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The Influence of Twitter on Youths' Participation in 2023 Election in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The role of social media in influencing users' decisions in a democratic system cannot be underestimated. Nigeria, being the most populous African nation, has attracted nations and organisations who served as spectators observing the electoral process. Nigeria, with over 200 million, has about 84 million active internet users; most of the political parties have a social media handle to further political course during the election, which ushered in candidates for different positions. Prominent among the social media platforms is Twitter, which has promoted the awareness and popularity of other political parties. This study examined the influence of Twitter on youths' participation in the 2023 election. The researcher made use of the survey research method and questionnaire tool for data gathering.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media in the last decades have greatly impacted information sharing and distribution all over the world. This new media is built on the existing media; radio and television are driven by digital technology, which makes the world a "global Village". Social media sites comprise Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Gmail, WhatsApp Messenger, Skype, Google Meet, Google Messenger, iPhone and Androids. Its volatility and dexterity in making information get to its users as quickly as possible, according to

Osharive (2015), digital technology, like two sides of a coin, brings with it both negative and positive sides. While it enhances people to be better informed, enlightened, and keep abreast with world developments, it exposes people to information not in consonance with their belief system, culture, and traditions. These networking sites are used by most people to interact with old and new friends, physical or internet friends (Apuke, 2016).

For news and current affairs updates, social media are veritable platforms where people access news almost the same time it is happening. Against the passive accessibility of the audience to information from conventional media, which are radio and television, leading to delayed feedback, social media enhances immediate feedback from its users (Guanah, 2021). For instance, the EndSars protest by Nigerians against police brutality spread across states in the country by the influence of live streaming of the peaceful protest on social media, which escalated to the killing of some of the youths at the Lekki Tollgate in Lagos, where the protest started is a reference point. As youth engaged in Instagram and Facebook live, other youths in other states began the protest, especially in the southern and western regions of the country.

During the world plagued by COVID-19, business ventures all over the world also explored social media as an alternative to the person-to-person approach, Coronavirus which came with restrictions to social interaction, otherwise known as social distancing, made businesses difficult to run because the more people's interaction, the higher the likelihood of interpersonal transfer of the virus (Masengu et al., 2023). As a remedy, business owners all over the world instructed their workers to work from home with the aid of a computer system connected to the internet, making interaction on social media with co-workers and their bosses possible (Xiao et al., 2021).

In recent times, Nigerian politicians have resolved to make use of social media to advance their political aspirations and popularity purposely because its users are youth, who are 70 per cent of Nigeria's population (Okocha & Dapoet, 2022). He argued that Nigeria has a population estimated at 206 million in 2020, which makes it the most populous country in Africa and seventh in the world. The country has the largest population of youth in the world, with a median age of 18.1 years. About 70% of the population is under 30, and 42% are under the age of 15.

Social media has changed the way people live together, thereby giving everyone the power to present and tell their own stories. Statistics by the AFP (2018) show that out of 214 million people in Nigeria, over 109 million make use of the internet, while 176 have mobile connections. Popular social media in Nigeria are YouTube, with 33 million active users; Facebook, with 26 million active users; Instagram, with 9 million active users; and Twitter, with 4.95 million active users. The implication of these data shows that Nigerians are active on social media; further research by Kemp (2023) revealed that 23.7% of the Twitter audience in Nigeria is female, while 76.3% are male.

The influence of social media on users' perception cannot be overemphasised as it affects users' perception, especially during the democratic process. Social media, which is an open space for users, makes it possible for misinformation and propaganda to flow. The politicisation of social media by users became popular. Auxier & Anderson (2021) indicated politicians in the USA leveraged social media; for instance, in the 2008 election, social media was used by Barrack Obama for his campaign; during this period, 74% of users sought election updates.

Social media across the world have been playing key roles in influencing the minds of users; oftentimes, social media are used as campaign tools by different political organisations and candidates to influence, persuade and canvas users to vote for their party candidates. Also, social media are often used by government agencies to sensitise, enlighten, educate and create awareness on the need for citizens to exercise their franchise and discourage unethical and immoral activities

such as vote buying, stealing of ballot boxes and use of violence. Therefore, this study sought to know the role of Twitter in influencing youth participation in politics.

Objectives of the Study

- To know the impact of Twitter on youth willingness to participate in the Nigerian electioneering process.

- To understand the rate at which youths visit Twitter for political updates.

- To examine the degree to which Twitter influenced youths' decision to support a candidate.

- To know how slang on Twitter influences the choice of candidates.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (Thorstein Veblen 1857 – 1929)

Technological determinism theory has been gaining more attention in recent years, especially with the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter. This theory suggests that technology is the primary driving force behind social and cultural change. It argues that technology shapes the way people think, act, and interact with each other (Jaliff & Drew, 2023). The Technological Determinism theory is the idea that technology has a major influence on the development of society. It suggests that technology shapes our values, beliefs, and behaviours as well as our social structures and institutions.

Finley (2022) noted that this theory can be used to explain how youths are using Twitter to drive political change and shape democracy around the world. By using this platform to spread their ideas and opinions, young people are having a direct impact on society and influencing decision-makers in a way that was not possible before. In recent years, the rise of social media platforms like Twitter has had a profound effect on the way young people view and participate in democracy. This can be seen in how they engage with current events, share their opinions and ideas, and support the causes they believe in. This demonstrates how technology has changed our history by allowing for a greater degree of participation in democracy than ever before.

Technological determinism holds that technology is an autonomous force that is shaping society rather than being shaped by it. The theory suggests that technological progress is inevitable and unstoppable and that it is the primary factor that determines the course of human history (Bennett, 2006). The most influential determinism scholar was the Canadian Philosopher and media theorist Marshal Mcluhan who wrote in his book "Understanding Media: The Extension of Man", which argued that media technologies had a profound effect on human consciousness and social organisation.

According to Mutekwe (2011), social changes are controlled by technology, technological development, communications and media. The modern information society arises as a result of the development of innovations, new technologies and their social and political implications.

YOUTHS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: AN OVERVIEW

According to the Nigerian Constitution 1999, youth is generally defined as any person between the ages of 18 and 35 years. This definition is based on the National Youth Policy of Nigeria, which was developed in 2009 to guide youth development and empowerment programs in the country (Population Reference Bureau, 2019). However, it is worth noting that different laws, policies, and programs in Nigeria may use slightly different age ranges to define youth.

Usigbe (2023) stated that Nigeria with over 250 ethnic groups and youths from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, are spread across different groups in terms of education, socio-economic status, and political views. Nigerian youths are often seen as the driving force behind social and political change in the country and have been involved in various movements and protests in recent years, including the #EndSARS protests in 2020 and currently the popular saying "Obidients Movement".

Nigerian youth and social media have a complex relationship. On one hand, social media has been a powerful tool for Nigerian youth to connect, network, and express themselves. Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp have provided a space for young Nigerians to discuss social and political issues, share ideas, and mobilise for social change. On the other hand, social media has also been a source of concern for many Nigerians, especially when it comes to issues of misinformation, fake news, and hate speech. The spread of false information on social media has led to numerous incidents of violence, as well as the stoking of ethnic and religious tensions (Buchanan, 2020).

Moreover, social media can also be a platform for cyberbullying and harassment, particularly against women and other marginalised groups. There have been numerous cases of young Nigerians being harassed or threatened online, which can have serious consequences for their mental health and well-being (Espinoza & Wright, 2018). Overall, social media has both positive and negative effects on Nigerian youth. While it can be a powerful tool for social and political engagement, it also requires responsible use to avoid negative consequences.

In recent times, Twitter has become a major platform for youths in Nigeria to get political updates and participate in the election process (Nguyen, 2011). It is estimated that over half of Nigerian youths aged 18-35 use Twitter to stay up-to-date with the latest political developments (Oluwafemi, 2021). The influence of Twitter on youth participation in elections in Nigeria is undeniable. Social media platforms like Twitter have become an essential source of information for Nigerian youths who are looking to get involved in politics. Through these platforms, they can easily access news and updates about their candidates and their policies, as well as engage in debates with other users around the country.

It is important for Nigerian youth to be critical consumers of social media content to use these platforms in ways that promote positive social change while avoiding harm to themselves or others. Orellana-Rodriguez & Keane (2018) noted that Twitter has had a major impact on the youth's willingness to participate, with its ability to spread news quickly and widely, it has enabled young people to become more informed and involved in the political process. It has also allowed them to voice their opinions and concerns on matters that affect them. This increased engagement of the youth in Nigeria's elections is likely to have a positive impact on the country's future.

Twitter

According to Orellana-Rodriguez & Keane (2018), Twitter is a social media platform that allows users to share short messages known as "tweets" with their followers. Tweets can be up to 280 characters long and can include text, images, videos, and links to other content on the web. Users can follow other Twitter users to see their tweets in their timelines, and they can also interact with tweets by liking, retweeting, and replying to them. Twitter is used by individuals, businesses, and organisations to share information, promote products or services, and engage with their audience. It was founded in 2006 and has since become one of the most popular social media platforms in the world.

In Nigeria, Twitter is a popular social media platform that is widely used by individuals, businesses, and organisations to communicate, share information, and connect with others. However, in June 2021, the Nigerian government suspended Twitter's operations in the country after the platform deleted a tweet from President Muhammadu Buhari's account for violating its rules on abusive behaviour. The suspension of Twitter in Nigeria led to widespread condemnation from local and international human rights groups, who viewed it as an attack on freedom of expression and a violation of citizens' rights to access information. Many Nigerians also criticised the move, arguing that it was an attempt by the government to suppress dissenting voices and curtail the right to free speech (Maclean, 2022).

Despite government suspension, many Nigerians continued to access Twitter using virtual private networks (VPNs) and other means. In November 2021, the government lifted the ban after Twitter agreed to establish a physical presence in Nigeria and comply with local regulations, including the country's data protection laws. Since the lifting of the ban, Twitter has resumed its operations in Nigeria, and many Nigerians have returned to the platform to continue engaging with each other and sharing information. However, concerns remain about the government's continued efforts to regulate social media and control the narrative online (Anyanwu et al., 2022).

Twitter has played a significant role in Nigerian elections in recent years. During the 2015 presidential election, Twitter was used by both politicians and citizens to express their opinions, share information, and mobilise support for their preferred candidates. Candidates also used Twitter to communicate their policies, respond to criticisms, and engage with voters. In the 2019 general elections, Twitter played an even more significant role. The platform was used extensively by Nigerians to monitor the election, report irregularities, and share results. Twitter also played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, with several hashtags trending throughout the election period (Bello et al., 2019).

Overall, Twitter has been an important tool for political engagement in Nigerian elections, allowing citizens to participate in the democratic process and hold their leaders accountable. However, its impact on elections is not without challenges, particularly in terms of the regulation and moderation of political speech. Twitter has also made it easier for Nigerian youths to connect with political figures and organisations, allowing them to voice their opinions on issues that matter most to them. This increased level of engagement has led to more youth participation in elections across the country (Maclean, 2022).

Twitter has become an integral part of the Nigerian online space. It has seen a tremendous amount of growth since it was initially launched in Nigeria in 2011. Over the years, millions of youths have used Twitter to stay updated with political news, share their views and opinions, and engage with others. Twitter has become a go-to source for many Nigerians who are looking for reliable information on politics, sports, entertainment, and other topics. It has also given people from all walks of life an avenue to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of censorship or judgment (Nguyen, 2011). Today, Twitter is one of the most visited websites in Nigeria, as it continues to be a hub for political updates and discussions.

Twitter, Avenue for Youth Mobilization and Political Participation

Twitter, in recent times, has been a motivating factor in influencing Nigerian youth's participation in politics. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria are a testament to this fact in that politicians took a substantial part of their campaigns to the platform because youths, who constitute more than 60% of the Nigerian population, are the major users based on World Bank reports (2021). Also, Omeni (2022) examines the ways in which the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria utilised the social media platform Twitter as a tool for organisation and mobilisation. By analysing tweets, retweets, hashtags, and user interactions during the height of the protests in October 2020, the study sheds light on the role that Twitter played in facilitating communication and coordination among protesters. The findings suggest that Twitter served as a crucial platform for spreading information, sharing personal experiences, and amplifying voices of dissent, ultimately contributing to the success of the movement. The study provides insights into the ways in which social media can be used as a tool for social change and activism in the digital age.

Twitter, Platform for Sensational News Versus Unbiased News

Despite the fact that Twitter is an accessible avenue for youths to get on-the-spot political news of an event before it gets to the mainstream media

such as radio, television, and newspapers, amongst others, however, with some level of fakeness, it is known that it is a popular platform among Nigerian youths for political discourse and activism. In recent years, Twitter has been used as a tool to mobilise young people for political protests and advocacy in Nigeria. Many young Nigerians use Twitter to share their opinions, voice their concerns, and organise political actions. The frequency of their visits to the platform for political updates may vary depending on current events, political issues, and personal interests (Akinyemi & Mobolaji, 2022).

Abdulrauf-Salau (2013) examines the role of Twitter as a news source for select audiences in Ilorin, Nigeria. The study argues that with the rise of social media platforms, Twitter has emerged as a significant source of news and information for many individuals globally. It also explores the types of news stories that are sought after and the factors that influence the credibility and trustworthiness of Twitter as a news source. The results reveal that Twitter is used by select audiences in Ilorin as a primary source of news, with political and entertainment news being the most sought-after.

Kruikemeier (2014) also suggests that Twitter has become an increasingly important platform for political candidates to connect with voters and disseminate their messages. It examines the ways in which political candidates use Twitter and the impact it has on votes. By analysing data from previous elections, the study found that candidates who had a larger Twitter following and posted more frequently were more likely to receive a higher percentage of the vote. Additionally, it discovered that Twitter allowed candidates to engage with voters in real time, respond to criticism, and mobilise supporters. However, the research states that the impact of Twitter on votes varied by demographic group, with younger and more educated voters being more likely to be influenced by social media. Overall, this study highlights the importance of Twitter as a tool for political candidates to reach and engage with

voters and the potential impact it can have on election outcomes.

Twitter's Potential To Influence Youths' Resolve To Support Political Candidates

Akinyemi & Mobolaji (2022) stated that social media platforms, including Twitter, have played a significant role in shaping political attitudes and opinions. Studies have shown that social media platforms can serve as important sources of political information for young people. Twitter, in particular, has become a popular platform for political discussion and activism, especially among young people. According to a study by the Pew Research Centre (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), 44% of 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States use Twitter, and many of them engage with political content on the platform.

Twitter can also help political candidates to reach younger audiences and engage with them directly. Candidates can use Twitter to share their policies, connect with voters, and respond to questions and criticisms in real time. This can help to build a sense of trust and transparency with young voters, who often value authenticity and accessibility in their political leaders (Okocha & Dapoet, 2022).

However, the impact of Twitter on youths' decision to support a political candidate is complex and multifaceted. Other factors, such as political ideology, social background, and personal experiences, can also influence how young people perceive and engage with political content on Twitter. Additionally, the presence of echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media can limit young people's exposure to diverse viewpoints and reinforce their existing beliefs and biases. Overall, while Twitter can certainly influence youths' decision to support a political candidate, it is unlikely to be the only or even the most significant factor in their decision-making process (Kruikemeier, 2014).

Twitter and Slangs

Social media has become an increasingly important platform for people to express their views and opinions on a variety of topics,

including elections. As such, the use of slang on Twitter during elections has become a popular way for people to express their support or opposition to certain candidates (Okocha & Dapoet, 2022). This has led to an increase in the use of slang during election campaigns, with some people using it as a form of political expression. This article will explore the effects that this increased use of slang may have on Twitter during an election. It will discuss how it can affect public opinion and how it can be used by politicians to influence voters. Furthermore, this article will also look at potential solutions that could be implemented in order to reduce the negative effects associated with the use of slang on Twitter during elections.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

Survey Research was adopted, and a survey questionnaire was used to collect data from Twitter users about their political engagement, views and behaviours during the 2023 election. This approach allowed the researcher to gather quantitative data that was analysed statistically.

Study Area

The study area for this research is Nigerians on Twitter. According to data published in Data Report (2023 (Kemp, 2023), there are 4.95 million Twitter users in Nigeria.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

The researcher adopted a statistical program software to arrive at the sample size using the formula (Unlimited Population):

$$CI = p \pm z \ X \ \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}$$

Where z is the z score, p is the population proportion, and n is the sample size

A total of 139 or more are needed to have a confidence level of 95%, that are the real value within ± 5% of the measured/surveyed value of 4.95 million Twitter users in Nigeria. Therefore, the sample size for the study was 139 Twitter users in Nigeria; the researcher adopted an available sampling technique to get participants' data.

Research Instrument

The researcher made use of a survey instrument to collect participants qualitative data about the respondent who resides in Nigeria within the election period and have a registered/active Twitter account.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data for the study was collected using Google Forms; respondents were briefed about the study; this was done through consent information on the questionnaire. The data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences software. Afterwards, the results were shown in percentages using bar charts

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The researcher carried out a study on Twitter users using Google Forms from May 27 – April 9 2023, when it stopped accepting responses from respondents who filled out the survey forms; 102 respondents filled out the forms. Data from the respondents are presented below.

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	46	45.1
	Male	56	54.9
	Total	102	100.0
Age	18 – 25	46	45.1
	25 – 35	45	44.1
	36 – 45	10	9.8
	46 >	1	1.0
	Total	102	100.0
Career	Student	23	22.5
	Entrepreneur	24	23.5
	Employed	39	38.2
	Others	16	15.7
	Total	102	100.0

Data in *Table 1* showed that more men (54.9 %) than women (45.1%) participated in the survey, which confirms GSMA 2023 reports (Kemp, 2023) that the majority of Twitter users are male. Information on age distribution also indicated that the majority of the respondents are between the ages of 18 – 25 and 25 – 35. Also, the table showed that the majority of the respondents are working (Government and Private), some are entrepreneurs- they own a business, while others are mostly students.

Figure 1: Respondents with Twitter account
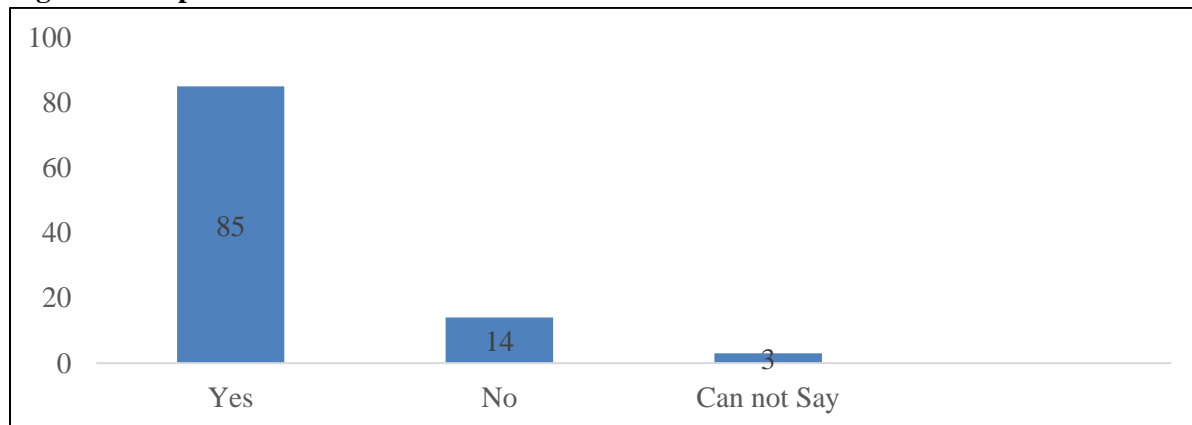
Twitter, which is the variable that influenced users, is the centre of the research; the data indicated that 85% of the respondents actually have a Twitter account, and the majority of them are between the ages of 18 – 35 years. In addition, 39.2% of respondents noted that having a Twitter account did not vote during the election period, while 60.8% of the respondents having a Twitter account voted during the election, which indicated a positive turnout.

The study further showed that 33.7% of voters on Twitter are actually first-time voters, while 66.3% of the respondents have been voting during the election process. The data indicated that the majority of the first-time voters are within the age range of 18 – 25 years.

Figure 2: Data showing the efficiency of Twitter updates on respondents
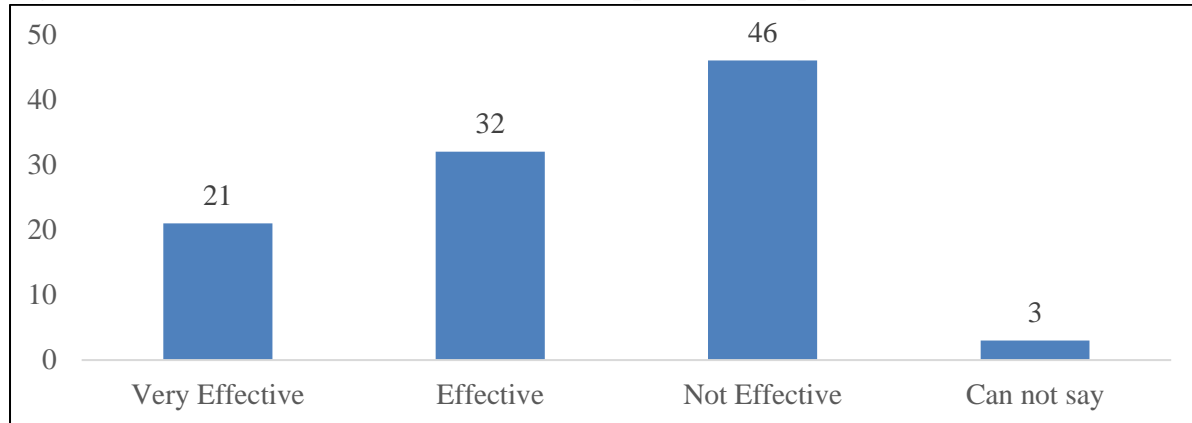
Kruikemeier (2014) suggests that Twitter has become an increasingly important platform for political candidates to connect with voters and disseminate their messages; however, 46.7% of the respondent do not see the update as effective, while 53.5% sees it as an effective channel for passing information.

Figure 3: Respondents' reliance on Twitter for updates
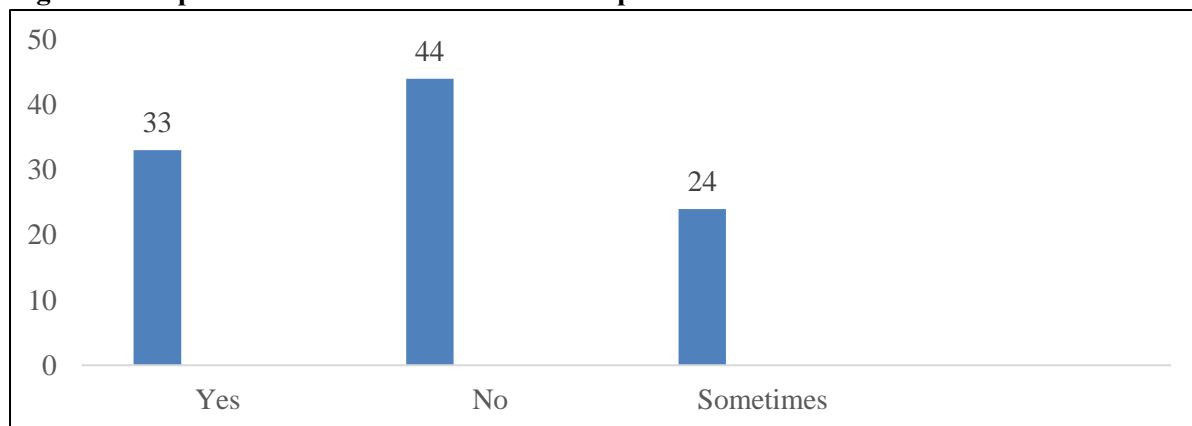
Abdulrauf-Salau (2013) revealed that Twitter has proven to be a source of news for youths; this data showed that youth dependency on Twitter has proven to be effective, with 32.7% agreeing, while 23.8% of users sometimes rely on it, 43.6% of the users do not rely on Twitter updates.

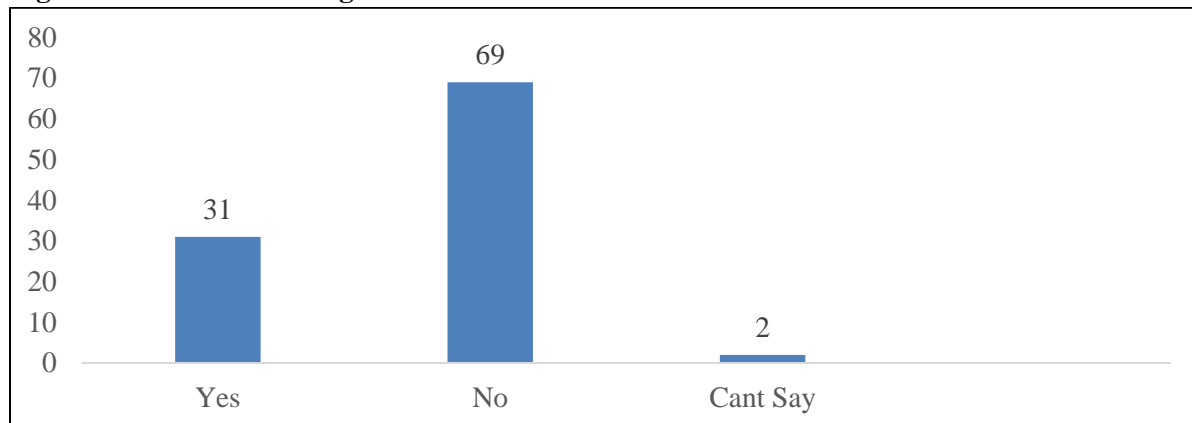**Figure 4: The effects of Twitter on respondent**
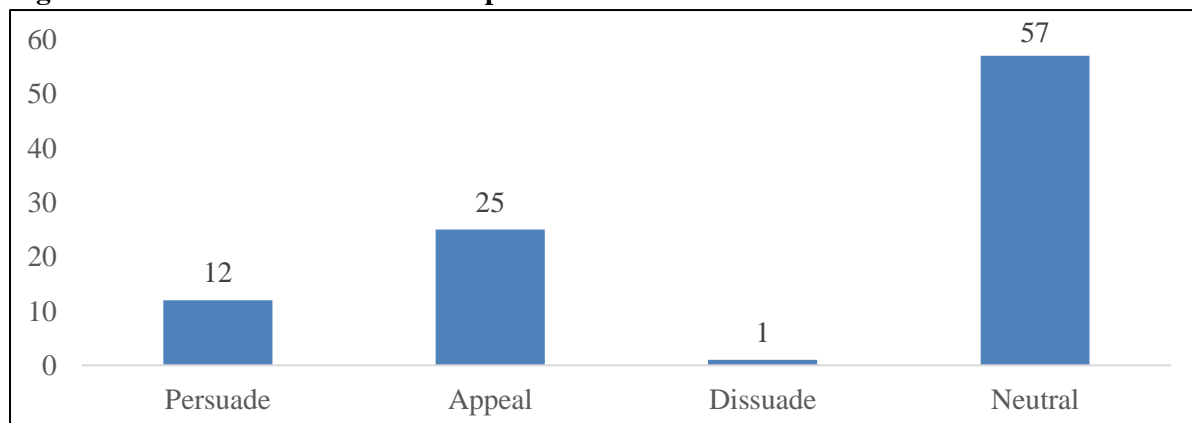
The results of respondents' effects on Twitter dependency for updates, 60% of respondent believes Twitter does not have any effects on them, 12.6%, 26.3% agreed that Twitter persuades

and appeal to them, while 1.1% agreed that it changes their beliefs.

Figure 5: Influence of slang

The data in *Figure 5* indicated how the use of slang influenced respondents' choice of candidates during an election (31%), while 69 % disagreed.

DISCUSSION OF FINDING

Data from the survey indicated that Twitter, which is common among Nigerians, is an important platform where users get updates about politics, politicians and political parties. Data revealed on gender use of Twitter also supported Auxier & Anderson (2021) that the majority of Twitter users in Nigeria are male. The implication of this data is that during strategic communication, men should be given more attention to Twitter influencers. Also, the majority of Twitter users are between the age of 18 – 35, of which 81% falls under the Nigeria Youths Policy Plans age bracket. Twitter influenced the youths, especially youths within the age range of 18 – 25, with 30% of the respondents being first-time voters, while 47% of them were users who had been using Twitter accounts for three years.

Also, the Data showed that 12% of youths are always active on Twitter, while 72% often make use of Twitter apps. The implication of this data is that Twitter has become part of youth's daily lives and form part of their habits, though the resultant effect could be positive or negative depending on how individual make use of it and the kind of content they are exposed to daily, this supports the technological determinism theory of Marshall (2011).

Furthermore, Twitter has been effective in reinforcing or dissuading users by providing them with more information; the data showed that 56% of respondents agreed that Twitter was effective in supporting and influencing the candidates of their choice, with 71% of the respondents depending on Twitter for election updates in Nigeria. 39% of users believed that Twitter was able to persuade and appeal to them to support a candidate during the election period.

The use of slang or hashtags is prominent among users, as data reveal that 80% of the users were able to identify a political party or candidates through their slang and hashtags. However, despite this, data revealed that 60% of the respondents were not influenced by the hashtags or slang to support any candidates.

CONCLUSION

Twitter has had a major impact on Nigerians' political views and opinions. The platform has allowed for greater access to information about candidates and their policies, as well as opportunities for political conversations among Nigerians. It also provides a space for citizens to express their views on current events and share ideas with others from across the country. However, there are also concerns that social media can be used to spread false information or

further polarise political opinion in Nigeria. Data analysed revealed that 80% of Twitter users can identify politics by their trends; this implies that when planning an online campaign, concise efforts must be taken to factor in hashtags and slang that will portray in good light and promote the parties. Also, Data revealed that though Twitter user does not support the idea that it influenced their voting decisions, over 50% of the users still makes use of Twitter as a means of updating on political happenings in the country; the implication means that when planning a campaign effort must be taken to get users informed of happenings and positive information must be constantly reinforced to support the campaigns.

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