

Digital Media, Propaganda and Voter Behaviour: A Comparative Analysis of the 2015 and 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700213>

Received: 11 July 2026; Accepted: 16 July 2026; Published: 29 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The intersection of digital media, propaganda, and voter behaviour has become increasingly prominent in contemporary political discourse, particularly in developing democracies such as Nigeria. This study comparatively investigated the impact of digital media on voters' behaviour in the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, with a specific focus on how propaganda was deployed through digital media to influence public perception and electoral outcomes in both polls. Anchored in media dependency theory, the research examined the strategic use of digital media, such as blogs, online news platforms, and messaging applications, by political actors and interest groups to frame narratives and perceptions, spread information and misinformation, and mobilise support. Using a comparative qualitative content analysis, the study analysed digital campaign content, news reports, and user engagement patterns across the two electoral cycles. The study's findings indicate that digital media serves as a strategic tool for democratic expression, political communication, and voter manipulation in Nigeria. The study concluded that both elections highlighted the increasingly central role of digital media in shaping voter perception and political legitimacy in Nigeria's democracy. The study recommends strengthening media literacy initiatives, clarifying digital regulation, and implementing targeted electoral reforms to mitigate the adverse effects of propaganda and safeguard democratic processes.

Keywords: Digital Media, Propaganda, Voters' Choice, 2015 Nigerian Elections, 2023 Nigerian Elections

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital media technologies has shaped the evolution of political communication in the 21st century. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, and YouTube have transformed how political actors engage with citizens, disseminate information, mobilise supporters and influence electoral outcomes (Bartlett et al., 2015; Ekwueme, 2017). In Nigeria, this transformation is evident in the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections. In these elections, digital media emerged as a central arena for mobilisation and voter engagement (Adebayo, 2023).

Historically, political communication in Nigeria was dominated by conventional media, which include television, radio, and print journalism. These acted as gatekeepers of electoral information. However, digital media have liberated the media space, and the proliferation of internet-enabled devices has significantly decentralised information flows. Digital media have transformed political communication by enabling political actors to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and engage with citizens directly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Digital media played a significant role in the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections, where political actors used them to disseminate campaign messages, mobilise support, and circulate persuasive content that is sometimes misleading (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Isika & Akinade, 2023). This shift created fertile ground for digital propaganda. It is therefore relevant to examine how these practices have evolved and how they influence voters' behaviour.

The rapid expansion of digital media has also intensified the spread of political propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation, creating new challenges for electoral integrity and voter decision-making. They have also enabled the rapid circulation of unverified and emotionally charged content. However, how these dynamics have

evolved across different electoral cycles in Nigeria remains insufficiently understood. There is limited comparative research analysing how digital propaganda has evolved across multiple electoral cycles. Existing studies often focus on either 2015, 2019, or 2023 in isolation, leaving a gap in understanding the longitudinal transformation of digital political communication and its cumulative effects on voter behaviour. As a result, there is limited empirical understanding of how digital propaganda strategies have evolved and how these shifts influence voter behaviour across different electoral contexts.

The 2015 and 2023 presidential elections represent critical turning points in Nigeria's digital political landscape. While 2015 marked the first major integration of social media into electoral campaigns, 2023 witnessed unprecedented youth-led mobilisation and sophisticated online propaganda networks. Comparing these two elections provides a unique opportunity to trace how digital media practices, voter engagement, and propaganda strategies have evolved. The persistence of digital propaganda in Nigeria's electoral process reflects broader global trends, where misinformation and online manipulation increasingly threaten democratic institutions. In Nigeria, these challenges are compounded by socio-political factors. Consequently, voter behaviour is shaped not only by national considerations but also by exposure to emotionally charged and strategically framed digital content. Despite growing scholarly attention to digital media and elections in Nigeria, there remains a gap in comparative analyses that systematically examine how digital media and propaganda have evolved between election cycles and how these changes influence voter behaviour.

Media Dependency Theory was applied to investigate these dynamics. The theory provides a useful lens for analysing these elections because it explains how individuals rely on the media for information, orientation, and decision-making during periods of uncertainty, such as elections. The study employs comparative qualitative content analysis of digital campaign materials, social media trends, online news reports, and sentiment analysis data. This approach enables systematic examination of narrative framing, propaganda patterns, and voter engagement across both electoral cycles. By comparing two pivotal elections, this study offers new insights into the evolution of digital political communication in Nigeria.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature; Section 3 presents the theoretical framework; Section 4 outlines the methodology; Section 5 provides the comparative analysis; and Section 6 discusses the findings and implications.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Digital media

The usefulness of digital media characterises contemporary societies. With the widespread adoption of personal computers, smartphones, tablets, and other mobile technologies, coupled with near-ubiquitous connectivity, digital media have become an integral part of the daily lives of ordinary people over the last two decades (Delfanti & Arvidsson, 2019). Digital media refers to any form of content or communication that is created, distributed, and accessed through digital technologies, primarily via the internet and electronic devices such as computers, smartphones, and tablets (Lister et al., 2009). It encompasses a wide range of platforms and tools, including websites, social media networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram), blogs, podcasts, video-sharing services (such as YouTube), mobile applications, and online news outlets (Lister et al., 2009).

The digital media environment in which we live is widespread, fluid, and highly efficient. While it is essential to acknowledge that they are not entirely distinct from older media forms and technologies, one defining technological characteristic of contemporary media is that they are digital. Digital media plays a crucial role in modern communication and culture. It transformed how information is disseminated and consumed, enabling real-time interaction and engagement across global platforms. Unlike traditional media, digital media allow real-time interaction, personalisation, and mass participation in political discourse (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In electoral contexts, digital media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, mobilising voters, and disseminating both factual and misleading political content (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013).

Propaganda

Propaganda, defined as the strategic dissemination of biased or misleading information to influence public opinion, has long been a feature of political contests (Robinson et al., 2019). Propaganda is a strategy commonly used in the public domain. In democratic societies, it is often used during elections to shape narratives about candidates, parties, and national issues. Propaganda refers to the deliberate and systematic use of communication strategies, often biased, misleading, or emotionally charged, to influence public perception and promote a specific political agenda or ideology. It usually involves selective presentation of facts, repetition, emotional appeals, and framing to persuade target audiences (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). Unlike traditional propaganda channels, digital platforms allow anonymous, rapid dissemination of content, often with limited verification or oversight (Lu et al., 2025). Propaganda found fertile ground in digital spaces during Nigeria's 2015 and 2023 presidential elections. In 2015, social media emerged as a potent tool in the electoral space, with political parties leveraging Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to engage and persuade the electorate (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

Voter behaviour

Voter behaviour, on the other hand, refers to the actions, attitudes, and decisions of individuals when choosing among political candidates or parties during elections. It is influenced by a combination of factors, including political ideology, ethnicity, religion, media exposure, propaganda, socioeconomic status, and party loyalty (Campbell et al., 1960; Bratton, 2008). In recent years, the media, particularly digital media, have become a significant factor shaping voter behaviour through targeted messaging and online discourse. Voter behaviour in Nigeria is shaped not only by historical and ethnic affiliations but increasingly by digital media engagement and exposure to online political messaging (Bratton, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have examined the role of media in political communication and its influence on voter behaviour. Traditional media such as radio, television, and newspapers once served as dominant gatekeepers of political information, shaping public opinion and controlling the flow of electoral messages. However, the advent of digital media has disrupted this landscape, decentralising information flows and enabling political actors to bypass traditional institutions and engage directly with citizens (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In Nigeria, the liberalisation of the media space and the proliferation of internet-enabled devices have accelerated this shift, creating a more interactive but less regulated communication environment (Ogunsola et al., 2026). Digital platforms were widely used in the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections to disseminate political messages, mobilise support, and influence voter behaviour, particularly among young people who constitute a significant portion of the electorate (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Isika & Akinade, 2023). This transformation created fertile ground for digital propaganda, necessitating a closer examination of how these practices have evolved and shaped voter behaviour.

Uwalaka and Watkins (2018) noted that the 2015 Nigerian elections marked a significant shift in political campaigning, where digital media became a critical space for mass political messaging and public engagement. The authors highlighted the extensive use of propaganda, including emotionally charged content, character framing, and fear appeals that influenced voter preferences. Similarly, Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) analysed the nexus between fake news and political propaganda in both the 2015 and 2019 elections, asserting that digital media enabled the rapid dissemination of unverified political information, often without editorial oversight or verification. Furthermore, Obot and Essien (2021) noted that fake news during elections usually targeted opposition candidates with inflammatory narratives, contributing to voter misinformation and distrust in the electoral system.

In a comparative analysis of digital campaign strategies, Ogunyemi (2022) examined the increasingly sophisticated use of digital tools in the 2023 presidential election. Techniques such as micro-targeting, influencer endorsements, political memes, and coordinated hashtag campaigns have become widespread. Ogunyemi's study also highlighted how digital propaganda contributed to voter polarisation and ethnic profiling, especially

in contentious political climates. These findings align with the work of Ojebuyi and Salawu (2021) on digital political communication in West Africa, which found that although digital media democratises access to information, it also enables the proliferation of echo chambers and disinformation bubbles that reduce civic deliberation and rational decision-making.

Aina and Olaniyi (2023) examined digital engagement patterns in Nigeria's 2023 elections and found that digital media algorithms amplified content aligned with users' prior beliefs, reinforcing ideological divides. This finding echoes the concerns raised by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) about "personalised political communication", where fragmented audiences receive tailored propaganda, making collective deliberation more difficult. Ajayi (2023) also emphasised the organic digital mobilisation of young voters in support of third-party candidates, such as Peter Obi, noting that this digital activism was instrumental in shaping political discourse, especially among urban youth.

However, the increased use of digital media intensified the challenges associated with disinformation and propaganda. Unlike traditional propaganda channels, digital platforms enable anonymous and rapid dissemination of content, often without verification (Ajayi, 2023). In the Nigerian context, political propaganda during the 2015 elections frequently exploited ethnic, religious, and regional identities, shaping voter perceptions and, in some cases, influencing voting behaviour (Okolie et al., 2021). Studies reveal that fake news and misleading content were widely circulated during the 2023 election, influencing voter perception and contributing to political polarisation (Alade, 2023). The proliferation of unverified information is often amplified by algorithms and echo chambers, creating an environment in which voters are exposed to competing narratives, some deliberately crafted to manipulate electoral choices. Furthermore, the credibility of information sources became a significant concern, as voters struggled to distinguish between factual reporting and politically motivated content (Ogunsola et al., 2026). This underscores the dual nature of digital media as both a tool for democratic engagement and a conduit for manipulation.

Despite this growing body of research, gaps remain in comparative analyses across multiple electoral cycles in Nigeria. Most studies focused on either the 2015, 2019, or 2023 elections in isolation, with limited emphasis on how digital media and propaganda evolved and on the socio-political contexts that shaped their application and effectiveness. Further, while existing literature acknowledges the rise of digital platforms in shaping voter behaviour, there is an insufficient empirical focus on the impact of digital political propaganda and the dynamics it introduces across different electoral environments. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge that gap by comparatively examining the nature, tools and outcomes of digital media propaganda in the 2015 and 2023 Nigerian presidential elections.

METHODOLOGY

To examine the role of digital media and propaganda in shaping voter behaviour during the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, the study adopted a comparative qualitative research design. This design enabled systematic comparison of two distinct electoral cycles, allowing the study to identify changes and emerging patterns in digital political communication. A qualitative content analysis was used to examine the development and patterns in digital campaigns, social media trends, and online news reports in both elections. Content analysis enables the systematic interpretation of digital textual and visual content, including political messaging, propaganda narratives, and online engagement patterns.

The content analysis followed a structured coding procedure. Digital materials were selected for their relevance to presidential campaign messaging and for trending or high-engagement posts before the election. To improve reliability and transparency, the content was coded manually after reading, writing and organising into themes. The Codes were cross-checked against patterns identified in IFES sentiment analysis. The four categories identified include emotional appeals, misinformation/disinformation, mobilisation strategies, and voter reactions. To enhance reliability.

The study relied exclusively on secondary data sources, drawn from two main sources. First, digital political communication and online media content were analysed, including social media posts and trends, digital campaign materials, online news reports, and political commentary published before the 2015 and 2023 elections. These materials provided insight into how political actors used digital platforms to mobilise supporters, frame narratives, and disseminate propaganda.

Second, the study incorporated sentiment analysis data from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). IFES utilised Crimson Hexagon, a social media analytics tool, to assess key trends in Nigerian digital discussions during the 2015 election. The dataset provided insights into the level and tone of discussion around major electoral events, public reactions to the use of card readers on Election Day, engagement levels on Facebook and Twitter, and broader patterns of online political discourse.

This combination of digital content and sentiment analysis provided a robust foundation for examining propaganda and voter engagement across both election cycles. The comparative design was essential for bridging gaps in existing scholarship by analysing how digital media platforms were utilised for propaganda in two pivotal elections. It enabled the study to trace the evolution of digital political communication between 2015 and 2023, identify shifts in propaganda strategies, and examine how these practices influenced voter behaviour over time.

Although this study is based on secondary data, it still indirectly captures voter perspectives and behavioural trends. It used sentiment analysis and engagement patterns from existing surveys. Insights were drawn from the IFES Crimson Hexagon dataset on how voters reacted to issues such as PVC distribution and card reader problems, which affected their trust in the electoral body. By integrating qualitative content analysis with secondary digital data and IFES sentiment analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the changing nature of electoral politics in Nigeria. It provides insights into how digital media shapes political engagement and influences voters' decisions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theories, such as Agenda Setting Theory, Propaganda Model, and Media Dependency Theory, were considered for the study. This study adopts Media Dependency Theory (MDT) as its guiding framework. Media Dependency Theory provides a useful lens for analysing these elections because it explains how individuals rely on media for information, orientation, and decision-making during periods of uncertainty. As digital media became more central between 2015 and 2023, voter dependency on online platforms intensified, increasing the potential influence of propaganda and misinformation.

MDT was developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976. It was designed as a framework for understanding the interplay between media, audiences, and society during periods of change or crisis. The theory posits that individuals rely on media to fulfil their needs for information, understanding, and guidance, especially when they face uncertainty (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The election period is a peak period of uncertainty because several candidates with different manifestos and propaganda are trying to discredit their opponents as they try to convince the electorate to cast their votes in their favour. As dependency on media increases, the potential influence of media messages on the audience's attitudes, emotions, and behaviours also grows.

The core assumption of MDT is that the greater the dependency on media to understand the environment and make decisions, the stronger the media's effects. In times of social or political instability, such as elections, protests, or conflicts, people are more likely to depend on the media, and the media, in turn, gains greater power to shape perceptions and behaviours (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Currently, digital media has become a significant channel, as it is easily accessible and offers more comprehensive coverage. This makes MDT particularly suitable for examining how digital media platforms were utilised as tools of propaganda, which influenced voter behaviour during Nigeria's 2015 and 2023 presidential elections. Digital media began gaining a foothold in Nigerian elections. By 2023, the most recent election year, digital media had become a central strategy for all political parties. The MDT provides us with a lens for considering this topic, and based on the

theory, when people depend primarily on the media for information, it becomes the centre of contestation, attracting propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and divisive content. Citizens' reliance on digital media will invariably tilt votes in favour of the candidate with the best digital media strategy and propaganda, such as the youth-led grassroots online campaign of the #ObedientMovement. Therefore, the force of propaganda was more heavily projected on digital media platforms in 2023 than in any other year in Nigeria's electoral history. The centrality of digital media in reaching mainly young people contributed to the rise of propaganda targeting young citizens, especially first-time voters.

Critics of Media Dependency Theory argue that it overemphasises media power and assumes a passive audience, ignoring the role of individual agency and selective exposure (Rubin & Windahl, 1986). In today's digital media landscape, where users can generate and share content, the theory has been challenged for failing to fully capture the dynamics of interactive media. Nonetheless, recent scholars have re-contextualised MDT to include digital media environments, particularly emphasising how algorithmic content curation, misinformation, and real-time updates intensify dependency (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

This theory is especially relevant to this study because it explains how and why Nigerian voters depended on digital media as their primary source of political information and engagement. During the 2015 elections, digital media was beginning to emerge as a political force, but by 2023, it had become the central battleground for voter influence and the dissemination of propaganda (Oyenuga, 2015; Ogunyemi, 2022). Overall, MDT provides a robust framework for analysing how digital media shaped voter behaviour in the 2015 and 2023 elections by highlighting the relationship between media reliance, propaganda exposure, and electoral decision-making.

Overview Of The 2015 And 2023 Presidential Elections

The 2015 and 2023 separate presidential elections in Nigeria stand out as defining milestones in the country's democratic evolution. Although separated by eight years, the two elections were markedly shaped by contrasting political climates, socio-economic conditions, voter expectations and behaviour, digital media dynamics, and electoral outcomes. Together, they illustrate the transformation of Nigeria's electoral politics, particularly the deepening role of digital media, online mobilisation, and propaganda in shaping political discourse and voter behaviour.

The 2015 Presidential Election

Historical Significance and Political Context

The 2015 presidential election was historic for being the first time an opposition party defeated an incumbent president at the polls in Nigeria. Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) defeated President Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) with 15.4 million votes to Jonathan's 12.8 million, marking a significant power shift (INEC, 2015). The election was primarily seen as a referendum on corruption, insecurity (especially the Boko Haram insurgency), and economic stagnation under Jonathan's administration (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). It also witnessed a significant mobilisation of digital media and political messaging, with social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook emerging as tools for voter education, propaganda, and political engagement (Oyenuga, 2015). This outcome marked a major political realignment and reflected widespread public dissatisfaction with the PDP's 16-year rule.

The election unfolded against a backdrop of intense national anxiety. Several structural and governance challenges shaped voter sentiment:

- Escalating insecurity: The Boko Haram insurgency had intensified, with frequent attacks and territorial occupation in parts of the northeast.
- Economic stagnation: Declining oil revenues, rising unemployment, and inflation contributed to economic hardship.

- Corruption scandals: High-profile allegations of mismanagement eroded public trust in Jonathan's administration.
- Demand for change: Buhari's campaign capitalised on widespread frustration, presenting him as a disciplined, incorruptible alternative.

These conditions created a political climate in which voters were highly receptive to the opposition's narratives of reform, accountability, and strong leadership.

Digital Media Mobilisation and Propaganda

The 2015 election marked a turning point in Nigeria's digital political landscape. For the first time, social media became a central arena for political communication, mobilisation, and propaganda. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp were deployed strategically by political parties, candidates, civil society organisations, and ordinary citizens.

Digital media played several critical roles:

- Voter education: Information on voting procedures and electoral guidelines is circulated widely online.
- Political persuasion: Campaign teams disseminated speeches, manifestos, and promotional videos to shape public opinion.
- Propaganda: Emotionally charged content, memes, selective framing, and misinformation were deployed to influence perceptions of candidates.
- Civic engagement: Online discussions, hashtags, and debates encouraged political participation, especially among young voters.

Empirical evidence from Bartlett et al. (2015) shows that 12.4 million tweets were posted about the election, with 1.38 million unique Twitter users generating content. Facebook also recorded significant engagement, with 216,000 users interacting with political content on popular public pages.

The APC's digital strategy was particularly effective. Hashtags such as #Change2015 and #Buhari4Change trended widely, reinforcing Buhari's anti-corruption image. WhatsApp groups served as hubs for emotionally charged messages, often containing manipulated photos, religious appeals, and unverifiable statistics. In contrast, the PDP struggled to adapt to the digital environment, relying more heavily on traditional media and failing to counter the dominant online narrative.

Competitiveness and Electoral Dynamics

The 2015 election is widely regarded as one of the most competitive in Nigeria's history. Digital media intensified this competitiveness by enabling rapid dissemination of campaign messages and facilitating real-time political engagement. Studies indicate that digital platforms stimulated political discussions and enhanced civic engagement more than in any previous election (Ezeh & Mboso, 2018). Social media played a significant role in shaping political discourse and mobilising youth and urban voters (Adebayo, 2023).

The 2023 Presidential Election

The 2023 election featured four major candidates: Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC), Atiku Abubakar (PDP), Peter Obi (Labour Party), and Rabi'u Kwankwaso (NNPP). Tinubu won with 8.8 million votes, while Atiku and Obi received 6.9 million and 6.1 million votes, respectively (INEC, 2023). Tinubu's victory occurred in a highly competitive and polarised electoral environment, with unprecedented youth mobilisation and heightened scrutiny of electoral processes. The 2023 election was also marked by controversies over electoral transparency,

delays in the transmission of results via the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Result Viewing (IReV) portal, and allegations of voter suppression and rigging (Yiaga Africa, 2023).

Political and Socio-Economic Context

The 2023 election took place in a vastly different environment. Nigeria faced severe economic hardship, persistent insecurity, rising inflation, and widespread public distrust of political elites. These conditions shaped voter expectations and intensified demands for political reform.

Youth Mobilisation and the Rise of Digital Activism

A defining feature of the 2023 election was heightened youth participation driven largely by digital activism and online movements, reflecting a shift towards more networked and participatory forms of politics (Chukwu, 2025). Peter Obi's candidacy catalysed widespread support among young Nigerians and the urban middle class, amplified through the #ObedientMovement on Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok (Ajayi, 2023).

Digital activism played several roles:

- Grassroots mobilisation: Volunteers organised rallies, fundraising, and voter education online.
- Narrative framing: Influencers and activists shaped political discourse through hashtags, videos, commentary, and political memes.
- Real-time engagement: Platforms enabled immediate responses to political events, debates, and controversies.
- Collective identity formation: The movement created a sense of shared purpose among young voters demanding political change.

Electoral Controversies and Digital Transparency

Significant controversies marked the 2023 election:

- Delays in uploading results to the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal
- Technical failures affecting real-time result transmission
- Allegations of voter suppression
- Claims of rigging and manipulation

Civil society organisations such as Yiaga Africa (2023) documented irregularities that fuelled public distrust and heightened political polarisation.

Sophistication of Digital Media Use

Compared to 2015, digital media use in 2023 was more advanced and multifaceted. Campaigns deployed:

- Data-driven propaganda
- AI-generated content
- Influencer-driven messaging
- Real-time disinformation networks

- Micro-targeting and psychographic profiling
- Crowdsourced mobilisation and fundraising

The Labour Party's digital strategy stood out for its organic, youth-led enthusiasm, while the APC and PDP operated large content farms and digital war rooms. Meltwater analytics showed millions of daily impressions for hashtags such as #TinubuForPresident, #AtikuIsComing, and #Obidient.

Disinformation around BVAS and IReV became potent propaganda tools, undermining trust in the electoral process (Ogunyemi, 2023). Studies also show that ethnic and religious bigotry intensified online, influencing voter behaviour (Abumbe & Atai, 2024).

Impacts Of Digital Media And Propaganda

In 2015, incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan lost re-election to an opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari. A key contributor to this historic shift was the strategic use of digital media for propaganda and voter mobilisation. This was the first Nigerian election where digital media, such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp, were systematically employed for political messaging, propaganda, and mobilisation. Although digital penetration was still growing, with internet usage reaching approximately 43% of the population in 2015 (Internet World Stats, 2016), the All Progressives Congress (APC) effectively utilised social media to craft persuasive political narratives. The APC and its candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, leveraged social media extensively to mobilise support, particularly among young and urban voters (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

The APC ran a highly coordinated digital campaign to discredit the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and its candidate, incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, while portraying Buhari as a symbol of change. Hashtags such as #Change2015 and #Buhari4Change trended on Twitter and Facebook. Buhari's campaign team employed digital content, including video clips, memes, infographics, and viral quotes, to reinforce his anti-corruption credentials and attack the Jonathan administration's handling of Boko Haram and economic mismanagement (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). WhatsApp groups, often controlled by party operatives, served as distribution hubs for emotionally charged messages, usually containing manipulated photos, religious appeals, and unverifiable statistics. In contrast, the PDP was not very efficient in its digital outreach. Though it relied more on traditional media, propaganda still circulated digitally, including images and fear-inducing messages linking Buhari to religious extremism (Omoera & Obaro, 2018).

Digital propaganda significantly shaped how voters perceived candidates and electoral issues. Buhari's online portrayal as an anti-corruption crusader swayed many undecided voters, while Jonathan was associated with inefficiency and insecurity (Oyenuga, 2015). In their research, Bartlett et al. (2015) found that Twitter was ten times as active during the election period as at other times. Their findings showed that 12.4 million tweets were posted about the elections during the period, and these tweets were categorised into reportage (describing events) and comments on events. There were 1.38 million unique Twitter users posting content about the elections, while 216,000 Facebook users interacted with content on popular public Facebook pages (Bartlett et al, 2015).

Before Nigeria's 2015 presidential elections, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) analysed key trends on Nigerian social media using the sentiment analysis tool Crimson Hexagon. The tool was used to assess the level and tone of discussion around key electoral events, such as the distribution of Permanent Voters' Cards (PVCs), the potential for electoral violence, and the use of card readers on Election Day. IFES also measured engagement with the INEC on Facebook and Twitter, as well as confidence in its Chairman, in the wake of the electoral delay (IFES, 2015). Content analysis reveals that high emotional appeal, negative attack ads, and moral-panic rhetoric characterised the propaganda during the 2015 election. The Jonathan campaign, by contrast, was slower to adapt to the digital environment and failed to counter the dominant narrative effectively. Empirically, Buhari's victory was significantly supported by the youth and urban voters, two demographics highly active on digital platforms (Oyenuga, 2015).

By 2023, Nigeria's digital media environment had matured with more political communication. Internet penetration reached over 73 million users, with smartphone adoption and data access becoming increasingly widespread (Statista, 2023). Unlike in 2015, when digital propaganda was limited to basic formats, the 2023 election cycle featured data-driven propaganda, AI-generated content, influencer campaigns, and real-time disinformation networks. The campaigns featured three major candidates: Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress, Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) and Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples' Democratic Party. The 2023 campaigns were conducted primarily online, with Peter Obi's campaign particularly standing out for its robust digital strategy, characterised by organic, youth-led movements and engagement across multiple platforms (Isika & Akinade, 2023). The LP's digital enthusiasm was controlled through the #ObedientMovement, a grassroots social media-driven campaign dominated by younger Nigerians, tech-savvy users, and first-time voters. The movement gained momentum on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp, deploying issue-based advocacy and anti-establishment rhetoric (Isika & Akinade, 2023). Digital propaganda in Obi's campaign often centred on themes of accountability, youth inclusion, and systemic reform, with a heavy use of user-generated content, including TikTok explainer videos and viral songs.

Conversely, the APC and PDP operated large content farms and digital war rooms to produce and circulate strategic propaganda. A quantitative review of the 2023 Twitter trends (via Meltwater social analytics) shows that hashtags like #TinubuForPresident, #AtikuIsComing, and #Obidient collectively garnered millions of impressions daily, suggesting a massive digital footprint and potential influence on voting intention and discourse framing. Disinformation around the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and IReV also became potent propaganda tools, undermining public trust in the electoral process (Ogunyemi, 2023). Digital propaganda also significantly shaped voters' perception of Peter Obi as a youth-centric reformer, a narrative heavily sustained by online communities and influencers (Isika & Akinade, 2023). However, the spread of disinformation also led to confusion, political apathy and sometimes aggressive online behaviour. This affected how users consumed information, aligning with biases which further deepened political polarisation (Arowolo & Ogande, 2024).

Alaba & Ogande (2024), in their study of 381 respondents, revealed that Facebook was the dominant platform for political engagement (34.9 per cent), with 69.8 per cent of respondents frequently interacting with political content. It also highlighted the significant impact of social media on voting decisions, with 62.4 per cent of respondents acknowledging its influence. Despite its benefits, the study shows that misinformation and challenges in content verification were considered major obstacles.

In summary, digital media evolved from basic propaganda tools in 2015 to highly sophisticated, data-driven instruments of persuasion and manipulation in 2023. This transformation underscores the growing centrality of digital platforms in Nigeria's electoral politics and highlights the urgent need for regulatory frameworks, digital literacy, and fact-checking mechanisms.

Comparative Analysis

Digital media and propaganda played a significant role in shaping voter behaviour and the political discourse in Nigeria, which underwent substantial transformation between the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections. Both elections highlight the dynamic interplay between technology, political strategy, and voter psychology. However, the sophistication, coverage, tools, and impact of digital media propaganda differed significantly between the two electoral cycles. In 2015, Nigeria experienced its first substantial integration of digital media into its electoral campaigns, primarily through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The All Progressives Congress campaign team strategically mobilised social media to craft a populist narrative portraying Muhammadu Buhari as a disciplined, incorruptible leader, in contrast to the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, who was depicted as incompetent, ineffective, and corrupt (Oyenuga, 2015). The digital messaging focused on binary narratives, such as "change vs continuity" and "anti-corruption vs impunity", using emotional appeals and slogans (change is coming). Despite being relatively organic and volunteer-driven, this strategy contributed to voter enthusiasm, especially among urban youth (Omoera & Obaro, 2019).

In contrast, the 2023 election campaigns represented a more institutionalised and data-driven use of digital propaganda. By 2023, social media platforms were readily accessible to Nigerians who could afford a smartphone. These platforms were not just supplementary but central to campaign strategy. Campaign teams employed professional digital strategies, data analytics, and algorithm profiling experts to target specific demographics. Tools such as psychographic analysis, similar to those used by Cambridge Analytica, enabled micro-targeting of messages tailored to voter anxieties and aspirations (Oladeji & Bello, 2023).

Beyond the effects of digital media, contextual conditions also shaped voter behaviour in both elections. In 2015, widespread insecurity caused by Boko Haram, declining oil revenues, and corruption scandals created a political environment in which voters were highly receptive to the APC's call for "change". In contrast, by 2023, the condition had become severe before the election. There was severe inflation, currency depreciation, rising unemployment, and distrust in the political class. This set the stage for youth mobilisation to put pressure on the traditional political structure. Also, a candidate, Peter Obi, who was not associated with the ruling class, could appeal better to the electorate. This means that digital propaganda interacted with socio-economic anxieties, heightening voters' dependence on online information sources.

A notable shift in 2023 was the emergence of the Labour Party's candidate, Peter Obi, whose online movement, referred to as the "Obedient Movement", capitalised on the decentralised, participatory nature of social media. Obi's support base, especially among Gen Z and Millennials, used hashtags like #Obedient and #TakeBackNigeria to challenge the dominance of traditional parties (Arowolo & Ogande, 2024). Propaganda was not just about persuasion; it evolved into algorithmic manipulation, sentiment engineering, and perception warfare, challenging the traditional political class and its actors. These created a ripple in the polity, and the influence was evident in the viral nature of user-generated content, digital town halls, and real-time policy discussions.

A rise in weaponised propaganda and misinformation paralleled the democratisation of digital media. Compared to the 2015 elections, the 2023 elections saw a surge in coordinated misinformation campaigns. AI-generated messages, synthetic visuals, and deepfakes were deployed to misrepresent candidates and their parties. Empirical data by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) identified that over 80 per cent of political misinformation during the 2023 elections circulated via WhatsApp and Facebook (CDD, 2023). In the post-election report submitted to the Nigerian government by the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the observers alleged that websites were engaged in the use of confirmation bias, cherry-picking information, emotional manipulation, conspiracy theories, selective framing, misleading headlines, out-of-context content, and advertorial journalism, in promoting their party and its candidates and of course, discrediting the opposition during the electioneering campaign (Olagunju, 2023).

Furthermore, the use of influencers and bot networks amplified these messages. Popular social media personalities were reportedly paid to endorse specific candidates or discredit others (BBC Africa, 2023). In contrast, the 2015 election's propaganda was largely grassroots-driven and lacked algorithmic intensity. While both elections experienced hate speech, the 2023 polls recorded a noticeable rise in ethnic and religious bigotry online. This was fuelled by messages on the various digital media. The study by Abumbe & Atai (2024) corroborates the finding that the candidates' ethnicity and religion strongly influenced voter behaviour and the outcome of the 2023 presidential elections. Voter behaviour and reactions also differed across the two periods. In 2015, digital propaganda essentially enhanced political participation and optimism among the populace. However, by 2023, the digital space, though more engaged, also bred disillusionment. This was partly due to the failure of digital electoral tools employed by INEC, such as the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV), which created a gap between expectations of transparency and realities of perceived electoral outcomes, diminishing them, creating what scholars call the 'transparency paradox' of digital democracy (Kalu-Nwiwu, 2023).

Overall, the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections illustrate a profound transformation in Nigeria's digital political environment, revealing a shift from symbolic, narrative-driven propaganda to highly sophisticated, data-driven manipulation and perception warfare. While digital media expanded political participation and enhanced communication in both electoral cycles, their largely unregulated use also enabled the spread of

misinformation, the coordination of disinformation networks, and targeted psychological influence. The contrast between the relatively organic, volunteer-driven mobilisation of 2015 and the algorithmic, influencer-powered propaganda ecosystems of 2023 underscores the increasing centrality and volatility of digital platforms in shaping voter behaviour and electoral outcomes. This evolution highlights the urgent need for comprehensive media regulatory frameworks, strengthened digital literacy initiatives, and independent fact-checking mechanisms to safeguard Nigeria's democratic processes in future elections.

Implications For Future Elections in Africa

The implications of this study for future elections in Nigeria, as well as lessons for other African democracies, lie in the central role of digital media and propaganda in elections. The 2015 elections proved that with the right strategy, an incumbent can be democratically unseated. The 2015 election demonstrated that a well-coordinated digital strategy can enable opposition parties to challenge incumbents on a level playing field, offering important lessons for other African democracies on how digital mobilisation can reshape electoral outcomes. When an incumbent knows that the opposition threatens their seat, it leads to the provision of democratic dividends and the promotion of economic programmes and social welfare. The relative success of the #Obedient Movement in the 2023 election indicates that a grassroots digital movement, led by vibrant youth, is on the rise, with the potential to disrupt the traditional electoral campaign system. The #Obedient Movement claimed no loyalty to a political party structure but their devotion to Peter Obi, a presidential candidate in the 2023 election. Therefore, party machinery may not be necessary for the upcoming social media mobilisation tsunami of youth who are fed up with the traditional political system and governance.

The danger of creating a transparency paradox was that the electoral umpire was to use digital electoral tools like INEC's IReV portal to prevent electoral malpractice, but ditched them when needed, creating suspicion about the credibility and transparency of the 2023 elections. This seed of digital disillusionment threatens the beneficial role of transparency expectations in the use of digital media in elections, potentially leading to civil unrest and political apathy. It is essential that African democracies, particularly their electoral bodies, present themselves as transparent, independent, and credible. There were indications of ethno-religious polarisation as digital media gained prominence in the 2023 election. This is dangerous to national cohesion and the promotion of a peaceful democracy. States must implement an awareness programme to educate citizens about the use of digital media. There should be a collaboration between the government, civil society and tech companies to create digital literacy, combat misinformation and disinformation, and agree on a regulated digital space that will prevent the use of divisive attributes that go against the norms and values of the state in its quest to promote national unity and democratic practices.

Limitations Of the Study

Although this study provides important insights into how digital media and propaganda shaped voter behaviour in Nigeria's 2015 and 2023 presidential elections, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies solely on secondary digital content, meaning it does not include direct voter interviews or surveys that could provide first-hand evidence of how individuals interpreted and responded to online political messages. As a result, voter behaviour is inferred indirectly through sentiment analysis, engagement metrics, and findings from existing empirical studies.

Second, while qualitative content analysis was applied systematically, the absence of a fully detailed coding protocol and inter-coder reliability checks may limit the reproducibility of the findings. Future studies using mixed methods or larger coding teams could strengthen analytical rigour. Third, the comparative focus on 2015 and 2023 does not fully capture broader socio-political variations such as regional differences, economic shocks, or security dynamics that may have interacted with digital propaganda in complex ways.

Finally, the study does not disaggregate voter responses by demographic factors such as age, education, digital literacy, or geographic location. These variables are increasingly important in understanding why certain groups are more susceptible to misinformation or more active in digital mobilisation. These limitations point directly to the

need for more voter-centred, platform-specific, and demographic-focused research, which the subsequent recommendations address.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the relationship between digital media, propaganda, and voter behaviour in the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that digital media is an indispensable tool in political communication and electoral mobilisation. There is an increase in their disruptive and manipulative potential between the two electoral cycles. In 2015, the APC's digital strategy, anchored in simple messaging, emotional appeals, and coordinated dissemination through Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, played a decisive role in Buhari's victory. By contrast, the 2023 election unfolded within a far more complex and competitive digital environment. This shift benefited the Obi-led Labour Party's youth-driven online movement, illustrating the power of grassroots digital activism in shaping electoral outcomes.

The assertion of the Media Dependency Theory that the greater the dependence on media to understand the environment in times of uncertainty, the stronger the media's effects, was confirmed by contextual differences that led to severe dependence on media. In 2015, uncertainty was driven primarily by insecurity and corruption. Voters therefore rely on and trust digital narratives promising stability and reform. In 2023, economic hardship and declining trust in political institutions set the stage for reliance on user-generated digital content and influencer commentary. Across both elections, digital media and propaganda, ranging from disinformation, micro-targeting, and algorithmic amplification to ethnically charged rhetoric and emotionally persuasive content, were dominant forces influencing public perception and voter behaviour. As voters became more dependent on digital platforms, they also became more vulnerable to manipulation, misinformation, and polarising narratives, underscoring the dual role of digital media as both an enabler of democratic participation and a conduit for electoral distortion.

Although this study provides important insights into how digital media and propaganda shaped voter behaviour in Nigeria's 2015 and 2023 presidential elections, it has some limitations. The study used secondary data without direct, firsthand evidence of how individual voters interpreted online political messages and how their attitudes changed. Other socio-political variables could have been relevant if the study had expanded beyond the 2015 and 2023 elections. Finally, the study does not examine demographic differences such as age, education, digital literacy, or geographic location, which may shape how voters respond to digital propaganda.

In light of these insights, the study recommends the following:

1. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in collaboration with the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), should establish clearer and more enforceable guidelines on digital political advertising. These should include rules on content regulation, transparency in sponsored posts, disclosure requirements, and campaign timelines. Such measures will enhance accountability and reduce the misuse of digital platforms during elections.
2. The National Orientation Agency (NOA), alongside civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, should intensify civic education initiatives focused on digital media literacy. These programmes should equip citizens, especially those in rural and semi-literate communities, with the skills to identify propaganda, misinformation, and fake news. Strengthening public resilience against manipulation will improve the quality of democratic participation.
3. Digital media companies, such as Meta, Twitter, and Google, should work closely with Nigerian regulators and election monitoring bodies to detect and remove harmful content and coordinated disinformation campaigns during the election period. Improved cooperation will help safeguard the integrity of the digital information environment.
4. Future research should involve direct voter engagement to deepen understanding of how digital propaganda shapes political attitudes and electoral choices. Comparing digital platforms, which differ in

their communication styles and algorithmic applications, could offer more insights into their individual roles in shaping political discourse. Other variables that influence how people interpret and respond to online political content should be studied, as they will clarify why certain populations are more vulnerable to propaganda than others.

Taken together, these recommendations highlight the urgent need for a more transparent, regulated, and digitally literate electoral ecosystem. As Nigeria's democracy continues to evolve, strengthening the governance of digital media will be essential to ensuring credible elections, informed voter participation, and long-term democratic stability.

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