

Political Marketing and Social Media Use in Nigerian Politics: Understanding the Nexus

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the importance of social media is highlighted in political marketing. Political players and stakeholders believe the use of social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, among others, can influence political participation. Nowadays, social media tools are utilised within political communication campaigns to secure victory, encourage interaction between political parties/voters, promote and market identities, ideologies and build images. New media technologies have played essential roles in the Nigerian political landscape in the last two decades, both on the side of campaigners who work for political parties and the electorates who vote-in politicians marketed to them through political marketing. Hinged on the three-stage model of political marketing and the technological determinism theory, this paper examines and provides a contextual appraisal of the nexus between political marketing and the social media boom, particularly the Nigerian political system. This study employed an essentially exploratory and descriptive design with significant reliance on a desktop or library review of literature and theories presented alongside the analyses of relevant issues in work. The paper concluded that social media usage in political marketing encourages more engagement and interaction between the political actors and the electorates.

KEYWORDS: Political Marketing, Social Media, Political Communication, Nigeria, Political System.

INTRODUCTION

With recent technological advancements, social media has emerged as a vital medium for communication and networking worldwide (Ghoshal, 2018). Recognising the power of social media as the easiest, quickest, and cheapest way to reach their target audiences, political parties are now utilising social media as an essential political marketing tool. Scholars opine that political parties no longer have to depend only on conventional means of political communication like wall campaigns, town hall meetings, the mainstream media and public relations to solicit support and reach out to the electorates during electioneering periods (Ghoshal, 2018).

Gudmundsson, Hjálmarsdóttir and Kristjánsdóttir (2019) assert that the importance of marketing techniques in political campaigning has increased as communicating politics has become more complicated in a highly fragmented media environment. The scholars further conclude that with different media logics interacting in a hybrid media system, political marketing methods through social media have drawn considerable attention and threatened democratic processes in some instances.

The adoption of the internet and social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, among others, create new avenues to political market campaigns. Lilleker (2006) stresses that applying core political marketing concepts is becoming relevant to winning elections without the need for violence. The deployment of social media in political marketing advances nation-building by breaching the gap between communication and relationship between the political parties and the other stakeholders, allowing for dialogue, feedback, and participation in a political system. Conversely, this platform can trend negative political comments and utterances, which may have drastic and adverse effects when there is political tension within the polity (Ajayi & Adesote, 2015), as these negative comments may not only end on these social networking sites but may continue in the real world.

Political marketing focuses on market values, ideologies, and candidates of a political party in contrast to the conventional marketing of products and services in commercial organisations (Baines, 2012). In Nigeria, just like most countries today, the utilisation of social media for elections campaigns and politics has become a heated political topic creating many debates in political communication. Hence, applying strategic marketing techniques in politics could

significantly offer a competitive advantage and a structured framework for political campaigns and processes. Against this background, this paper discusses political marketing in the social media era concerning the Nigerian political system.

THE PROBLEM

In the world of politics, there is a political market where potential and aspiring political candidates seek the electorate's support to win an election (Gbadeyen, 2011). Since the turn of the new epoch, the internet and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have become new opportunities to energise political participation and civic engagement in democracy and modern politics (Milakovich, 2010). Therefore, the contributions of social media platforms to Nigeria's political landscape cannot be overemphasised as political actors and organisations have found these platforms to be one of the fastest and most effective ways to mobilise support and canvass for votes (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonaya & Anumadu, 2017; Opeibi, 2019). Hence, social media marketing offers different opportunities for political campaigning, and there is a need for a contextual appraisal of the nexus between political marketing and the social media boom, with particular reference to the Nigerian political system.

OBJECTIVE/SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to explore the relationship between using social media platforms in political marketing. The technological developments in the 21st century have aided the interaction between electorates and political actors, making these politicians more visible to their electorates. This study highlights the crucial roles of social media tools in political marketing. The study provides a better understanding and analysis of how social media platforms have impacted the political terrain in Nigeria, mostly during politicking and electioneering periods. The significance of this study can also be viewed from the theoretical perspective as it establishes that technological advances have birthed a new pattern of political marketing and political communication in the Nigerian political landscape.

POLITICAL MARKETING

The idea of political marketing builds on a fusion between marketing and politics (Stromback, 2007). Political marketing uses marketing tools, concepts and philosophies within policy

development campaigning and internal relations by political parties and organisations. It is seen as a reaction to the rise of political consumerism, and the fall of partisanship, in western democratic societies and emergent democracies (Lilleker, 2006).

Political marketing entails “the application of marketing principles and procedures in political campaigns by various individuals and organisations” (Newman, 1999, p. 13). The significance of marketing in politics has increased as voters become diverse, the market fragmented, and television viewership has disintegrated (De Landtsheer, De Vries and Vertessen, 2008). Aspiring political candidates seek to create a unique brand identity to match their personality, campaign objectives and voter expectations and blend this identity effortlessly through all communication messages (Jackson, 2003).

Imam (2015) explains that political marketing infers the usage of marketing tools, techniques and methods in the political process. As an activity and method, it reflects the penetration of the political space by marketing and the presence of marketing in politics has a progressively prominent role which is based on the fact that political actors nowadays do not only act according to the principles of marketing but also- think in marketing terms in their political activities (Henneberg, 2004). Therefore, political marketing applications have changed from a communication instrument to a coherent way of managing politics, whether policymaking, election canvassing or executing decisions (Venu, 2008; Imam, 2015). Political marketing expresses itself in such various activities as focusing a campaign on the salient political issues of swing voters, through the application of sophisticated segmentation techniques a consequent voter- 'customer' orientation, the application of celebrity endorsement strategies as part of integrated marketing communication or the institution of influential directors of Communication (Henneberg, 2004).

Historically, before Nigeria gained its independence, the colonial administration had organised a couple of general elections without any deliberate and systematic marketing programme undertaken in any of them (Nzeribe, 1992). Nevertheless, political parties and candidates canvassed for votes through several means. Scholars aver that political marketing started gaining ground after independence, as the 1963 elections witnessed the use of advertising and sales promotions by candidates to propagate their campaign messages (Worlu, 2010). Scholars, such as Achumba and Dixon-Ogbechi, (2004); Osuagwu, (2008) believe that the best of times for political

marketing in Nigeria came between 1991 and 1994 when the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC), contested in the series of elections within the that period. These scholars further attributed Abiola's victory to the massive deployment of marketing strategies.

In the meantime, all forms of promotions in political marketing are carried out through a communication or political campaigning strategy (Worlu, 2010). For instance, the use of the name of political candidate duo, which comprises of two syllables, is anticipated to be more easily recognised and shared in the public memory, and management of image and popularity of politicians as a way of marketing which is similar to the marketing a business product (Imam, 2015). Political products and personalities are promoted via all channels consumed by the target audience. These channels could include; advertising, publicity, personal selling, and sales promotion, as Sarwate (1990) enumerated.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Adelakun (2018), citing Okoro and Nwafor (2013), observed that, before the 2011 election, subscription to and usage of social media platforms for political movement were not well pronounced in Nigeria. Despite that some popular social media existed prior to 2011, social media users were more concerned with their social and entertainment functions than political participation. In Nigeria, the subscription to social media follows the world pattern as Facebook made a giant stride in 2011.

Adelakun (2018) further buttressed that Facebook was utilised for socialisation and other functions like political participation and monitoring. Twitter also added some weight to the number of users. Many Twitter accounts were opened and managed on behalf of politicians who were not familiar with the platform or too busy to explore it themselves for their political campaigns (Andersson, 2015). Other social media networks such as LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Skype, and Pinterest stimulated Nigerians' interest as access to the internet became more lubricated though used more for social entertainment than politics. Before the 2015 general elections, internet access had improved, and many Nigerians on social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, swelled. It solidified the foundation upon which the political terrain developed and the growth of political marketing via social media in Nigeria (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013).

ADOPTING POLITICAL MARKETING AS ELECTIONEERING STRATEGY

Studies such as Venu (2008), Grossarchieve.com (2015) and Imam (2015) document that political marketing applications have changed from a communication instrument to a more coherent way of managing politics, whether it is policymaking, election canvassing, or executing decisions. Political marketing expresses itself in various activities that include focusing a campaign on the salient political issues of swing voters, through the application of sophisticated segmentation techniques which results in voter-customer orientation, the application of celebrity endorsement strategies as part of integrated political marketing communication or the institution of influential directors of communication (Henneberg, 2004).

Lilleker (2010) observes that historically, the driving force behind the adoption of marketing to politics is the phenomenon of dealignment that has forced parties to move from merely offering their product and relying on this to be wanted by the voter to sell themselves a similar way to fast-moving consumer goods. As more parties increasingly use sophisticated political marketing techniques of salesmanship, the competitive edge is lost, forcing political parties to engage in market orientation, allowing the market or electorates the power to design parts of the political product they desire from the political parties (Lilleker, 2010).

Similarly, the upsurge of political marketing in the past is attributed to the advancement of an investigative press, declining party loyalty, and changes in the political and electoral systems. Scholars have identified the growth of the media, particularly television, as having had a substantial impact (Venu, 2008). Also, political marketing has contributed to improved communication between politicians and voters. It underpins many of the recent developments of political communication and demands political actors to offer voters what voters need or desire. These politicians, in turn, utilise tools such as image creation through aesthetics which may appear authentic and relevant, thereby dividing the electorate to target messages (Lilleker, 2006).

THEORETICAL REVIEW

According to Durmaz and Direkçi (2015), the most popular theory for political marketing is the Three-Stage Model, and it has been widely accepted and discussed in academic literature. In this model; there are three different stages:

1. Step 1: Identify consumer demand, feed this into the product and messaging and refine it accordingly.
2. Step Two: Inform the consumers of the changes to the product due to their demands and needs.
3. Step Three: Delivery of the refined product will satisfy the consumer demand better, thus producing incrementally greater profit for the company (Durmaz & Direkçi, 2015:32).

Donovan (2012) buttresses that the three-stage model assumes parties can establish what voters want using sophisticated polling methodology and feedback from focus groups. Conceptually, the suggestion is that parties/candidates listen to (targeted) public opinion and provide the electorate with a product that they want to achieve electoral victory (Durmaz & Direkçi 2015; Savigny, 2010. p.1052). This model for political marketing consists of three distinct steps for the candidate to follow, providing a template to achieve a market orientation and eventual electoral success (Durmaz & Direkçi 2015:32; Savigny, 2010:1050). The model allows political organisations to listen to their targeted public opinion, thus providing the electorate with a product they seek, eventually granting the candidate electoral victory (Donovan, 2012:7).

As a primary route for successful political marketing, the three-stage model was critiqued by Durmaz and Direkçi (2015) for skipping out a crucial aspect of the communication chain among the political candidates, the voting public and the media, which they considered as biased and agenda-ridden. The media now acts as an additional uncontrolled source of influence, even beyond the candidates' message. Hence, this action must be considered in any model that seeks to influence voters' behaviour (Durmaz & Direkçi, 2015; Donovan, 2012).

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM THEORY

Marshall McLuhan propounded the technological determinism theory in 1962. Chandler (2000) states the theory assumes that the complete form of society is seen as being determined by technology. He believes that new technologies transform society at every level, including institutions, social interaction and individuals. The theory explains that media technology shapes how individuals in a given society think, feel, act, and society moves from one technology age to another. McQuail (2010) affirms that technological determinism theory means that communication

technologies are fundamental to society as each media technology has a bias to particular communication forms, contents and uses.

Morah (2012) asserts that people learn feelings and think the way they can due to messages received via the current technology available to society. With technological advancement and the spread of internet use by all and sundry, social networking has become an activity done on the internet, which has changed society's interaction and made it more flexible (Lewis, 2008). Also, scholars such as (Lievrow & Livingstone, 2006; Dominick, 2009) state that technological determinism theory drives and impacts historical and political changes influenced by advances in technology innovation and diffusion. The theory explains how fast the political actors utilise social media platforms to market and campaign their political ideologies to their target audiences, eliminating space and time without delay.

Three-stage model of marketing and technological determinism theory in the era of social media

Political marketing and social media in 21st century Nigeria are being harmonised and utilised in setting political outlines for the electorates or voters during politics. As stated earlier, the relationship between political marketing and social media is theorised both synchronically and longitudinally as buttressed by the Three-Stage Model of Marketing. Cwalina, Falkowski and Newman (2012) documented technology development, particularly in advanced countries such as the United States and some European countries. It plays a vital role in the success of modern political campaigns while developing societies of the third world like Nigeria are coming to terms with the reality of fully adopting technologies for politicking, mainly in the area of political communication, and the use of social networks are becoming the conventional means of reaching out to target audiences. Technology is said to bring about change and development within any given society, and this technology propels development that shapes society in specific ways. It shows how new media technologies (social media) have transformed the political environment by playing significant roles in elections in Nigeria and other countries. The technological determinism theory suggests that nothing else but technology determines society's social structure and communication (McQuai, 2010).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Since the new epoch, the internet and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have become new opportunities to energise political participation and civic engagement in democracy and modern politics (Milakovich, 2010; Morah, 2012). Ekwelem, Okafor and Ukwoma (2012) found out that the advent of affordable mobile phones and data services enables many Nigerians to utilise social media networks to enhance virtual interaction. Opeibi (2019), in his analysis, expatiated that political actors and organisations, on the other hand, have found social networking platforms to be one of the fastest and effective ways to mobilise support and canvass for votes during political campaigns and even during elections.

Omenugha, Ukwueze and Malizu (2011), in their study, found out that the 2011 general elections in Nigeria marked a significant milestone in the use of social media for political communication in Nigeria. They averred that; political aspirants disposed of all means to gear up their support base. Goodluck Jonathan, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, Pastor Chris Okotie and some other aspirants made use of social media like Facebook, Twitter, NaijaPals, Nairaland among, others, to engage the youths in discussing their political policies and programs, following the realisation that campaigning in modern-day 21st-century politics requires more than just handshakes and physical persuasion.

More so, 2015 witnessed a massive use of social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs during the general elections in Nigeria. In their survey, Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) opined that, due to their participatory, interactive, and cost-effective nature, the mentioned social media became more user-friendly during the 2015 general elections because they were heavily relied on by political stakeholders for political marketing. Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) further asserted that social media became a veritable and powerful instrument for political marketing, political engagement, mobilisation, and other electioneering activities. Accordingly, the place of social media in rallying political support is no longer in doubt. As buttressed by Opeibi (2019), among the over forty registered political parties in Nigeria during the 2015 general elections, two major political parties, the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and the main opposition party, the All-Progressives Congress (APC), dominated Nigerian political discourses online. Furthermore, with the expansion outside of political websites, social media tools like Facebook and Twitter were incorporated into the campaign tool repertoire alongside mobile phone SMS (Opeibi, 2019).

However, studies by Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) and Opeibi (2019) primarily focused on the gains of using social media for political marketing while neglecting the ills of utilising the platforms for political marketing. It was recorded that some political actors and stakeholders during 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria used the social media platforms for negative political marketing at some point which incited violence and questioned the authenticity of election results. Also, some of the utterances made by political actors during political marketing before the 2011 general elections in Nigeria fuelled the post-elections violence of 2011 in Nigeria, aided by the rapid spread of political campaign messages on social media. Future studies can look into these areas as they may threaten the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

Also, critics averred that President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC created personal Twitter and Facebook accounts to promote his presidential ambition, and it was more pronounced during the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria. He used the platforms to mobilise support, persuade, influence, and educate voters during the electioneering period, while former president, Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the PDP, utilised cyberspace as a platform to report achievements and solicit further support (Opeibi, 2019).

As Herring (2013) observed, the retweet feature on Twitter has become a significant component of social media. Twitter as an interactive microblogging platform can be utilised in political marketing due to its peculiar features such as the retweet, hashtags and text limited to 140 characters. The Nigerian political terrain witnessed the deployment of retweets' recursive nature, which stimulated voters and became a useful political advertising device. Opeibi (2019) averred that, the 2019 general elections in Nigeria witnessed varieties of hashtags; they include: *#VoteAPC*, *#NigeriansDecides*, *#VoteNotFight*, *#letsGetNigeriaWorkingAgain*, *#AskAtikuYourself*, *#VoteWisely*, *#BetterLife*, *#BetterNigeria*, *#DefendYourVotes*, *#NextLevelEngagement* and many more. These hashtags sometimes represent the ideological position of the party, agendas, and manifesto the political party wishes to execute. This further indicates that going forward, the nexus between political marketing and social media in the Nigerian political terrain can grow stronger.

Gambarov, Zenelaj and Belba (2015), in their analysis of how political parties use social networks for the political marketing of their respective parties in Albania, found that this phenomenon was explicitly practised in the United States for many years since 2008, when Barack Obama, the then-

presidential candidate of the Democratic Party started using social media platforms for political marketing. Their findings showed that Albania Socialist Party in 2013 relied on or made use of social media to woo and get the votes of the Albania electorates during the 2013 general elections in the country through effective political marketing strategies. The researchers concurred that the Albania Socialist Party's campaign was a total success and the Socialist Party came to power after eight years through a big victory made possible by essential political marketing through social media.

Relating the study findings by Gambarov, Zenelaj and Belba (2015) to the Nigerian political terrain, Nigerian politicians at the state level use online channels to reconstruct and rebrand their personality profile to crowdsource followership. For instance, during the 2015 governorship election in Lagos state, the candidates of the two leading political parties, the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) and the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), deployed Twitter to complement their traditional media campaigns. The use of these strategies by the political parties showed the increased awareness of the potentials of using social media among the ruling political elites in Nigeria. Mr Akinwunmi Ambode, the then-candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC), used his Twitter account extensively to project his image and flaunt his credentials as the best political candidate to solicit votes (Opeibi, 2019).

Using a mixed-methods approach in a study on the 2018 municipal elections in Iceland, Guðmundsso, Kristjánsdóttir and Hjálmarsdóttir (2019) found out that the importance of marketing techniques in political campaigning has increased as communicating politics has become more complicated in a highly fragmented media environment. With different media logics interacting in a hybrid media system, political marketing methods through social media have drawn considerable attention and even threaten democratic processes. The scholars further revealed that both social media and traditional media are important political marketing vehicles, highlighting the rise in the importance of social media in the 21st century. One can relate the findings of the study by Guðmundsso, Kristjánsdóttir and Hjálmarsdóttir (2019) to the Nigerian political context and society. As scholars asserted earlier, political marketing methods through social media have drawn considerable attention. They have even posed threats to democratic processes, where aggrieved individuals use their social media platforms during electioneering to challenge elections results' legitimacy and heat the polity. By so doing, such actions can lead to

chaos in society. Also, through social media, political marketers tend to disseminate fake news or fake campaign promises that they cannot keep. Besides, some politicians or allies tend to use social media to release election results even before the electoral umpire does so. These shenanigans by political stakeholders can pose a challenge to the democratic process in Nigeria if the results do not correspond with what political cronies intended.

METHODOLOGY: The research employed a secondary research method and relied on desktop and library review of literature and theories presented alongside the analyses of relevant issues in work.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The advent of social media is said to have created a new paradigm in political participation. Through the new media, participatory communication is made more evident in political circles in many countries of the world, including developing nations, making the electorates more empowered to express and enforce their political views. The use of social media platforms is mostly during electioneering periods due to the several opportunities they provide to political actors to communicate to voters simultaneously in a more personalised and conventional manner thereby, enhancing the nexus between citizens and candidates.

Durmaz and Direkçi (2015, p.32), “nowadays, more sophisticated techniques have been adopted such as the media supplying the political information to voters who base their decisions on problems in the society, and this serves as the medium for deliberation.” In line with Durmaz and Direkçi (2015), citizens have more chances to get involved in political affairs than ever due to the high proliferation of social media platforms in the 21st century.

Guðmundsson, Hjálmarsdóttir and Kristjánsdóttir (2019) stated that the importance of marketing techniques in political campaigning has increased as communicating politics has become more complicated in a highly fragmented media environment. In tandem with these arguments, different media logics interact in a hybrid media system, and political marketing through social media has drawn considerable attention, posing threats to the democratic processes. Notwithstanding, the use of social media in political marketing has many positive tendencies to influence and persuade the political atmosphere in countries like Nigeria, where many youths own one or two smartphones

that have different social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Telegram, WhatsApp, among many others which aid their participation in elections and politics.

The usage of social media platforms can also be seen in the organisation of the voters by political stakeholders during campaign periods to impact the political system and structures, which can either, be a positive push or a negative push. The social media impact on politics shows the influence that political marketing can have on the voters whom politicians often use as political thugs. With social media, political messages and campaigns are disseminated faster and at cheaper rates. Moreover, minority and unpopular groups can now have meaningful political influence due to ubiquitous access to social media platforms, allowing citizens to engage in the country's political process fully. The increased participation of youths in political processes can be related to their use of social media.

This study, therefore, concurs with the assertions made by Guðmundsson, Kristjánisdóttir & Hjálmarsdóttir (2019) and Durmaz & Direkçi, (2015). The study recognises that the importance of social media platforms to political marketing strategists in establishing political brand identity and creating political awareness to garner votes during elections and electioneering periods cannot be overemphasised as social media platforms have opened the doors to a new paradigm in political discourse. Furthermore, the burden on political parties and even political candidates in engaging in political marketing strategy is reduced from the society to the peer-to-peer level. The internet also enables information sharing via social media platforms, allowing voters to participate in political marketing activities as opinion leaders.

CONCLUSION

Modern political participation in countries like Nigeria is being improved rapidly by political marketing especially on social media. However, it would be essential to note that the mass media has created political avenues for engagement with voters who are majorly the consumers of political campaigns. The conventional media, in this aspect, the mainstream media, have since laid the background and foundation for political marketing. In the 21st century, the nexus between social media and political marketing is become more glaring by the day. Social media usage in political marketing encourages more engagement and interaction between political actors and potential voters.

Additionally, social media platforms become more user-friendly when applying the tenets of the three-stage model of political marketing. On social media, consumers' political demands are easily identified and responded to rapidly by political actors. Political messages are refined to suit a target audience and increase acceptance of political ideas with immediate feedback. Also, it is indisputable that the advancement in technology has changed the nature of politics and participation in Nigeria and globally. In recent times, social media platforms have created a digital community where people interact and express their feelings towards society's events during electioneering periods and other times.

Political campaigning in Nigeria in the 21st century is becoming professionalised, and political marketing is also becoming the new dominant campaign paradigm, specifically during elections periods and politics in general. Social media platforms should be utilised as an alternative to mainstream media for political marketing. However, there should be constant sensitisation and education on how these platforms should be used to avert the possible threats it poses. How political stakeholders use these social media platforms during political campaigns to woo voters is a technique that requires training to master because much money is budgeted by political parties and even political aspirants for political, social media campaigns.

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