



Social Media Framing and Voter Decision-Making: A Conceptual Analysis of Political Campaigns on X and Facebook in Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election

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Abstract

The increasing centrality of social media platforms in contemporary political communication has transformed how electoral campaigns are designed, disseminated, and interpreted by voters. Despite a growing body of empirical research on social media and elections, there remains a notable gap in theoretically grounded conceptual analyses that explain how social media framing mechanisms shape voter decision-making, particularly within the Nigerian electoral contexts. This conceptual paper examines the influence of political campaign framing on X and Facebook on voter decision-making during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Drawing primarily on Framing Theory, complemented by Agenda-Setting theory, Priming and Platform Affordances Theories, the paper develops an integrative conceptual framework that explains how platform-specific affordances, framing strategies, and contextual factors interact to influence voters' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses. Through a critical synthesis of existing literature, the paper argues that social media framing plays a decisive role in structuring political reality for voters, shaping perceptions of candidates, issues, and electoral choices. The study recommended among others that educational institutions, civil society organizations, and electoral bodies should collaborate to design programs that help citizens critically evaluate framed political content, recognize emotional manipulation, and differentiate between persuasive narratives and factual information.

Keywords: Social media framing, Voter decision-making, Political Campaigns, X, Facebook, Political Communication

Introduction

The evolution of digital communication technologies has profoundly reshaped political communication practices across the globe. Social media platforms, in particular, have altered the ways political actors communicate with citizens, how information circulates, and how voters make sense of political realities (Castells, 2012; Chadwick, 2017). Unlike traditional mass media, social media enables direct, interactive, and real-time communication between political elites and the electorate, thereby redefining the dynamics of political persuasion and engagement (Kreiss, 2016; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). In this transformed media environment, political campaigns increasingly rely on platforms such as Facebook and X to frame political issues, construct candidate images, and mobilize voter support. In democratic contexts, framing has long been recognized as a powerful mechanism through which media influences public opinion and political behavior (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). Framing refers to the selection, emphasis, and presentation of certain aspects of reality in ways that shape how

audiences interpret events, issues, and actors. When applied to political campaigns, framing determines not only what voters think about but also how they think about political alternatives (Iyengar, 1991; Chong & Druckman, 2007). The rise of social media has intensified framing effects by accelerating message circulation, enabling algorithmic amplification, and fostering participatory content creation by users (Sunstein, 2018; Bossetta, 2018).

Nigeria's 2023 presidential election provides a compelling context for examining social media framing and voter decision-making. As Africa's largest democracy, Nigeria has experienced increasing digitalisation of political communication, particularly among young voters who rely heavily on social media for political information (Akinola & Tella, 2021; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). The 2023 election was characterized by intense online political activity, including issue framing, candidate branding, counter-narratives, and disinformation campaigns on platforms such as Facebook and X. These platforms functioned not merely as channels of information but as arenas where political meanings were actively constructed and contested. Scholars have noted that social media platforms possess distinct affordances that shape political communication practices in unique ways (Gibson, 2020; Klinger & Svensson, 2018). Facebook's algorithmic newsfeed, emphasis on visual storytelling, and community-based interactions differ significantly from X's real-time discourse, hashtag activism, and elite-driven agenda formation. These platform differences suggest that framing effects may operate differently across social media environments, influencing voter decision-making through varied cognitive and emotional pathways (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

Despite the expanding literature on social media and elections, much of the existing research on Nigeria's electoral politics remains empirical and descriptive, focusing on patterns of use, misinformation, or voter mobilization (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2021; Asemah et al., 2017). While valuable, such studies often lack an integrated theoretical framework that explains *how* social media framing influences voter decision-making processes. Moreover, there is limited conceptual work that situates Nigeria's experience within broader political communication theories, particularly in relation to framing effects in digital environments.

Statement of the Problem

Although social media played a significant role in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, there is insufficient theoretical clarity on the mechanisms through which political campaign messages on platforms like X and Facebook shape voter decision-making. Existing studies tend to emphasize exposure, usage patterns, or misinformation without adequately addressing the framing processes that structure voters' interpretations of political content (Entman, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Furthermore, the unique socio-political context of Nigeria marked by ethnic diversity, political distrust, and youth-driven digital activism has not been sufficiently integrated into conceptual models of social media framing and electoral behavior (Oparaugo, 2021; Adeyanju & Harcourt, 2022). This theoretical gap limits the development of context-sensitive frameworks capable of explaining voter decision-making in digital electoral environments.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that explains how social media framing of political campaigns on X and Facebook influences voter decision-making in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- Examine how political campaign framing on X and Facebook shaped issue salience and candidate perceptions during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election.
- Analyze the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which social media framing influenced voter decision-making.
- Explore how platform-specific affordances of X and Facebook moderated framing effects on voters.

Develop a context-sensitive conceptual framework applicable to the study of digital political communication in emerging democracies.

Conceptual Clarifications

Social Media Framing

Social media, according to Okocha and Dapoet (2022) include websites and apps like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Tiktok, and Snapchat, among others, that allow users to connect with people who share their interests and work for societal change. Social media offers interactive elements like feeds and profiles to allow access and encourage visibility in order to grow the network of people with same interests.

The concept of "framing" is predicated on the idea that how a story is presented in news articles can affect how readers interpret it. The origins of framing can frequently be found in sociology and psychology. Framing's psychological roots can be found in Kahneman and Tversky's 1979 and 1984 experiments. They looked into how alternative ways to present nearly identical scenarios for decision-making affect people's decisions and how they weigh the options that are put in front of them. The sociological underpinnings of framing were established in 1974 by Goffman and other scholars who postulated that people fight continuously to make sense of their surroundings and their experiences, and that they are incapable of fully comprehending the universe. According to Goffman (1974) cited in Barlett et al (2015) pointed out that people use interpretive schemas, also known as "primary frameworks," to categorize and interpret new information in a meaningful way in order to assimilate it more quickly.

Framing of Political Campaigns

Political campaign framing on social media involves strategic message construction aimed at shaping voter perceptions. Frames on X often emerge through hashtags, elite commentary, and real-time political debates, whereas Facebook facilitates longer narratives, visual symbolism, and emotional appeals. In Nigeria's 2023 election, campaign messages frequently framed candidates as reformers, defenders of democracy, or threats to national unity. Framing on social media also involves counter-framing, where opposing actors

challenge dominant narratives. This dynamic framing environment intensifies cognitive engagement and emotional polarization among voters (Bail et al., 2018).

A campaign is a carefully thought-out sequence of activities with a specific target audience in mind. Social media is hyperactive, which makes it a useful instrument for campaigns (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). Users are permitted to use social media in public place. It offers politicians greater space to talk about their campaign themes, ambitions, and objectives, which has multiple advantages. Politicians could, however, suffer from social media effect as, if not managed properly, it could damage their perception of themselves.

In the same vein, Ngantem, Nyitse & Kente (2024) observed that a coordinated effort to influence a certain group's decision-making process is the goal of a political campaign plan. Electoral campaigns that decide on representative selection or referendum results are a common feature of political campaigns in democracies. The most well-known political campaigns of today are focused on candidates running for general elections, usually for the office of president or prime minister, or as the head of state or government. A campaign's management team, which can consist of anybody from a self-motivated individual to a well-capitalized team of professionals, has to think about a number of things, including how to effectively communicate the campaign's message, recruit volunteers, and raise money. According to Howard (2018) cited in Ngantem, Nyitse & Kente (2024) political campaigns' ability to spread their messages is limited by the resources at their disposal, the ingenuity of the campaign's participants, and existing legal limits.

Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election

In a democratic setting where a lawful change of administration is permitted by the constitution, elections are the process of selecting leaders (Johan, 2011). Nigerian elections have been held regularly since 1922, when the country obtained political independence from Britain. This continued until 1960. 1964 saw elections following political independence, but a brutal military takeover ended the democratic government's brief existence. Nigeria transitioned from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government in 1979.

One of the most intensely and fiercely contested presidential elections in Nigerian history, dating back to the colonial and post-independence eras, is the one scheduled for 2023. Tensions, allegations and denials, a fierce campaign, a transfer of blame between the main opposition and ruling parties, and other connected concerns all preceded the election Idowu & Iyabode (2024). Nigeria held its seventh presidential and National Assembly (NASS) elections in February 2023. While the elections were marred by some irregularities, they were also adjudged by observers to be relatively free, fair and credible (Hassan 2023; Premium Times 2023). The political parties in the elections shared the votes and NASS seats. The 2023 elections saw fewer violent incidents and casualty counts than the previous ones, which claimed hundreds of lives (Sanni 2019). However, during the elections, anomalies continued to occur.

Africa's Executive Director, Samson Itodo, who closely monitored the elections, claims that every worry raised by the election manipulation risks index (EMRI) materialized in

the way the polls were conducted (Itodo 2023). These generally have to do with the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) failure to uphold its own commitments and rein in political misbehavior. Attacks on voters and suspected electoral manipulation occurred during the voting process. There were many instances of voter suppression, violence, and intimidation in Lagos. According to Folourunso (2023). Attacks on voters in Port Harcourt were connected to former governor of Rivers State Nyesom Wike, a campaign staffer for All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate Bola Tinubu. Adeseye Ogunlewe, a prominent figure in the APC, claims that Wike received a ministry job as "compensation" for his involvement in Tinubu's victory (Channels Television 2023a). In other regions of the nation, there have been reports of ballot box and BVAS stealing as well as ballot box and paper destruction (Abati, 2023). The Presidential Election is one of the most fascinating political events in Nigeria. This is a result of Nigerian voters' political behaviour and voting patterns while choosing their leaders. This makes the race for the presidency fierce, disorganised, and dangerous at times even to the point of the country falling apart. The voting customs based on ethnicity, religion, and area that nationalists carried over from the colonial era appear to be ongoing today (Salahu, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on four theories: Framing Theory, Agenda-setting Theory, Priming Theory and Platform Affordances Theory.

Framing Theory

Framing Theory is most prominently associated with the works of **Erving Goffman (1974)** and later expanded within media and political communication by **Robert Entman (1993)**. Goffman introduced the idea of "frames" as interpretive schemata that individuals use to make sense of reality. Entman later refined the concept for media studies, defining framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in order to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. The core assumption of framing theory is that **how an issue is presented influences how it is understood and evaluated**. Frames do not tell people what to think, but rather **how to think about an issue**. In political communication, framing shapes candidate images, issue interpretation, and moral judgments.

In the context of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, framing was evident in how candidates constructed narratives around governance, corruption, competence, and national identity. For instance, the Labour Party's "New Nigeria" frame presented the election as a moral and generational choice, emphasizing reform and youth inclusion. Conversely, the All Progressives Congress' "Renewed Hope" frame portrayed continuity, experience, and political stability as essential for national progress. These frames shaped how voters interpreted campaign messages and evaluated candidates on social media platforms.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory was propounded by **Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972)** following their seminal study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election. The theory posits that the media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are remarkably successful in telling people **what to think about**. The central assumption is that frequent and prominent coverage of issues increases their perceived importance among audiences. In digital environments, agenda-setting extends beyond traditional media to social media platforms, where trending topics, hashtags, and algorithmically curated feeds elevate certain issues into public consciousness. In Nigeria's 2023 election, repeated discussions of economic hardship, insecurity, corruption, and youth unemployment on X and Facebook made these issues central to voters' evaluations of candidates. Agenda-setting operates as a **precondition for framing and priming**. Before voters can interpret or evaluate political messages, issues must first be made salient. Social media trends such as #FuelSubsidy, #EndCorruption, and #NewNigeria illustrate how digital platforms helped set the political agenda during the election.

Priming Theory

Priming Theory is closely linked to the works of **Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987)**, who conceptualized priming as a process through which media emphasis on certain issues influences the standards or criteria people use to evaluate political leaders and events. Priming occurs when exposure to specific content activates particular cognitive schemas, making them more accessible in subsequent judgments. The central assumption of priming theory is that **media exposure affects how people evaluate political actors by altering the weight they assign to specific issues**. When certain issues are consistently highlighted, voters are more likely to use those issues as benchmarks for political judgment.

In Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, social media primed voters to assess candidates based on dominant campaign frames. For example, sustained framing of corruption and accountability primed voters to judge candidates' integrity while repeated emphasis on economic competence primed evaluate based on policy credibility and leadership capacity. On X, frequent elite discourse and activist commentary primed issue-based evaluations, while on Facebook; emotionally resonant narratives primed affective judgments rooted in trust, fear, or hope. Priming thus serves as a **linking mechanism** between agenda-setting and framing, translating issue salience into evaluative criteria that guide voter decision-making.

Platform Affordances Theory

Platform Affordances Theory draws from **James J. Gibson's (1979)** concept of affordances, which refers to the action possibilities that an environment offers to its users. In digital media studies, scholars such as **Danah Boyd (2010)** and **Treem and Leonardi (2013)** extended this concept to social media, defining affordances as the features and functionalities of platforms that shape user behavior, interaction, and content visibility. The fundamental assumption of platform affordances theory is that **technology structures, but does not determine, social interaction**. Features such as algorithmic feeds, character limits,

interactivity, visibility, persistence, and scalability influence how information is produced, circulated, and interpreted.

In the Nigerian context, X and Facebook offered distinct affordances that shaped political framing. X's character limit, retweet culture, and trending algorithms facilitated rapid issue amplification, elite discourse, and hashtag activism. Facebook's longer posts, multimedia content and community-based networks enabled narrative storytelling, emotional engagement, and grassroots mobilization. These affordances moderated how framing, agenda-setting, and priming processes unfolded across platforms, explaining why similar campaign messages produced different effects depending on the platform.

This integrated framework demonstrates that voter decision-making is not merely a rational evaluation of policy alternatives, but a socially constructed process shaped by digital narratives, emotional cues, and platform-specific communication dynamics.

Methodological Approach

This study adopts a **conceptual and narrative synthesis approach**, which involves integrating existing theoretical and empirical literature to develop a coherent conceptual framework. It draws on scholarly works in political communication, social media studies, framing theory, and voter behaviour to identify mechanisms linking campaign framing to electoral outcomes. The approach allows for a **contextualized analysis** of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election without the need for new empirical data. Through critical synthesis, the study highlights key patterns, gaps, and pathways that inform the development of a robust conceptual model.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a conceptual framework in which:

- **Independent Variable:** Social media framing of political campaigns on X and Facebook
- **Mediating Variables:** Cognitive interpretation, emotional response, political attitudes
- **Moderating Variables:** Platform affordances, political knowledge, socio-cultural context
- **Dependent Variable:** Voter decision-making (vote choice, political engagement)

The framework explains how framed messages influence voters through cognitive and emotional pathways, shaped by platform-specific features and contextual factors.

Social Media Framing in Political Campaigns

This study conceptualizes social media framing as a multidimensional process through which political actors, parties, and supporters strategically construct meanings around candidates, issues, and governance visions on X and Facebook. The independent variable social media framing of political campaigns captures the deliberate use of language, visuals, symbols, hashtags, and narratives to influence voter perceptions.

During Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, three dominant framing strategies were evident across X and Facebook. First was the reformist "New Nigeria" frame strongly associated with Peter Obi and the Labour Party? This frame emphasized youth inclusion, economic prudence, anti-corruption credentials, and a break from traditional political elites. On X, this frame was amplified through hashtags such as #NewNigeria, #ObidientMovement, and #TakeBackNigeria, often accompanied by infographics comparing Obi's perceived integrity with the alleged failures of past administrations. On Facebook, the same frame appeared in longer narrative posts, testimonial videos, and symbolic images portraying Obi as a modest, disciplined, and people-centered leader.

Second, the continuity and stability frame, branded as "Renewed Hope," was predominantly employed by Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the All Progressives Congress (APC). This frame presented Tinubu as an experienced political strategist capable of sustaining governance continuity and national stability. Facebook posts frequently used professionally designed visuals, endorsements, and campaign rallies to project competence and leadership depth. On X, APC-aligned actors framed opposition candidates as inexperienced or unrealistic, reinforcing a contrast frame that positioned continuity as safer than change.

Third, the moral responsibility and national security frame was frequently used by Atiku Abubakar and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). This framing emphasized economic restructuring, national unity, and security reform, often portraying the election as a moral choice to rescue Nigeria from decline. Emotional appeals referencing insecurity, unemployment, and inflation were prominent, particularly in Facebook video messages

Mediating Variables: variables in the framework include cognitive interpretation and emotional response. Cognitive interpretation refers to how voter's process framed information to evaluate candidate competence, integrity, and issue relevance. Emotional responses such as hope, fear, anger, and trust mediate the translation of frames into political attitudes. For example, the Obidient movement's hopeful tone fostered political efficacy among young voters, while fear-based security framing heightened anxiety and risk perception among undecided voters.

Moderating Variables: this variable includes platform affordances, political knowledge, and socio-cultural identity on the X and Facebook. X's real-time, elite-driven discourse encouraged rapid counter-framing and political polarization, while Facebook's algorithmic personalization reinforced echo chambers and emotional resonance. Political knowledge moderated framing effects, as politically sophisticated voters were more likely to resist simplistic narratives.

Dependent Variables: variable voter decision-making includes vote choice, turnout intention, and political engagement. Framing influenced not only who voters supported but also their motivation to participate actively in the electoral process.

Social Media Framing and Voter Decision-Making in Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election

Voter decision-making in the context of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election was deeply influenced by how social media platforms shaped political awareness, issue salience, and candidate perceptions, particularly among young and digitally engaged citizens. Rather than being passive recipients of information, many Nigerian voters actively engaged with campaign narratives on X and Facebook, using these platforms to compare policy positions, identify leadership traits, and interpret political controversies in real time (Chukwu, 2025; Akporue & Efebeh, 2025). Studies of the 2023 campaign reveal that social media significantly shaped political discourse and mobilized voters by providing spaces for debate, real-time updates, and advocacy for transparency (Akporue & Efebeh, 2025). For example, content analyses in urban and rural areas showed that themed discussions around economic issues and education on candidate Facebook and X pages influenced residents' opinions and political judgments, suggesting that exposure to such narratives played a role in forming voter preferences (Adekunle & Adinlewa, 2025). In Benue State and Abuja, social media was instrumental in raising awareness about election timelines, candidate promises, and youth empowerment issues, which in turn informed voters' decisions about whom to support (Agada & Ogande, 2024; Taraba International Journal of Social Sciences Research, 2025).

The impact of social media on voter decision-making is further underscored by studies showing that these platforms were effective tools for mobilizing participation and shaping voting intentions during the 2023 election cycle (Glorious Vision University et al., 2025). While Facebook and X enabled personalized and community-level discussions that reinforced political identities and framed candidates in distinctive ways, they also contributed to information overload and exposure to conflicting narratives that complicated voters' decision processes (Chukwu, 2025; Fagbemigun & Akase, 2025). This dynamic underscores that voter choice in digitally mediated contexts is not solely driven by rational policy assessments, but also by mediated interpretations, emotional responses to framed issues, and social reinforcement through networks of peers and influencers.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper advances understanding of how social media framing on X and Facebook shapes voter decision-making in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. By integrating framing, agenda-setting, and platform affordance perspectives, the study contributes a context-sensitive theoretical model to political communication scholarship. Future research can empirically test and refine this framework across different electoral contexts.

Recommendations

Drawing from the conceptual analysis and aligned with the objectives of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Educational institutions, civil society organizations, and electoral bodies should collaborate to design programs that help citizens critically evaluate framed political

content, recognize emotional manipulation, and differentiate between persuasive narratives and factual information.

2. Political parties, candidates and regulatory body such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be encouraged to adopt **ethical framing strategies** that prioritize issue-based discourse over fear-mongering, misinformation, or identity-based polarization.
3. Social media platform operators or providers particularly X and Facebook should increase **algorithmic transparency and accountability** during election periods. This includes clearer labeling of political content, promotion of diverse viewpoints, and mechanisms for rapid response to coordinated disinformation campaigns.
4. Future studies should empirically test the conceptual framework proposed in this study across different electoral contexts in Nigeria and other emerging democracies. Researchers are encouraged to adopt mixed-method approaches that combine content analysis, surveys, and experiments to validate the pathways identified in this conceptual model

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