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Influence of WhatsApp Broadcast Messages on Political Discourse during the 2023 Presidential Election in Selected South-South States of Nigeria

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Abstract

This study, examined how exposure to WhatsApp broadcasts shaped voters' perceptions of political candidates and their engagement in political communication. Guided by the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the study explored how WhatsApp, as a rapidly diffusing digital innovation, functioned as a tool for political mobilisation, information exchange, and opinion formation during the election period. Employing a quantitative research design, the study used a multi-stage sampling technique to select 400 respondents across the three states, with data collected through structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including regression analysis. The findings revealed that WhatsApp served as a dominant channel of political communication during the 2023 presidential election, with 68.9% of respondents confirming frequent exposure to broadcast messages and 62.2% indicating that such messages positively influenced their perceptions of political candidates. The regression analysis ($\beta = 0.472$, $p = 0.000$) established a statistically significant relationship between exposure to WhatsApp broadcasts and voter perception. These findings affirm the relevance of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, as WhatsApp's relative advantage, ease of use, and compatibility with voters' communication habits accelerated its adoption and effectiveness as a medium for political messaging. The researchers conclude that WhatsApp significantly influenced political engagement and perception formation during the 2023 election, reshaping traditional modes of political communication into more interactive, peer-driven networks. It recommends that political campaigners and policymakers strategically employ



WhatsApp for voter education and engagement, while also developing mechanisms to counter misinformation and enhance the credibility of political communication on digital platforms.

Keywords: WhatsApp, broadcast messages, political discourse, diffusion of innovations, 2023 presidential election.

Introduction

In recent years, WhatsApp has emerged as one of the most widely used messaging platforms globally, particularly in regions like Nigeria. Launched in 2009 and later acquired by Facebook in 2014, WhatsApp allows users to send text messages, voice messages, images and videos, as well as engage in voice and video calls. Its user-friendly interface and end-to-end encryption feature have made it a popular choice for personal and group communication (Adeniyi, 2021). In Nigeria, WhatsApp has transcended its original purpose of simple messaging, evolving into a vital tool for political engagement and mobilisation, particularly during election periods. Ezegwu et al. (2024, p. 126) aver that “WhatsApp is one of the world’s most famous social media platforms. In the run-up to Nigeria’s 2023 general elections, the platform was used by political campaigners to disseminate messages, chase after voters and call to action through WhatsApp groups, both large and small.”

A key feature of WhatsApp that has gained prominence in political communication is the broadcast message function. This feature allows users to send messages to multiple contacts simultaneously without creating a group chat, thereby preserving the privacy of recipients. In the context of political discourse, broadcast messages serve as an effective means for political parties, candidates and activists to disseminate information quickly and efficiently. This capability is especially significant in a country with a large population and diverse communication preferences, as it enables political actors to reach a broader audience with tailored messages that can influence public opinion and voter behaviour (Afolabi, 2019).

Political discourse, particularly in the context of elections, refers to political ideas, beliefs and values are communicated and debated among citizens, candidates and institutions (Amiebaho et al., 2023; Asemah&Umoro, 2022). It comprises various forms of communication, from formal speeches and debates to informal conversations on social media platforms. In Nigeria, political discourse has been shaped by historical, social and economic factors, often reflecting the complexities of the nation's diverse ethnic and cultural landscape. The 2023 Nigerian presidential election, for instance, was marked by intense competition and an emphasis on issues such as security, corruption and economic development, which were actively discussed across various media, including WhatsApp (Egbulefu&Nwaoboli, 2023).

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was particularly significant as it represented a crucial moment in the country's democratic journey (Nwaoboli&Ajibulu, 2023; Ezegwu et al., 2024). The election saw a diverse array of candidates, including those from established political parties like the All Progressive Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Labour Party (LP) and new entrants seeking to challenge the status quo. Voter engagement was notably high, with social media platforms playing a central role in shaping public discourse and mobilising support (Oladimeji, 2023). The South-South region of Nigeria, which comprises states such as Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers, played a vital role in this electoral process. This region, characterised by its rich cultural heritage and significant oil resources, has often been a focal point for political dynamics in Nigeria (Nwaoboli, Nwammuo&Asemah, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). The inhabitants of these states are known for their active participation in political discussions and the diverse interests within the region often influence the broader national political landscape.



The increasing reliance on WhatsApp as a political communication tool in Nigeria has transformed how citizens access and share political information. While the platform enables swift dissemination of messages and mobilisation of voters, it has also become a major source of misinformation and political propaganda. Studies such as those by Ojebuyi and Awoleye (2022) and Okon and Udoudo (2021) have shown that WhatsApp plays a significant role in shaping political discourse during elections in Nigeria. However, these studies primarily focused on the general patterns of social media usage and political mobilisation, without critically examining the nature and effects of broadcast messages on voters' perception and behaviour.

During the 2023 presidential election, the widespread circulation of unverified broadcast messages on WhatsApp raised concerns about voters' exposure to fake news and emotionally charged political rhetoric (Okeibunor&Nwaoboli, 2024). This problem threatens informed political participation and may undermine the integrity of the electoral process. Although Oladimeji (2023) found that digital platforms enhance political engagement among Nigerian youths, they did not address how misinformation through WhatsApp broadcasts specifically influences voter perception or electoral decision-making. Furthermore, in the South-South region of Nigeria—where historical marginalisation, resource control struggles, and ethnic diversity shape political identity—the potential impact of WhatsApp political broadcasts is even more pronounced. Yet, few studies have examined how these messages reflect or shape political attitudes in this region. The lack of empirical evidence on how WhatsApp broadcast messages influence political discourse, voter behaviour, and participation in the South-South forms the critical gap this study seeks to fill.

The following are the objectives of this study are to:

1. Find out the extent of exposure to WhatsApp broadcast messages during the 2023 presidential election in select South-South states, in Nigeria.
2. Ascertain the impact of WhatsApp broadcast messages on the South-South region voters' perceptions of political candidates in the 2023 presidential election.

Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study is:

1. **H₀:** Exposure to WhatsApp broadcast messages did not significantly influence voters' perceptions of political candidates in the 2023 presidential election in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of Innovations Theory, developed by Everett Rogers in the 1960s, offers a framework for understanding how new ideas, practices and technologies spread within and between social systems. The theory emphasises that the adoption of innovations is a social process influenced by various factors, such as the characteristics of the innovation, the communication channels used for dissemination, the social system involved and the individual characteristics of adopters (Rogers, 2003). This framework underscores the dynamic interplay between innovation and social context, making it essential for understanding societal change.

The central tenets of Diffusion of Innovations Theory focus on several key concepts: the innovation itself, communication channels, social systems and adopter categories. The innovation's characteristics—such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability—play a crucial role in determining its rate of adoption. Innovations perceived as advantageous are more likely to be adopted



quickly. Communication channels refer to the means by which information about the innovation is disseminated, including interpersonal communication, mass media and social networks. Social systems encompass the norms, values and structures that influence how innovations are received. Lastly, Rogers identified five categories of adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards, each reflecting different levels of willingness to embrace new ideas (Rogers, 2003).

Despite its contributions, Diffusion of Innovations Theory has faced criticisms, particularly regarding its potential oversimplification of the diffusion process. Critics argue that the theory can neglect the influence of power dynamics and institutional factors that shape adoption (Valente, 1996). Furthermore, some researchers have pointed out that the linear model of diffusion may not accurately reflect the iterative and non-linear nature of how innovations spread in practice (Dearing & Cox, 2018).

In the current study assessing WhatsApp broadcast messages for political discourse during the 2023 presidential election in select South-South states of Nigeria, Diffusion of Innovations Theory can illuminate how political messages spread through social networks. Understanding the characteristics of these messages and their perceived advantages can help explain how political parties and candidates effectively reach and engage voters, influencing electoral outcomes.

Method

This study adopted a quantitative research design using a survey method to examine how WhatsApp broadcast messages impacted political discourse during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria's South-South region. The population comprised residents of three purposively selected states—Rivers, Delta, and Edo—chosen for their economic, cultural, and political significance, which make them representative of the region's diversity. Specifically, Rivers State was selected as the region's economic hub, Delta State for its cultural richness and history of political activism, and Edo State for its unique political leadership structure. Within these states, Eleme, Sapele, and Egor Local Government Areas (LGAs) were purposively chosen because they capture diverse socio-political realities, including urban and peri-urban dynamics. Based on the 2023 City Population Census projection, the total population across these LGAs was 824,684, from which a sample size of 400 respondents was derived using the Taro Yamane formula.

A multi-stage sampling technique, according to Asemah and Nwaoboli (2024) is used to ensure fair representation across the study area. In the first stage, the three states were selected purposively to reflect the distinct socio-political characteristics of the South-South region. In the second stage, three LGAs were chosen from each state to include both urban and semi-urban areas with active social media engagement. In the third stage, two wards were selected from each LGA using stratified random sampling, ensuring inclusion across different demographic groups such as youth, adults, and political actors. In the final stage, respondents were selected systematically from the chosen wards—133 each from Rivers and Edo, and 134 from Delta—bringing the total to 400 participants. The slight variation, with two states having 133 respondents and one state having 134, is justified because the sampling interval required an even distribution across the three states, and allocating 134 to one state ensured the sample size reached the exact total of 400 without altering the systematic sampling process. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire, containing closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to elicit respondents' perceptions of WhatsApp's role in political communication. The instrument's validity was confirmed by academic experts, while reliability was tested using the test-retest method, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.8, signifying high internal consistency. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to participation, with clear explanations provided about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and



anonymity of their responses, and all data collected were used solely for research purposes. The study adhered to ethical guidelines in social research, ensuring that no harm came to participants and that their privacy and personal information were fully respected.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to summarise responses and the regression analysis to test hypotheses. The choice of a quantitative approach was justified as it enabled objective measurement and statistical assessment of trends across a large, diverse population, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Out of the 400 copies of questionnaire distributed, 389 copies were retrieved and found valid while 11 copies were lost.

Findings

Table 1: Extent of Exposure to WhatsApp Broadcast Messages During the 2023 Presidential Election in Selected South-South States of Nigeria

Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
I frequently received WhatsApp broadcast messages related to the 2023 presidential election.	119 (30.6%)	149 (38.3%)	0 (0%)	68 (17.5%)	53 (13.6%)	3.5
I actively engage with WhatsApp broadcast messages concerning political candidates in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election.	101 (26.0%)	139 (35.7%)	11 (2.8%)	77 (19.8%)	61 (15.7%)	3.3
I believe that WhatsApp broadcast messages were a common source of political information among voters in my community in the 2023 presidential election.	137 (35.2%)	129 (33.2%)	13 (3.3%)	54 (13.9%)	56 (14.4%)	3.6
I often shared WhatsApp broadcast messages with others to discuss political issues in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election.	108 (27.8%)	111 (28.5%)	17 (4.4%)	79 (20.3%)	74 (19.0%)	3.2
I rely on WhatsApp broadcasts for updates on political events and candidates.	126 (32.4%)	117 (30.1%)	12 (3.1%)	66 (17.0%)	68 (17.5%)	3.4

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 1 indicate that WhatsApp was a major channel for political communication during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election in the South-South region. Most respondents reported frequent exposure to political broadcast messages, confirming the platform's widespread use for campaign and information dissemination. While many participants engaged with political content by reading or occasionally discussing it, active sharing and debate were less common, suggesting that engagement was often passive rather than participatory. Respondents also believed that WhatsApp served as a key source of political



information within their communities, reinforcing its role in grassroots mobilisation. However, reliance on WhatsApp varied, as some participants preferred other media sources due to concerns about message credibility.

Table 2: Impact of WhatsApp Broadcast Messages on South-South Voters' Perceptions of Political Candidates in the 2023 Presidential Election

Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
WhatsApp broadcast messages positively influenced my perception of certain political candidates in the presidential election.	113 (29.0%)	129 (33.2%)	14 (3.6%)	76 (19.5%)	57 (14.7%)	3.4
I feel that the information in WhatsApp broadcast messages is credible and trustworthy.	91 (23.4%)	117 (30.1%)	16 (4.1%)	89 (22.9%)	76 (19.5%)	3.2
WhatsApp broadcasts have made me more aware of the policies of specific candidates.	124 (31.9%)	121 (31.1%)	13 (3.3%)	65 (16.7%)	66 (17.0%)	3.4
I have changed my opinion about a candidate based on WhatsApp broadcast messages I received.	94 (24.2%)	102 (26.2%)	15 (3.9%)	89 (22.9%)	89 (22.9%)	3.1
WhatsApp messages have helped clarify my understanding of candidates' positions on key issues.	119 (30.6%)	109 (28.0%)	12 (3.1%)	81 (20.8%)	68 (17.5%)	3.3

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 2 indicates that WhatsApp had a notable influence on political perception during the 2023 election. Most respondents agreed that messages received on the platform positively shaped their views of certain candidates and increased their awareness of candidate policies, highlighting WhatsApp's persuasive and educational role. However, opinions were divided on whether these messages actually changed respondents' political preferences, suggesting that while WhatsApp effectively informed and influenced perceptions, it did not necessarily alter established political loyalties.

Testing of Hypotheses

Inferential statistics were employed to test the hypotheses of this study. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of WhatsApp broadcast message exposure on voters' perception of political candidates and on their voting behaviour during the 2023 presidential election in selected South-South states of Nigeria.



H₀: Exposure to WhatsApp broadcast messages did not significantly influence voters' perceptions of political candidates in the 2023 presidential election in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Table 3: Linear regression analysis on exposure to WhatsApp broadcast messages and perception of political candidates

(Independent variable: Table 1 – Extent of Exposure; Dependent variable: Table 2 – Perception of Candidates)

Variable	Standardised Coefficients Beta	t-value	p-value	Decision
Exposure to WhatsApp broadcast messages	0.472	9.613	0.000	Rejected

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The result of the regression analysis reveals that exposure to WhatsApp broadcast messages has a statistically significant effect on voters' perceptions of political candidates ($\beta = 0.472$, $p < 0.001$) in South South, Nigeria. This moderate-to-strong positive relationship suggests that the more voters interacted with WhatsApp political content, the more their views and opinions about the presidential candidates were shaped or re-shaped. Respondents reported not only receiving messages but also sharing, discussing, and relying on WhatsApp for political information. These behaviours evidently translated into increased awareness of candidates' policies, better understanding of their manifestos, and in some cases, changed perceptions. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion

The findings from this study revealed a high level of exposure to WhatsApp broadcast messages among voters in Rivers, Delta, and Edo States—the selected focal areas in Nigeria's South-South region. Respondents indicated frequent receipt of political broadcasts during the 2023 presidential election, with a mean score of 3.5. Engagement with WhatsApp broadcast messages concerning political candidates was also notable, reflected by a mean of 3.3, while participants acknowledged that these messages were a common source of political information in their communities, with a mean of 3.6. Sharing of messages to discuss political issues scored a mean of 3.2, and reliance on WhatsApp broadcasts for updates on political events and candidates had a mean of 3.4, indicating that while exposure and information acquisition were high, active discussion and sharing were slightly less pronounced. These findings indicate that WhatsApp has become a dominant medium for political communication, reflecting its growing role in shaping public discourse, particularly during election periods (Oladimeji, 2024; Ogunyemi, 2023).

Furthermore, findings from Table 2 and the regression analysis in Table 3 demonstrated that WhatsApp broadcasts had a significant impact on voters' political perceptions. A substantial proportion of respondents (62.2%) agreed that messages received on WhatsApp positively influenced their views of political candidates, while 63% affirmed that such messages improved their understanding of candidate policies. The regression result ($\beta = 0.472$, $p = 0.000$) confirmed a strong and statistically significant correlation between exposure to WhatsApp messages and changes in political perception.

These findings align with the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003), which explains how new technologies and ideas spread through a social system over time. WhatsApp, as a digital innovation, achieved widespread adoption due to its relative advantage over traditional media, offering immediacy, affordability, and interactivity. According to Rogers, five characteristics influence the diffusion of innovations: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. The present study shows that WhatsApp embodies all five.



These findings are consistent with previous empirical studies that demonstrate similar diffusion patterns. Kumar and Singh (2022) observed that WhatsApp was instrumental in voter mobilisation in India, while Li and Chen (2023) reported its centrality in Taiwan's electoral discussions. In Nigeria, Oladimeji (2024) and Ogunyemi (2023) found that WhatsApp has surpassed traditional media as a primary platform for political communication. Collectively, these studies, along with the present findings, affirm that WhatsApp's diffusion within the South-South region represents a transformative shift in political communication—one where digital technologies decentralise information flow, foster peer-to-peer engagement, and reshape how political perceptions are formed and shared across social networks.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is concluded that during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, WhatsApp emerged as a major channel of political communication and voter mobilisation in the South-South region. The platform's extensive use for disseminating political messages and candidate information demonstrates its great role in shaping voters' awareness and perceptions. The study therefore concludes that WhatsApp significantly influenced political engagement in the 2023 election by transforming traditional patterns of information exchange into more interactive, peer-driven forms of digital participation, ultimately redefining the dynamics of electoral communication in the South-South region. Despite these insights, the study has some limitations. The research focused exclusively on the South-South region, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions of Nigeria. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by respondents' recall bias or social desirability. The cross-sectional nature of the study also prevents establishing causal relationships between WhatsApp use and political behaviour.

The implications of the study are notable for both political practitioners and scholars. For campaign strategists, the findings highlight the potential of WhatsApp as a cost-effective, highly targeted tool for voter engagement, messaging, and mobilisation. For researchers, the study shows the need for further investigation into the role of social media platforms in shaping political behaviour across different contexts and electoral cycles, as well as the broader impact of digital communication on democratic participation in Nigeria. It is recommended that:

1. Based on the finding of high exposure to WhatsApp broadcasts, political campaign managers should strategically utilise WhatsApp for voter engagement by developing structured, well-planned, and interactive broadcast messages that can effectively reach large segments of the population.
2. Given the influence of WhatsApp on voters' perceptions of candidates, political actors should invest in building trustworthy narratives on WhatsApp which includes clarifying policy intentions, correcting misconceptions, and projecting their identity consistently, as voters form opinions based on content and the frequency of candidate-related messages.

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