This theme was more personalized, expressing their interest or support for their different political candidates. We could see this emanate from @JeminaOsunde's tweet, “Just had my first meal right at my polling station! My sis @taradurotuye brought me starch and bang soup since I refused to leave my Polling Unit #NigeriaDecides2023”. Also, @AborisadeAdeto1 tweeted #NigeriaDecides2023 My volunteer role is related to the Domestic observer's network, from @bashirAhmaad, "Security during these national elections has significantly improved around the country... #NigeriaDecides", from CatrionaLaing1, “Good to speak to media at GSS Tunduwada Wuse Zone 4 Abuja polling station just now “I told @channelstv, @AITTV, and @tvnewsng how well I thought #NGElections2023 were going so far despite some delayed starts and called for a continued peaceful #NigeriaDecides2023 day today” and “Good to visit polling units across Abuja this morning with some of my @UKinNigeria team. Good to see democracy in action in #Nigeria today. I am seeing a busy but peaceful and orderly process so far”. Akomscopy tweeted, "My week began with the Yoruba Nollywood stars, mobilization for @officialABAT around Isolo local govt. Peter Obi, the leading Nollywood actor in the election season, was missing in action."

**Real-Time Election Updates.** Real-time information or updates was another theme that emerged from the data analysis. Undoubtedly, one of the unique attributes of socially enabled platforms like Twitter is an avenue to disseminate real-time updates about events. Several tweets from the opinion leaders act as news updates or reports on the ongoing Nigerian elections,
offering information mostly about the security measures and election-related events. Tweets about election events, the arrival of INEC officials, and voting updates in various places are examples of news updates. For example, tweets from Jemima: “Largest polling unit in Eti-Osa, and they brought only 2 BVAS for us. It’s 12:16 pm, I’m number 88, there are at least 2 thousand people here, and I have not been called up yet.” or from Akom who tweeted “UPDATE!!! “Anyone on the queue by 2:30 pm will vote” - @inecnigeria #NigeriaElections2023 #NigeriaDecides were tweets that expressed vote turnout and accessibility. Also, real-time updates are shown below about voter security during the elections from opinion leaders like Ayomairose, BashirAhmaad - "Deploy soldiers to streets of Lagos... Unrest reported in parts of the city... #NigeriaDecides2023", "Military now on the ground at Ikate Elegushi... #Nigeriadecides2023", "Security during these national elections has significantly improved around the country... #NigeriaDecides". Also, from MrAfobaje he tweeted, "The Nigerian troops of Operation Hadin Kai have successfully repelled a midnight attack on Mafa LGA, Borno."

Results from Participant Interviews

RQ3 to explore how Nigerian youth used Twitter to engage in political discussion. In the end, three prominent themes and accompanying themes were identified through analysis of participants interviews: (1) Political Enlightenment and Evaluation- candidates manifesto/past achievements, assimilating political views, proposed policies, choice reinforcement, (2) Civic Engagement-voting mobilization, political affiliations, standard of living and experiences and, (3) Activism and transparency. Each theme will be discussed sequentially in the following sections.
Table 2

Theme Descriptions, Initial Codes, and Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Enlightenment/Evaluation     | Election promises                      | Involves how Twitter users engage to remain informed about political updates, delve into candidates' platforms, and assess the suitability of potential presidential candidates. | - “It was about people’s opinions, examining the political track records of the political candidates and how their policies in the past have influenced the people.”
|                              | Candidates Manifesto                   |                                                                            | - During this period, I was looking out for this aspirant opinion on some of Nigeria’s major issues that we have.” |
|                              | Staying informed/updates               |                                                                            |                                                                          |
|                              | Contents on opinions/threads           |                                                                            |                                                                          |
|                              | Achievements                           |                                                                            |                                                                          |
|                              | Economic reforms                       |                                                                            |                                                                          |
| Civic Engagement             | Personal views                         | Highlights how participants utilized Twitter to express personal political perspectives, advocate for improved living standards, and actively engage in mobilization endeavors. | - “I used the platform to influence people to go and vote in my community. If we do not act and mobilize people, our situation is going to get worse.”
|                              | Political party affiliation            |                                                                            | - I was more concerned about the future if we don’t start addressing the real issues now.” |
|                              | Voting Accreditation                   |                                                                            | - I was actively trying to convince people to pick up their PVCs to ensure that we vote in mass.” |
|                              | Standard of living                     |                                                                            |                                                                          |
|                              | Third force candidate                  |                                                                            |                                                                          |
| Activism                     | Accountability                         | Illustrates how participants have maintained their engagement on the platform post-election, utilizing it as a space to voice opinions on the current administration and hold political leaders accountable for their actions | - I have made it a point of duty as much possible to continue to play my part in ensuring to hold our government accountable” |
|                              | Constructive criticism                 |                                                                            |                                                                          |
|                              | Transparency                           |                                                                            |                                                                          |

**Enlightenment and Evaluation.** Participants often cited during the interview sessions that one of the major reasons why they engaged with political discussion on social media was to increase their political knowledge by staying current with the latest updates and through online political discussions. It was an avenue to express their personal opinions on issues surrounding the political atmosphere and even the presidential candidates. For example, the discussions around the candidates manifesto, how each candidate declared their proposed policy, economic reforms etc. In addition, for some participants, it was a way of creating a personal intimacy by knowing more about the candidate’s individual personality and not political party as well as
candidates past achievements. While some participants engaged actively during this political atmosphere, some also noted that their engagement on Twitter was more passive.

Furthermore, due to the collaborative aspect of social media, several participants stated that threads or opinion-based content were particularly interesting. These were posts or tweets that included related debates or provided personal ideas and facts regarding political perspectives on current events, keeping them engaged and informed. Tosin for one, admitted that “I was looking out for all the aspirant manifesto on some of Nigeria’s major issues that the country is currently faces. After critically examining their manifestos, I started disseminating a lot of content of my favorite candidate campaign promises, to influence people’s voting decisions”. Halima stated “Twitter Spaces and Instagram live made me to be aware of people’s opinions and views on Nigerian politics. These platforms became a discussion forum where different updates were disseminated. For me it was more about knowing each candidate strengths and weaknesses. Also, one motive for me was to know the presidential candidates past records and achievements.” Also, another participant, Dolly explained that because her immediate circle was more aligned to a candidate, she needed to use social media to stay abreast of other candidates and have a neutral view about the candidates. In her words:

My current social circle like my friends and business partners were all aligned to one presidential candidate; therefore, it made it easier for me to know what’s up about this particular candidate. However, I did not want to be influenced by my social circle, and the only way to avoid this was to stay updated with other political candidate through social media. For me, I wanted to know the candidates as a person and not as a political candidate. To be honest, I took personality of the candidates more seriously.
However, aside from the youths using SM to stay updated, the analysis also showed that this gratification aligned with the candidate’s evaluation. The main objective noted in the analysis from the participants was either to decide who to vote for or to reinforce their choice of candidate. For example, according to Tito, she stated:

_I admire the political buzz that happened during the election period, seeing youths sharing their voices on Twitter platforms; however, for me personally, with the help of credible news channels, I used them as a means to back up my choice of a candidate to determine if I am making the right choice. Messages from the social media engagements helped me to strengthen my choice of candidate. I already had my candidate, but messages from largely followed influencers on the Twitter platform just reinforced my candidate._

**Civic Engagement.** Civic engagement was the second significant theme identified from the analysis of interview responses. This theme entails participants leveraging social media platforms to actively promote political participation among young people actively, focusing on encouraging them to address important issues within their communities. For example, Topsy emphasized that social media served as a tool for him to influence his local community by ensuring that his community was accredited for voting. Supporting this perspective, Isaiah also emphasizes that politics revolves around numbers; the more individuals are mobilized, the better the representation of their chosen candidate. In their words:

_First my major aim using Twitter was to try and convince individuals to pick up their Personal Voters’ Card to ensure that we vote in mass. I was targeting individuals who have not gotten their Personal Voters Card (PVC) because it gives us the right to cast our vote and have a say on who should take over the mantle of leadership. Election accreditation is not an easy process in the country. Most people feel there is no need to
fight for the process but then what they do not know is that they are making the process more open for election rigging. I saw this as a way to take responsibility to keep sharing information for people to get their voter’s card.

Additionally, Isaiah noted that:

The election period was quite unique because each presidential candidate represented the three major ethnic groups in the country and everyone might want to vote for their kinsmen. However, with the whole social media hype towards the election especially among the youths, we all know that elections are a game of number and for us to have a good representation we must go out and vote. I just knew that social media discussions won’t be enough, and we the youth needed to take more offline action, so I shared more about getting accredited than engaging in other type of political discussion.

Still under this theme, bad standard of living and renewed hope were other motives that gave birth to civic engagement. Participants enumerated that they engaged and exercised their civic rights because they were tired of the bad standard of living due to no efforts from the government or political leaders to mitigate the crisis. In other words, they engaged online and voted mostly because they wanted to take action to break Nigeria’s electoral pattern and eagerness to experience better and more humane standards of living. Also, participants narrated that the inspiration to vote or engage on social media was to have a glimpse of renewed hope. Renewed hope in this context meant flushing out bad government leaders and their dysfunctional processes and voting in someone more trustworthy and accountable. Buttressing this theme, Sayo stated that it was to answer her provoking question, "How do we make the country work again?"

In contrast, Halima stated that the high engagement was a belief for a change of status quo in Nigerian politics.
Four years ago, I voted, and I did so again in the recent election. The primary motivation behind my decision to vote amidst the buzz on social media surrounding the elections is my identification as a youth. I firmly believe that we, as the youth, hold the power to steer the country in a new direction. I often contemplate how we can revitalize Nigeria, and the conclusion I arrive at is simple: by fulfilling my civic duty and voting out inadequate leadership that does not prioritize the welfare of the people. Personally, I refuse to toil tirelessly only to see minimal progress. (Sayo)

Furthermore, Halima indicated:

“During the past election period, a lot of people were very excited, they had anticipated a new regime, even though we were not sure if the Labour Party Presidential candidate Peter Obi would win, the youths were just tired of what we are used too in the political space. We wanted to taste something else even if it does not suit our needs for the next four years” (Halima)

For Lope, the paramount goal was to usher in a fresh cohort of leaders into executive roles to disrupt the prevailing political landscape. Even though this presidential election marked her inaugural voting experience, she remained steadfast in her conviction that each vote holds significance. By participating in the electoral process, she aimed to contribute her voice towards dispelling the notion that votes are inconsequential during elections. In her own words:

Voting is like a step for me to liberation. I was tired of the way previous administrations have conducted things so far. We need a new change, a disruption that will bring in a new set of leaders who can be accountable for their actions. The current leaders of the country do not rate the citizens at all, and we need to teach them a lesson” (Lope).
**Activism.** Several participants intentionally maintained their continue use and engagement of Twitter after the elections was to utilize these platforms as powerful tools to engage in activities aimed at influencing government policies or reforms. They expressed their viewpoints on specific issues within the country, employing means such as accountability, constructive criticism, and transparency to scrutinize the current administration's actions.

Benjamin highlights the resilience of his engagement, stating, "Even though my candidate did not win, I continue to leverage Twitter to actively hold the government accountable for its actions concerning the country. It's a platform for me to voice concerns, promote transparency, and contribute to discussions on critical matters." Isaiah further stated that “after the elections, I was able to give certain submissions on issues, just to express myself even if I get scrutinized for my thoughts. I will only accept if I get countered based on facts and statistics. We are all emotional beings, and with the current situations in the country, we cannot excuse ourselves from trying to make things right, especially how the previous government made things so bad".

Yet another participant emphasized that their ongoing involvement on these platforms serves as a method to consistently inform people about recent developments within the country, leveraging the existing election buzz. Illustrating this, Gbadi stated, "Continuing my engagement amplifies the right for people to stay well-informed. I've encountered numerous young individuals who have never taken the time to follow the news or learn about Nigeria. I perceive it to raise awareness among youth, encouraging them to better understand their community." This commitment to information dissemination underscores the potential of sustained online engagement in fostering awareness and online activism among the younger demographic.

Certainly, although most participants persist in utilizing the platforms for activism, the significance varies for others. One participant indicated a waning interest in sustained
engagement post-elections, asserting that she perceives social media involvement as disconnected from bringing about substantial changes in Nigeria's political landscape. Her rationale stems from a skepticism rooted in offline political intimidation tactics employed by certain political parties to manipulate election outcomes in their favor. This perspective highlights the complex interplay between online activism and offline political realities, shaping diverse attitudes toward continued engagement on social media platforms. For example, Dolly, a frequent voter, noted, “I noticed that some of the political parties used vote buying to canvass more votes. Also, at polling units, we had fewer voting materials that would have aided a credible voting exercise. All these made me have a rethink if its worth it to continue voting”. 
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

This project delves into the impact of opinion leaders on online youth political participation, examining how the engagement of youth in online platforms amplifies the influence of their political actions, particularly in the context of developing democracies. Examining Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections as a case study, this paper identifies key opinion leaders who wielded significant influence during the electoral process. The research categorizes these opinion leaders based on their generational cohort, analyzes the nature of the content they disseminated to sustain or sway their audience, and investigates the motives driving engagement on social media for political involvement both during and after the election phase. The results from this study yield valuable insight into the role of online opinion leaders, youth engagement on social platforms especially within the context of online political campaigns/communication in the strategic communications field.

Evaluating RQ1, the data analysis identified the opinion leaders during the election conversations. Findings showed that within the two-week timeframe (i.e. pre and post-election), only a few individuals had a greater influence on their audience than others. This means that despite active usage of Twitter during the elections, there were lots of isolated conversations happening. With the enthusiasm towards the presidential election and the push for a new candidate to rule the country's affairs, results showed the Nigerian youths were not connected with each other during the online conversations/networks. This discovery was rather unexpected, considering the extensive number of tweets analyzed in the dataset, the massive buildup of the online Obidient movement, the high voter registration among the youths and lastly it was the peak of the election to go exercise their civic duty. Essentially, this isolated conversation reveals
that many youths tend to be passive rather than active on social media platforms. Rather than actively engaging with each other, most of the youth prefer to observe political conversations. Unfortunately, this passivity often prevents them from collectively influencing change and achieving their desired outcomes as a marginalized group.

This finding partially aligns with the tenets of the two-step flow theory, opinion leaders played a crucial role in disseminating political information within their respective networks, but in actively engaging with their followers by initiating discussions, responding to comments, and soliciting feedback, they did not create opportunities for deeper engagement and collaboration within their network, thereby not strengthening their influence and building community. It is possible that the isolated conversations among the Nigerian youths could be a result of some factors like lack of trust (lack of faith in the platform's ability to generate constructive communication), information overload (overwhelming due to the sheer volume of information and discussions), echo chambers (following and interacting with accounts that share their political ideas, restricting their exposure to diverse points of view), and polarization (afraid of online harassment or backlash.) This buttresses Keating and Melis’ (2017) claim that while social media may provide a new outlet for some young adults, it is not re-engaging those who have already lost interest in politics, and a large percentage of young adults never utilize social media for this purpose. Also, a report validates these isolated dialogues which states that Nigerian youths use social media to mostly keep in touch with family members, making new contacts and read online news (Kemp, 2024).

However, on the other hand, it is promising that online opinion leaders via social media platforms enable citizens to obtain political knowledge through online contents/discussion, increasing their internal and external political efficacy. This emphasizes the importance of social
networking sites and the role of opinion leaders in the flow of political information in society (Karlsen, 2015). For example, in Nigerian politics, particularly in the context of the multiparty system, Nigeria's political scene is distinguished by the many perspectives and interests represented by several political parties. In this atmosphere, online opinion leaders are powerful voices that shape political narratives within a platform. Furthermore, Nigeria's cultural variety complicates political engagement, necessitating effective communication tactics to transcend cultural differences. As a result, understanding the power and communication patterns of online opinion leaders is critical for encouraging meaningful political engagement and navigating Nigeria's complex political terrain.

Furthermore, the results showed that the millennial cohort within the age group 27-42, remains influential as online opinion leaders in political campaigns. Their considerable presence on numerous social media platforms and their natural aptitude for traversing the digital landscape make them key players in shaping public debate and influencing political narratives. Taking a cue from Table 1, we can see that some opinion leaders are widely recognized, knowledgeable about Nigeria’s political scene and are esteemed within the country. With their proficiency in the language of hashtags, memes, and viral material, millennials have used the power of the internet to connect with a vast audience of like-minded individuals and engage in political discussions that transcend geographical boundaries. Millennials are regarded as the first high-tech generation (Norum, 2003); resulting in much higher levels of persistent involvement, innovativeness, and self-perceived expertise (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). Millennials use their internet influence to share information, mobilize support, and advocate for their favored politicians or causes during political campaigns. They act as channels for sharing news, policy insights, and campaign updates to be shared with their vast networks, amplifying political messaging at an unparalleled
rate. Twitter is a communication hub for millennials, enabling them to connect with their peers and form a political community. In this space, individuals can freely express their thoughts, rally around common values, and champion social and political transformations. This heightened engagement is notably fueled by the fact that millennials constitute a substantial portion of the voting community, underscoring their influence in shaping discussions and advocating for change on platforms like Twitter. Because of their online activism and capacity to mobilize support through digital storytelling, millennials have become vital opinion leaders who continue to play a critical role in defining the political landscape in the digital age.

Providing insight into RQ2, opinion leaders in the online political conversation during the presidential elections used Twitter as a reliable source to disseminate information and leverage their network and relationships they had built over time (Boatwright, 2022). The findings showed that the contents disseminated were advocacy/call to action, commentary, opinions, and real-time news updates to encourage the youths to go and perform their civic duties. In essence, opinion leaders used these messages to motivate young individuals to fulfill their civic responsibilities to achieve the change in the electoral process that they yearn for. This supports Boulianne and Theocharis’ (2020) findings, that while the nature of digital media use is important, engaging in political activities online is more likely to motivate people compared to using the internet for non-political reasons. Opinion leaders were more action-oriented, exploring the roles of volunteering to push offline participation from their followers. Additionally, they assumed the role of political commentators, diligently monitoring the electoral process to uphold transparency and accountability. In doing so, opinion leaders played a crucial role in shaping public perception, mobilizing support, and fostering an informed citizenry during the electoral cycle. These action-oriented activities align with (Mustapha & Omar, 2020) research that states
youths compensate for political marginalization through action-oriented engagement and the highly democratized social media space to communicate, discuss, mobilize, and coordinate social actions to hold power accountable.

For RQ3, this study extends our understanding of how Nigerian youths have continually used the platform before, during and post-election cycles. Themes that emerged are enlightenment/evaluation, civic engagement and activism. As anticipated, the findings affirm the prevailing trend where participants articulated a dual purpose for their involvement: enlightenment and evaluation. Due to the importance of the presidential elections, a lot of youths used Twitter to stay updated with political news developments. The platform acted as a dynamic source for political knowledge, offering real-time updates and diverse perspectives, which can be tied to some of the tenets of the uses and gratification framework, for example how users and participants used Twitter to stay engaged either by sharing their opinions or exposing themselves to political updates and information (Kipkoech, 2023; Matthes, 2022). Prior research has shown how social media helps create enlightenment ties with different online communities (Harris & Harrigan, 2015), how social media appears to have a relationship unique to candidate evaluations and alludes to the potential of influence (Kenski et al., 2022), also how online political consumption is more directly tied to civic engagement (De Zúñiga et al., 2014) and lastly activism (Chon & Park, 2020).

By expressing their opinions on candidates' manifestos and proposed economic reforms, participants demonstrate a heightened level of political awareness and critical thinking which were some of their political needs using the platform (Abid & Harrigan, 2020; Alivi, 2023; Hong & Kim, 2021). Moreover, the development of parasocial relationships with candidates underscores the personal connection individuals feel towards political figures, transcending party
affiliations. This phenomenon highlights the evolving nature of political discourse in the digital age, where social media platforms serve as catalysts for deeper engagement and interaction among citizens and political actors. Furthermore, the study found that participants involvement with the Twitter platform was a way to evaluate candidates through candidates’ manifests, prior records, and campaign promises. To the participants, it was one of the many ways to assess the presidential candidates and determine who deserves their vote or rather reinforce their decision on the choice of candidate. Moreover, a significant number of participants, unaffiliated with any political party, displayed a strong interest in exploring alternative candidates. This underscores their deliberate effort to make informed decisions based on factors beyond traditional party affiliations.

For the second significant theme, civic engagement, participants actively used social media as a catalyst for political participation among the youth. The motivation ranged from advocating for voter registration to mobilizing the youth to vote in mass. It was evident that civic engagement became a strategic tool used by the youths to respond to challenges faced in the country, such as the potential for election rigging and the need for increased youth representation. This theme centered around mobilization used by participants as a major way to change and break the rigid political cycle. Nigeria has a history of low voting turnout which is due to the challenging voter accreditation process, thus the youths used the platform to mobilize and influence their community to act stir up enthusiasm and fight for the change that they yearn for. The unique context of the election, where candidates represented diverse ethnic groups, amplified the realization that online youth engagement was crucial for achieving effective representation. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that bad living standards and a quest for renewed hope motivated civic engagement. Participants were driven by a desire to address
societal challenges through active civic engagement. In its totality, mobilization and a renewed hope became critical players toward liberation, an opportunity to bring about political disruption, and a means to demand better accountability from leaders.

Lastly, several participants continued their social media engagement post-election as a form of activism. They utilized these platforms to scrutinize government actions, express viewpoints on national issues, and advocate for reforms. The resilience of engagement post-election was particularly notable among participants who perceived social media as a tool for accountability, transparency, and constructive criticism. Over time, these individuals will develop into opinion leaders by constantly providing political material on Twitter, displaying talent and comprehension in politics, and demonstrating integrity in their actions and interactions on the Twitter network (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). While some participants viewed it as an ongoing commitment to hold the government accountable, one individual expressed skepticism for several reasons. Firstly, she noted that voters often prioritize personal benefits over the broader interests of the nation, highlighting the influence of identity-based voting, as discussed earlier in this paper. Secondly, the participant raised concerns about intimidation tactics employed by the ruling party, including various political strategies aimed at undermining voters’ ability to freely express their preferences during elections. Concerns about the perceived disconnect between online activism and tangible political changes, coupled with issues like vote buying and inadequate voting materials, prompted reevaluation for some participants.

In summary, it affirms that to an extent opinion leaders, particularly millennials, play a vital role in creating political awareness by providing diverse online content, including news updates, commentary, opinions, advocacy, and calls to action. However, in terms of fostering engagement and influencing attitudes among the Nigerian youths, this was not evident due to the
isolated conversations during the time frame. Lot of Nigerian youths tended towards a passive behavior rather than actively engaging on the platform. Even some relied on reputable media news channels to verify and share political content. This aligns with (Keating & Melis, 2017) that social media needs to attract new or diverse groups of young adults to engage in politics. Instead, it serves as a platform for those already politically active to discuss and share their views. However, there is an intricate interplay between social media, youth engagement, and political activism in Nigeria, that unveils the dual role of social media as a source of enlightenment and a platform for civic participation.

Nigeria, with a population of over 250 million people, and 5.75M Twitter users, it is evident that the Twitter platform does not necessarily shape the discourse in the Nigeria political landscape because it’s not the most favorite social media channel among the Nigerian youth. The country’s most used social media platform is WhatsApp with 39.7%, followed by Facebook 17.4%, Instagram 17.0%, TikTok 12.2% and then Twitter 6.2% (Kemp, 2024). From analysis, several reasons could also contribute to this gap like platform algorithms which takes into consideration user preferences and opinions, thus creating a paradigm shift that alters the formation of societal perceptions and the shaping of narratives that may influence policymaking, political communication, and the evolution of public debate (Cinelli et al., 2021). Fear of political cyberbullying, offline political intimidation, vote buying etc. Others include the unlimited reach of political messaging, the rapid velocity of information flow, and the sheer volume of content contending for attention. Additionally, the often complex and lengthy political discussions on Twitter may not align with the short attention spans and preference for concise, visually engaging content prevalent among many younger users.

Additionally, notwithstanding the observed gap in active participation, it is crucial to
acknowledge the significance of political discourse on Twitter. There is a discernible emergence of political enthusiasm among the youth, a sentiment distinctly palpable in the interviews conducted. This sustained online engagement holds the promise of molding political narratives, exerting influence on electoral processes, and nurturing a culture of accountability as the upcoming elections approach. Most participants still expressed hope in the change that they wanted despite their candidate not winning, some were first time voters and still saw a need to continuously share their voices.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

While this study partially affirms the tenets of the two-step flow theory and fully for the uses and gratification framework, it depicts the influence opinion leaders have in disseminating information or increasing the political knowledge of their followers but, there is still a gap with isolated conversations, a dependence on credible news channel for information validation and a more passive engagement among youths on Twitter. In Nigeria, various factors could contribute to the prevalence of isolated talks on Twitter like Nigeria's multi-party system encourages people to have different political goals and affiliations. Each political party and its supporters frequently have separate conversations, with a primary focus on their party's perspectives and objectives which might result in solitary talks that occur within tight ideological bounds. Another could be Nigeria's identity-based voting habits, having a big impact on Twitter conversations. Individuals tend to identify with political views that reflect their ethnic, religious, or geographical identities. As a result, individuals mostly interact with people who share their identities and political beliefs, resulting in echo chambers in which alternative opinions are less likely to be heard or considered (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Engaging strategies on a platform can help break through isolated conversations online. Deploying captivating material, interactive features like as polls and Q&A sessions, and a variety of themes can stimulate user participation and conversation. Social media platform administrators, developers, and moderators can adopt these tactics because they are in charge of building and maintaining the platform's features, content, and community interactions to promote engagement, diversity, and inclusivity.
It is also imperative for future studies to understand the dynamics of online political activity, considering the impact of misinformation and disinformation as a potential foundation for future research. Research could investigate the sudden rise of validation from news channels especially on digital platforms, thus how digital literacy programs may effectively counteract the spread of misinformation and disinformation in online political forums. Furthermore, there is a need to develop ways for increasing individuals’ media literacy and fact-checking skills, particularly in the context of online political activity. Additionally, future research can also investigate the involvement of social media platforms and technology businesses in addressing the spread of misinformation and disinformation, as well as the effectiveness of interventions targeted at combating these phenomena. Overall, incorporating the impact of misinformation and disinformation into future digital literacy and political engagement studies is critical for addressing the challenges posed by misinformation in online political spaces.

Potential limitation of this study is the data timeframe, particularly the focus on the period around the elections. This study does not account for online conversations that may have occurred several days or months before the elections, including discussions that may have given rise to the social movements observed within the two-week window before and after the election. Another is that individuals’ usage of pseudonyms or erroneous personal information on Twitter could be a potential restriction in this study. Twitter permits users to create profiles with fictional names and birthdates. Determining the age and identity of users can be difficult, especially when analyzing the participation of specific age groups, such as millennials. This absence of true or verified data may add uncertainty and restrict the precision of demographic studies, potentially influencing the study's conclusions.
APPENDICES

Interview Protocol

Community & Location ________________________________

Date/time_____________

No. of people attending ________________________________

Thank you for your participation. I believe your input will be valuable to this research and in helping grow all our professional practice. Confidentiality of responses is guaranteed.

My name is Bowale Odukale, a graduate student of Communications Department at Clemson University and I will be facilitating this interview with you. The goal of this project is to examine the uses and gratifications of active Twitter users’ engagement via the platform during the 2023 Nigeria presidential elections. As a citizen of Nigeria and someone who executed your civic right by voting, we value your opinions and insights.

You were selected through a purposive sample through my discourse analysis on the Nigeria election thread on Twitter where your name was obtained because of your expressed personal views. Prior to the interview you were sent an introductory letter and two consent forms (one to sign and return and one to keep) prior to the session today.

This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes and will follow a designed semi-structured interview protocol. Also please take note that this interview will be recorded, both the audio and the video via zoom and will be retained for about a year, till this research work gets published.

You are free at any time to withdrawal from this interview process if you choose to. There will not be any incentive during this interview process. Do you have any questions?

1. To get started, let’s introduce ourselves. In your introduction, please tell us who you are, your occupation and which community where you currently live?
2. How frequently did you use social media for political discussions during the elections?

3. Did you follow any specific political figures, parties, or hashtags on social media?

4. Why did you choose to participate in political discussions on social media during the elections?

5. Were there specific gratifications you derived from their social media engagement? (e.g., staying informed, influencing others, expressing their political stance)

6. Discuss the types of content they interacted with on social media during the elections:

7. What kind of political content did they find most engaging (e.g., news updates, memes, opinion pieces)?

8. Were there specific topics or issues that drew their attention?

9. Did your social media interactions during the elections lead to any changes in their political views or behaviors?

10. Were you able to influence others' opinions or actions through your social engagement?

11. After the elections, have you continued to use the platform for political engagement?

Thank you for your time and insight during this interview. Once again, your confidentiality is reassured.

Thank you for your time.
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