ISSN:2659-0778

Influence of WhatsApp Messages on Electoral Participation during the 2023 General Elections among Staff of Abuja Municipal Area Council

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of WhatsApp messages on electoral participation during the 2023 general elections among staff members of the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC). The study is based on the Social Media Engagement Theory, which explores how social media users generate, share, and engage with content. Using a quantitative survey approach, data were collected from 351 respondents through a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that WhatsApp played a central role in the dissemination of political messages, with the majority of respondents reporting frequent exposure to political content via the platform. Additionally, the study found that WhatsApp messages had a significant impact on electoral participation, motivating respondents to vote and influencing their decision-making. However, the study also highlighted the prevalence of misinformation, hate speech, and emotionally charged content, which could undermine the quality of public discourse. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the Electoral Commission (INEC) and civil society groups use WhatsApp for voter engagement, that political parties use the platform for transparent communication, and that stricter content moderation policies be implemented to combat misinformation.

Keywords: WhatsApp, Messages, Electoral Participation, 2023 General Elections, Nigeria

Introduction

In the last two decades, the global community has experienced unprecedented levels of connectivity, largely due to the proliferation of social media platforms, which have overcome the barriers of distance and time through the rapid dissemination of information ((Amelia & Balqis, 2023b). Among these platforms, WhatsApp has emerged as a significant tool for influencing societal interactions, leveraging its social components of engagement and connectivity. Social

media now plays a critical role in shaping how individuals interact, communicate, and make decisions on social, cultural, and political issues (Takkac, 2019; Mangla et al., 2020). Consequently, platforms like WhatsApp have become dominant channels for political mobilisation and voter engagement, significantly influencing electoral outcomes worldwide (Ngoka, Ezeani, Ugwuozor & Ezeani, 2024).

WhatsApp, first introduced in 2009 and acquired by Facebook in 2014, has since grown to over 900 million global users. The platform supports one-to-one or group communication, with groups accommodating up to 256 participants. In addition to text messaging, WhatsApp offers voice and video calls, voice and video messaging, image sharing, PDF document sharing, and location sharing (Brendan, 2015). In countries like Nigeria, WhatsApp has become a key medium for disseminating political messages, with substantial penetration in rural areas where internet access is primarily via mobile phones (Aderinto, 2021). Political actors often use WhatsApp groups of various sizes to share images, messages, and calls to action, making it a powerful tool for influencing voters (Adedukun & Olaniyan, 2020).

Voting behaviour, electoral participation, and voters' decision-making processes are key aspects of political conduct displayed during election periods. Various factors, such as emotional states, ethnicity, religion, and sociocultural influences, significantly shape voters' decisions (Nguyen & Sim, 2021). Gender, race, culture, and religion also play a critical role in determining voter preferences (Ojo & Alabi, 2019). Additionally, external factors such as political socialisation, sociocultural perspectives, tolerance for differing political viewpoints, and media, including social media platforms, further influence voter behaviour. These impacts are moderated by voters' attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and sources of information (Kevin, Grossman, Horacio & John, 2015; Tamanna, 2015).

According to the Global State of Digitalisation 2019 Report, 85% of Nigerians consume news via WhatsApp and other social media platforms (Kemp, 2019). Report further highlights that the number of WhatsApp users in Nigeria surpasses newspaper readership. This indicates that WhatsApp, initially designed for social interaction, has evolved into a critical tool for disseminating political messages, mobilising voters, and fostering civic engagement (Okaiyeto, & Ottah, 2021).). Some studies indicate that WhatsApp use for political talk is rapidly increasing in many countries. For example, in Germany, 25% of IM app users discuss politics on their smartphones, a figure that rises to 27.8% in Italy, and 38.1% in Britain (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018). Concerning its democratic significance, some preliminary findings suggest that mobile-based political talk may also foster civic and political engagement, both directly and through a 'spillover effect' (i.e., via the stimulation of face-to-face and other forms of computer-mediated political discussions) (De Zúñiga et al. 2019b). Despite the increasing reliance on WhatsApp among Nigerians, limited research exists on its specific impact on voter behaviour in the country, particularly during the 2023 general elections. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the influence of WhatsApp on electoral participation during the 2023 general elections, with a focus on the staff members of the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC).

Statement of the Problem

During the 2023 Nigerian general elections, WhatsApp was a dominant platform for political messaging, particularly among the electorate in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC).

Despite its widespread use, there is limited empirical evidence on how WhatsApp messages influenced electoral participation, decision-making, and voter behaviour within this context. While previous studies have examined the role of social media in political communication, few have focused on WhatsApp as a unique platform, with its group-based and private messaging features, which offer distinct advantages for targeted political messaging. Key questions remain unanswered: To what extent did WhatsApp messages shape voter attitudes and behaviours? How effective was the platform in mobilising the electorate? Addressing these questions is crucial for understanding the evolving dynamics of political communication in Nigeria and the broader implications of social media platforms like WhatsApp on electoral processes.

Objective of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the extent to which staff members of the Abuja Municipal Area Council received political campaign messages through WhatsApp during the 2023 general elections.
2. To examine the nature of political campaign messages disseminated via WhatsApp to staff members of the Abuja Municipal Area Council during the 2023 general elections.
3. To evaluate the extent to which WhatsApp messages influenced the electoral participation of staff members of the Abuja Municipal Area Council during the 2023 general elections.

Literature Review

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a mobile phone-based application integrated with web functionalities, allowing users to send text messages, make voice and video calls, share files, and send multimedia content (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). Scholars such as Yeboah et al. (2014), Bouhnik and Deshen (2014), and Alsanie (2015) have described WhatsApp Messenger as a proprietary, cross-platform instant messaging service for smartphones and selected feature phones, using the internet for communication. Mefolere (2016) highlights that WhatsApp is available on modern smartphones, including iPhones, Android devices, Blackberries, Samsung, and Sony, which enable internet connectivity for downloading mobile applications. WhatsApp offers a rich array of functionalities, including voice and video calls, private messaging, group chats, file sharing, and location sharing, all of which enhance the communication experience and make the application versatile for various uses. Designed to be intuitive and user-friendly, WhatsApp allows users to navigate chats and settings easily without requiring extensive technical knowledge.

As of 2024, WhatsApp boasts over 2 billion active users, making it the most popular messaging app worldwide (Statista, 2024). Its extensive user base facilitates global connections, making it a key platform for both personal and professional communication. WhatsApp's popularity is attributed to several factors: (1) its user convenience, (2) the personalization options for the user interface, including customizable display applications, emoticons, stickers, wallpapers, gaming applications, and camera tools, (3) its commitment to ensuring privacy in personal communications, and (4) its ease of use and speed in accessing information (Ellynia & Tjhin, 2014). Additionally, the app's feature-rich environment and accessibility contribute to its widespread adoption (Zulfa, 2015).

Since its emergence, WhatsApp has been increasingly leveraged by politicians worldwide, including in Nigeria, to disseminate various messages aimed at targeting voters or members of the

public. Fisher, Gadjanova, and Hitchen (2023) argue that social media, particularly WhatsApp, has become central to the planning, organization, and coordination of electoral campaigns in Africa. Numerous political WhatsApp groups exist, where meetings are held and campaign strategies are discussed. Even those not directly within a group often receive messages through their network or contacts with shared phone numbers connected to WhatsApp. This transformation of WhatsApp into a political communication tool underscores its growing role in modern electoral processes.

Electoral Participation

Electoral participation refers to the active involvement of eligible citizens in the electoral process, primarily through voting, though it can also encompass other forms of engagement with the political system (Onigiobi, Obadiora, & Oriowo, 2020). Uhlaner (2001) conceptualizes political participation as a form of political engagement, while Riley, Griffin, and Morey (2010) argue that it constitutes a set of rights and duties associated with formal civic and political activities. Electoral participation, at its core, represents both a fundamental right and a civic duty in democratic systems, enabling citizens to express their preferences and hold elected representatives accountable. However, electoral participation is not limited to the act of voting; it also includes activities such as engaging in political campaigns, mobilisation efforts, and civic activism (Wojtasik, 2013). Political participation can thus be described as any activity aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel or shaping their actions.

Electoral participation plays a critical role in the functioning of democracies, ensuring that governments remain accountable to the people by reflecting their preferences and desires. It serves as a platform for social integration and political inclusion, while also fostering civic knowledge and responsibility (Onigiobi, Obadiora, & Oriowo, 2020). Several factors influence an individual's level of participation in the electoral process, including interest in politics, political efficacy, political ideology, and party identification. Additionally, factors such as social networks, socialisation, education level, voter registration, and accessibility contribute to electoral engagement. However, central to all these factors is access to information. Political messages, particularly those related to political education provided by stakeholders like electoral bodies and political parties, can significantly influence political participation. This underscores the importance of mass media—such as radio, television, and newspapers—alongside new media platforms like WhatsApp, in facilitating the effective functioning of political systems and mobilising citizens for electoral participation and governance (Shadrach, 2017). De Zúñiga et al. (2019) concur that ordinary citizens are increasingly using WhatsApp for politically related activities. Compared to other 'semi-public' online platforms, WhatsApp provides a more intimate and controlled environment in which users can almost simultaneously gather and share news, discuss politics, and mobilise others.

General Election

A general election refers to the process by which citizens elect their leaders, including the president, governors, and legislators, at both the federal and state levels in Nigeria (Ogu & Abraham, 2023). General elections are a cornerstone of Nigeria's democratic system, serving as the primary mechanism for the electorate to express preferences regarding the leadership and governance of the country (Tsokwa & Nwanegbo, 2024). Constitutionally, general elections are held every four years and encompass elections at the federal and state levels. At the federal level,

the president is elected through a direct vote by citizens, while members of the National Assembly, comprising the Senate and the House of Representatives, are elected to represent the nation's geopolitical zones and constituencies (Ogu & Abraham, 2023). Similarly, at the state level, citizens elect governors and members of the State House of Assembly. These elections are organised and supervised by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which is tasked with ensuring that the electoral process is transparent, free, and fair.

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has conducted 12 general elections: 10 under civilian-led regimes and 2 under military administrations (1987/1989 and 1993). The 2023 general election, which serves as the focus of this study, was the most recent in this series. Over the years, advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) have increasingly influenced Nigeria's political processes and participation. The emergence of social media has provided platforms, such as WhatsApp, that facilitate public discourse on political matters among the electorate and between political parties, candidates, and citizens (Shadrach & Apuke, 2021). Notably, the 2023 general election witnessed a significant rise in the adoption of social media, including WhatsApp, by various stakeholders to encourage political participation and influence voter behaviour positively.

Review of Empirical Studies

A growing body of research has explored the role of WhatsApp in political communication and engagement. Fisher, Gadjanova, and Hitchen (2023) examined the use of WhatsApp in West African political communication, focusing on Ghana and Nigeria. Their study, which relied on secondary data, revealed that institutionalised political parties tend to create formal, hierarchical online structures with strict control over message content, while less institutionalised parties operate with informal, personality-driven structures and minimal message discipline. De Zúñiga et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between WhatsApp-based political discussions, conventional participation, and activism using two-wave panel data collected in Spain, the USA, and New Zealand. Their findings demonstrated that WhatsApp discussions positively influence activism and have a more nuanced impact on conventional political participation.

Similarly, Pang and Woo (2020) conducted a systematic review of empirical studies on WhatsApp's role in civic and political engagement between 2009 and 2019. They found that WhatsApp is used by activists and organisational networks for mobilisation and coordination, but it is also employed for informal, often non-political conversations. Rossini et al. (2021) focused on misinformation sharing on WhatsApp and Facebook, highlighting that dysfunctional sharing is prevalent. However, their findings also revealed that social corrections—instances where misinformation is challenged—occur more frequently on WhatsApp than on Facebook. Moura and Michelson (2017) tested the effectiveness of WhatsApp as a tool for political mobilisation through randomised field experiments during the 2014 Brazilian elections. Their study showed that short candidate videos delivered via WhatsApp significantly increased voter turnout among young voters.

In Nigeria, research on WhatsApp's role in electoral participation is relatively limited. Ikegbunam and Obiakor (2021) analysed the use of WhatsApp by political parties during the 2019 general election. Based on data from 318 respondents in WhatsApp groups affiliated with the two leading parties, their findings demonstrated that WhatsApp facilitated popular participation and enhanced

electoral process monitoring. Similarly, Ngoka, Ezeani, Ugwuozor, and Ezeani (2024) examined the influence of WhatsApp on voter behaviour during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, focusing on students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Using survey data from 400 respondents, their study revealed that political campaigns on WhatsApp positively influenced voter turnout among the sampled students.

Despite the popularity of WhatsApp as a platform for political communication, research on its impact in Nigeria remains scarce. Notably, existing studies (e.g., Ikegbunam & Obiakor, 2021; Ngoka et al., 2024) are limited to the southeastern region of the country. There is a lack of research focusing on voters in Abuja, Nigeria's federal capital, which hosts a diverse population from across the country. Studying voters in Abuja could provide a more comprehensive and generalised perspective on the role of WhatsApp in political communication and engagement in Nigeria.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in the Social Media Engagement Theory, which originated from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) model of co-creation in the service sector. The theory emphasises the capacity of social media users to generate content that their audiences consume and engage with. According to Di Gangi and Wasko (2016), the model leverages social media's potential to produce cost-effective news and information that spreads throughout society via shared links and connectivity. A key proposition of this theory is that social media enables users to modify, share, and repurpose content, often deviating from the original intent or meaning of the creators (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Building on this theoretical framework, this study posits that WhatsApp users actively engage in creating, updating, and repurposing content, which allows them to expose various electoral malpractices affecting their preferred political parties. Simultaneously, users utilise the platform to counter reports that are perceived as unfavourable to their parties or candidates. In relation to this study, the theory provides a lens to understand how WhatsApp users' engagement with political content shaped electoral participation and responses to electoral narratives during the 2023 general elections among voters in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC).

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative survey approach. The target population of the study comprised all staff members of the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), totalling 3,578 individuals. A sample size of 351 respondents was determined and selected using stratified random sampling. Respondents were chosen through a balloting process within strata based on the eight departments within the area council. A questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument, and the data gathered were analysed using descriptive statistical tools, including frequency and simple percentages, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

Data Presentation

Table 1: **Respondents Demographics**

Demographic Information	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group		
Below 25	51	14.5
25-30	239	68.1
31-40	35	10.0
41-50	20	5.7
51-60	6	1.7
Religion		
Christianity	109	31.1
Islam	234	66.6
Others	8	2.3
Educational Programmes		
B.Sc	187	53.3
PGD	126	35.9
M.Sc	36	10.3
Ph.D	2	0.6
Gender		
Male	180	51.3
Female	171	48.7

n=351

The age profile indicates that the majority of respondents (68.1%) are within the 25–30 age group, followed by 14.5% who are below 25 years. This highlights the prominence of younger, tech-savvy individuals in the workforce, who are likely to be active WhatsApp users and key players in digital political engagement. The older age groups (31–60) form a smaller percentage, suggesting a generational skew in the study's focus towards younger participants who are more familiar with social media tools. In terms of religious affiliation, Islam (66.6%) and Christianity (31.1%) dominate, reflecting the diverse cultural and religious composition of AMAC. This diversity is significant, as it offers a broader understanding of how religious backgrounds might shape the consumption and dissemination of political content on WhatsApp. Educational attainment among respondents reveals that over half hold a Bachelor's degree (53.3%), with a substantial portion having postgraduate qualifications (PGD 35.9%, M.Sc. 10.3%, and Ph.D. 0.6%). This high level of education implies that the respondents are likely to critically engage with political messages on WhatsApp, thereby enhancing the quality of the study's findings. Gender distribution is nearly balanced, with males (51.3%) slightly outnumbering females (48.7%), ensuring an inclusive representation of perspectives. This balanced demographic mix across age, religion, education, and gender underscores the reliability of the study in capturing a comprehensive understanding of how WhatsApp influenced electoral participation among staff members of AMAC.

Table 2: Respondents Exposure to Political Campaign Messages via WhatsApp during 2023 General elections

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	High Exposure (Agree + Strongly Agree)
I frequently received political campaign messages on WhatsApp during the 2023 general elections.	10 (2.85%)	20 (5.70%)	60 (17.09%)	100 (28.49%)	161 (45.87%)	261 (74.36%)
I received political campaign messages on WhatsApp more often than through other media channels (TV, radio, newspapers, etc.).	15 (4.27%)	30 (8.55%)	80 (22.79%)	100 (28.49%)	126 (35.90%)	226 (64.39%)
WhatsApp was a primary source of political information for me during the 2023 general elections.	20 (5.70%)	50 (14.25%)	85 (24.22%)	115 (32.76%)	81 (23.07%)	196 (55.83%)
I was added to WhatsApp groups where political campaigns were actively discussed during the 2023 general elections.	12 (3.42%)	18 (5.13%)	74 (21.08%)	134 (38.18%)	113 (32.19%)	247 (70.37%)
I received messages about political candidates and their policies through WhatsApp during the 2023 general elections.	9 (2.56%)	14 (3.99%)	65 (18.52%)	108 (30.77%)	155 (44.16%)	263 (74.93%)

N=351

Table 2 presents data regarding respondents' level of exposure to political campaign messages via WhatsApp during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. A majority (74.36%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they frequently received political campaign messages on WhatsApp, underscoring the platform's role in disseminating political content. Similarly, 64.39% of respondents indicated that they received political campaign messages on WhatsApp more often than through traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers. Furthermore, WhatsApp emerged as a primary source of political information for over half of the respondents (55.83%), with many being added to WhatsApp groups where political campaigns were actively discussed (70.37%). The high level of exposure is also evident in the 74.93% who confirmed receiving messages about political candidates and their policies. These findings indicate that WhatsApp played a pivotal role in the dissemination of political messages and political discourse during the 2023 general elections.

Table 3: Nature of political campaign messages disseminated via WhatsApp during the 2023 general elections in Abuja Municipal Area Council

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	(Agree + Strongly Agree)	Ranking
Political campaign messages on WhatsApp often included detailed information about candidates' policies and manifestos.	20 (5.70%)	30 (8.55%)	100 (28.49%)	120 (34.19%)	81 (23.07%)	201 (57.26%)	6
Most political campaign messages on WhatsApp were focused on discrediting opposing candidates or parties.	15 (4.27%)	25 (7.12%)	50 (14.25%)	140 (39.89%)	121 (34.47%)	261 (74.36%)	4
The language used in political campaign messages on WhatsApp was often persuasive and emotionally charged.	10 (2.85%)	20 (5.70%)	60 (17.09%)	150 (42.74%)	122 (34.76%)	272 (77.49%)	1
I received political campaign messages on WhatsApp that encouraged community engagement and voter participation.	18 (5.13%)	30 (8.55%)	120 (34.19%)	100 (28.49%)	83 (23.65%)	183 (52.14%)	7
Many political campaign messages on WhatsApp included false or misleading information.	12 (3.42%)	20 (5.70%)	50 (14.25%)	150 (42.74%)	119 (33.91%)	269 (76.65%)	2
Political campaign messages on WhatsApp were primarily focused on the achievements of the candidates or parties.	15 (4.27%)	30 (8.55%)	80 (22.79%)	110 (31.34%)	116 (33.05%)	226 (64.39%)	5
Political campaign messages on WhatsApp often contained hate speech or derogatory remarks about certain groups or individuals.	10 (2.85%)	20 (5.70%)	60 (17.09%)	150 (42.74%)	111 (31.62%)	261 (74.36%)	3
Many political campaign messages on WhatsApp provided factual updates about the election process, such as voting dates and procedures.	15 (4.27%)	35 (9.97%)	110 (31.34%)	115 (32.76%)	76 (21.65%)	191 (54.41%)	8

N=351

The data in Table 3 highlight the diverse nature of political campaign messages disseminated via WhatsApp during the 2023 general elections in the Abuja Municipal Area Council. A significant proportion of respondents (77.49%) agreed or strongly agreed that the language of these messages was persuasive and emotionally charged, making this the most prominent feature (Rank 1). Closely following was the prevalence of false or misleading information, with 76.65% of respondents

indicating high exposure to such messages (Rank 2). Messages containing hate speech or derogatory remarks about specific groups also ranked high (74.36%, Rank 3), emphasising the use of divisive tactics in WhatsApp campaign messages.

On the other hand, fewer respondents identified community engagement and voter participation as central themes in the messages they received (52.14%, Rank 7), while factual updates about the election process were the least reported feature (54.41%, Rank 8). Although over half of the respondents acknowledged receiving detailed information about candidates' policies and manifestos (57.26%, Rank 6), it appears that WhatsApp campaign messages were more focused on emotionally charged language, misinformation, and negative tactics than on constructive or informative content. This suggests that, while WhatsApp was a significant platform for political campaigns, its usage often leaned towards manipulative and polarising communication strategies.

Table 4: Influence of WhatsApp Messages on Electoral Participation

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	High Influence (Agree + Strongly Agree)	Ranking
WhatsApp messages motivated me to vote in the 2023 general elections.	10 (2.85%)	15 (4.27%)	40 (11.40%)	150 (42.74%)	136 (38.74%)	286 (81.48%)	1
WhatsApp messages provided me with important updates on how and where to vote.	20 (5.70%)	30 (8.55%)	70 (19.94%)	125 (35.61%)	106 (30.20%)	231 (65.81%)	4
The information I received on WhatsApp helped me decide on my voting choice.	12 (3.42%)	20 (5.70%)	50 (14.25%)	140 (39.89%)	129 (36.75%)	269 (76.64%)	2
I used WhatsApp to confirm or verify information related to the elections.	30 (8.55%)	55 (15.67%)	90 (25.64%)	95 (27.07%)	81 (23.07%)	176 (50.14%)	8
WhatsApp discussions helped clarify my understanding of the electoral process.	22 (6.27%)	40 (11.40%)	90 (25.64%)	115 (32.76%)	84 (23.93%)	199 (56.69%)	6
WhatsApp campaign messages influenced my perception of the importance of voting.	18 (5.13%)	35 (9.97%)	80 (22.79%)	120 (34.19%)	98 (27.91%)	218 (62.10%)	5
WhatsApp messages encouraged me to mobilize others to vote during the elections.	15 (4.27%)	25 (7.12%)	60 (17.09%)	130 (37.04%)	121 (34.47%)	251 (71.51%)	3
I was influenced by WhatsApp messages to attend political rallies or related events.	25 (7.12%)	50 (14.25%)	100 (28.49%)	100 (28.49%)	76 (21.65%)	176 (50.14%)	7

N=351

The data in Table 4 reveals that WhatsApp messages had a significant influence on electoral participation during the 2023 general elections, particularly in motivating individuals to vote. The

highest-ranked statement, "WhatsApp messages motivated me to vote in the 2023 general elections," showed that 81.48% of respondents reported that WhatsApp messages had a high influence in motivating them to vote, with a substantial proportion (42.74%) agreeing and 38.74% strongly agreeing. The second-highest ranked item was, "The information I received on WhatsApp helped me decide on my voting choice," with 76.64% indicating that WhatsApp played a crucial role in shaping their voting decisions. Additionally, WhatsApp messages also helped clarify the electoral process and influenced people's perceptions of the importance of voting, as indicated by the high influence percentages of 62.10% and 56.69%, respectively.

The table also shows that WhatsApp messages facilitated broader participation, such as encouraging people to mobilise others to vote (71.51%) and providing critical updates on how and where to vote (65.81%). While the influence of WhatsApp messages on mobilising attendance at political rallies or related events was slightly lower, with 50.14% indicating high influence, it still highlights WhatsApp's role in encouraging political engagement. The lowest-ranked item, "I used WhatsApp to confirm or verify information related to the elections," while still showing 50.14% high influence, suggests that although WhatsApp was primarily a tool for motivation and participation, respondents were somewhat less reliant on it for fact-checking election-related information.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective of this study was to assess the extent to which staff members of Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC) received political campaign messages via WhatsApp during the 2023 general elections. The results revealed high exposure to political messages, with most respondents reporting frequent receipt of WhatsApp messages from various sources, including multiple political groups and direct messages. WhatsApp emerged as the primary platform for accessing political information during the elections. These findings align with those of Ikegbunam and Obiakor (2021) and Ngoka et al. (2024), who also highlighted WhatsApp's role in disseminating political messages in Nigeria. The widespread use of WhatsApp for political communication mirrors trends observed by Fisher, Gadjanova, and Hitchen (2023) and De Zúñiga et al. (2019), who identified social media, particularly WhatsApp, as a key tool for political engagement in Africa. This consistent exposure supports the Social Media Engagement Theory, which underscores the active role of users in generating, sharing, and engaging with content, especially in political contexts.

The second objective focused on examining the nature of the political messages shared on WhatsApp. Respondents received a variety of messages, including persuasive, emotionally charged content, misinformation, hate speech, and fewer messages promoting community engagement or voter participation. These findings align with Rossini et al. (2021), who noted the prevalence of misinformation on WhatsApp, affecting public discourse. This supports the Social Media Engagement Theory, which suggests that while social media fosters democratic engagement, it also facilitates the spread of content that may not always be factually accurate.

The study also assessed how WhatsApp messages influenced electoral participation. The results revealed that WhatsApp had a significant impact, particularly in motivating respondents to vote and helping them make informed decisions about their candidates. WhatsApp messages also clarified the electoral process, shaped perceptions of voting's importance, and encouraged broader

participation, such as mobilising others to vote and providing updates on how and where to vote. These findings resonate with Moura and Michelson (2017), who demonstrated the effectiveness of WhatsApp in political mobilisation in Brazil. Additionally, they support Ngoka et al. (2024) and De Zúñiga et al. (2019), whose studies confirmed WhatsApp's positive influence on voter turnout and political activism. Ultimately, these findings reinforce the Social Media Engagement Theory, highlighting how social media platforms enable users to engage actively with content and modify it to align with their political preferences, thus influencing their behaviour and participation.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significant role WhatsApp played in shaping political participation during the 2023 general elections among staff members of the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC). The high exposure to political campaign messages on WhatsApp, coupled with its status as the primary platform for accessing electoral information, highlights the increasing reliance on social media for political engagement in Nigeria. Moreover, the study's findings demonstrate that WhatsApp messages had a notable impact on electoral participation. The platform not only motivated respondents to vote but also played a crucial role in informing their voting choices, clarifying the electoral process, and fostering broader participation through mobilisation efforts. These insights contribute to our understanding of the evolving role of social media, particularly WhatsApp, in political communication and electoral participation in contemporary Nigerian elections.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Given that WhatsApp serves as a primary source of political information for many users, stakeholders, particularly the Electoral Commission (INEC) and civil society groups, should actively use WhatsApp to engage voters, especially during crucial moments of the electoral cycle. WhatsApp can be used to send reminders about voting dates, polling locations, and provide real-time updates on election processes, encouraging higher voter turnout and ensuring that voters are well-informed about how and where to vote.
2. Similarly, political parties should leverage WhatsApp as a tool for transparent, factual, and constructive political communication. Creating official channels for the dissemination of well-researched and balanced political content will ensure that users are exposed to reliable information that supports informed decision-making.
3. The study found that WhatsApp messages not only motivated voters to cast their ballots but also influenced their decision-making. To further enhance this engagement, political campaigns should incorporate interactive content on WhatsApp, such as polls, Q&A sessions, and discussions that allow voters to express their opinions and learn more about candidates and issues.
4. The prevalence of false or misleading information, including hate speech and derogatory remarks, found in the study suggests a need for better regulation and monitoring of content on WhatsApp. WhatsApp and regulatory bodies should collaborate to implement stricter content moderation policies.

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