



Assessment of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC's) Digital Voter Education Approach on Facebook and X in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: With the rise of digital media, voter education has gained prominence and become more consolidated in many democracies. Prior to Nigeria's general elections of 2019 and 2023, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) used social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) to educate voters, but despite the increased use of these platforms, there have not yet been sufficient empirical studies analysing how thriving, what possibilities exist, and what bounds are faced by INEC's digital voter education programme during these election years, as well as how INEC's digital voter education content evolved between the two elections.

Objective: This study focused on voter education strategies, opportunities, and challenges on Facebook and X by INEC in the 2019 and 2023 general elections.

Method: This study employed a qualitative approach with data collection of four in-depth interviews with staff from the Voter Education and Publicity Department and the INEC Citizens Contact Centre (ICCC). A total of 146 posts from INEC's verified Facebook and X accounts were collected and analyzed thematically. Diffusion of Innovations and Technological Determinism theories were used for framework, while descriptive and thematic methods were utilized for analysis.

Results: Findings show that INEC has improved its digital strategies for educating voters from 2019 to 2023. The 2023 strategies were much more structured than the 2019 strategies which were experimental, and less interactive. Collaborating with civil society organisations, influencers and communication strategists, INEC addressed online misinformation using approaches such as live question and answer sessions, infographics and dynamic content. Nonetheless, INEC's advertising budget, platform-specific restrictions, algorithmic delays and technical limitations made it difficult for the Commission to achieve all of its goals.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the Commission's entry into Facebook and X is a significant improvement in Digital Voter Education in Nigeria; however, INEC's improved strategic use of social media in 2023 still had structural and technical challenges that limited the overall achievement of its goals.

Unique Contribution: This paper has provided new linear perspective to the Nigerian electoral body's use of social media for voter education, ranging from social innovation, institutional learning partnership/collaboration, and their impacts on digital voter outreach process.

Key Recommendation: This paper calls for the adoption of constituency-based comprehensive, data-driven, digitally integrated voter education campaigns that are likely to result in increased budgetary provisions and operational functional integration for online voter education initiatives as well as partnerships and collaboration between civil society organisations, Facebook, X, and local organisations for greater technical preparedness for future digital education campaigns.

Keywords: Voter Education, Strategy, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Digital Media



INTRODUCTION

Social media has changed the landscape of voters' education in the electoral process with the capacity of Facebook and X (Twitter) to engage over eighty percent of the people that are active online unlike other platforms which may have more restrictive access and would constrain the capacity of civic organisations to communicate in the democratic process (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018; Nwafor & Odoemelam, 2016). Social media in civic education has moved from being two separate activities to become more integrated, automated, and even more so in the use of data cross media influencer strategies (Babatunde & Adetola, 2023). Although, the importance of social media in political communication is rapidly increasing, there exists limited evidence of INEC's approach to digital voter education over different election cycles (Ndlela & Mano, 2020), with most scholars focusing on user-generated discourse or political campaign communication, creating imbalance in institutional scholarship (Suemo, Kusugh, & Okonkwo, 2023; Obiorah & Okafor, 2023). Consequently, this paper focuses on examining the opportunities and limitations of INEC's voter education on Facebook and X during the 2019 and 2023 general elections, evaluating the extent to which changes in messages, audience targeting, and varying levels of interactivity represent institutional learning and shifts across election cycles. This paper evaluates the use of Facebook and X by INEC for the purpose of increasing the level of education among voters and specific methods were developed by INEC when using these platforms in relation to the 2019 and 2023 general elections. The paper examines various advantages INEC has gained from the use of both platforms for voter education as well as the disadvantages/inhibiting factors presented by Facebook and X as viable sources of communication for voter education.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- i. To compare INEC's voter education strategies on Facebook and X in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections.
- ii. To identify opportunities of Facebook and X as platforms for voter education in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections.
- iii. To identify the limitations of Facebook and X as platforms for voter education in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections.

Literature Gaps and Justification for the Study

Studies have shown that social media is increasingly influential in Nigeria's electoral process, most research is focused on political campaigns, how voters use social media, fake news, and the political conversations that citizens have on Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) (Suemo, Kusugh and Okonkwo 2023; Obiorah and Okafor 2023; Nwafor et al., 2014). Very few studies use qualitative content analysis techniques to study the themes, stories and strategies underlying messages, while still fewer have looked at how these messages evolve from one election cycle to another. This study is therefore justified as it fills these gaps by offering a qualitative, theory-driven, and comparative assessment of INEC's digital voter education messages across two election cycles, thereby contributing empirically and theoretically to political communication and digital voter education in Nigeria.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Impact of Social Media on Voter Education Engagements

The rapidly developing digital communication technology impacts citizen engagement in elections and the political learning of citizens. Voters' relational interactivity via social media, especially in the USA, has changed the social contract concerning elections and Election Management Bodies in different parts of the world (Castells, 2012). In the context of Nigeria, social media platforms, particularly Facebook and X, have become prominent channels of political communication, discourse, information, and civic engagement. INEC and other civil society groups have been credited with promoting accountability, social activism, and civic participatory democracy through social media (Adebayo & Arogundade, 2022; Aligwe & Nwafor, 2016). The extent of social responsibility of each platform is the primary distinguishing factor between X and Facebook. Social responsibility and civic engagement are strongly emphasized with Facebook. In contrast, X's social responsibility is limited to the provision of fast communication. The existence of users on the site inquiring from the algorithms about the tools in the site or its functions in communication provides additional proof of the relevance of the site's communication functions and the tools of the focused site's algorithms.

The combination of innovation of technology, flexible digital strategies, and institutional innovation in the 2023 and 2019 elections in Nigeria is noteworthy. The digital era anticipates institutions adapting how they assist voters in becoming educated by providing fully structured documents related to policies. Therefore, using X and Facebook to educate voters can be compared to using X and Facebook to teach people how to demonstrate, of which both have their utilities. This is also the case with Adeola and Olatunji (2022), who mentioned the strategic use of different platforms and the targeted audience of the message as one of the most important factors of the INEC digital campaigns. Okojie and Yusuf (2019) analyzed Facebook and X's role in communication during Nigeria's 2019 General Elections. X is primarily focused on real-time communication and the rapid dissemination of time-sensitive INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission) announcements during elections that required immediate response and engagement from the public. While Facebook supported the constitutionally-promoted educational activities of the elections by enabling discussions, community engagement, and participative voter education to some extent, Nwachukwu and Adebajo (2020) noted that Facebook's unique algorithm helped sustain certain voter education content vis-a-vis persistence, enduring visibility, and long-term visibility.

Digitalisation in Political Communication

The advancement of digital technologies over the last quarter of a century has greatly affected the communicative relationship and informational exchanges between the citizenry and the government (van Dijck et al., 2018; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). With the aid of digital technologies, the rapid flow of information has enabled the public and the various political bodies to construct collaborative narratives, and engage in various levels of interactivity (Castells, 2012; Adebayo & Arogundade, 2022). The essence of digital political communication fundamentally revolves around creating a two-way channel for user participation made possible through user technology and social media. The use of social media sites like Facebook and X/



Twitter provides an opportunity for more expressive citizen participation and has led to the creation of more responsive citizen political education (Kreiss and McGregor; 2019; Odoemelum & Nwafor, 2012). On the flip side, the digital content visibility of social media platforms can be detrimental. Algorithms controlling social media visibility, prioritize interaction metrics, and therefore have the potential to amplify elections-related falsehoods and increase digital content visibility (Gillespie; 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Everett Roger's Diffusion of Innovation Theory offers explanations on how new technologies, behaviors, and methods of communication are adopted by societies. This theory applies to INEC's engagement with and use of Facebook and X as social communication tools, given the characterization of the body as conservative and bureaucratic regarding the use of digital communication for public dissemination. While it is indisputable that INEC transitioned from traditional media to digital media, the organisation still fits the characterization of an entity that for many years utilized media that did not involve social networks and has, at long last, come to use social media. The context within which Facebook and X have been utilized by INEC to promote voting education is precisely why the Diffusion of Innovation Theory is applicable for assessing the extent of integration.

The steps in the diffusion of innovations theory as proposed by Rogers (2003) which are knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation, can be applied to the various stages of evolution of the use of Facebook and X by the INEC during each election cycle from 2019 to 2023. Therefore, it can be said that the diffusion of innovations theory explains the INEC learning curve as more or less being the same as the advancement of digital voter education. The theory of diffusion of innovations provides insight on how an audience decides whether to accept or reject an innovation based on its perceived characteristics (e.g. compatibility, complexity, observability) (Rogers, 2003). INEC has made use of various tactics to improve the perceived compatibility, complexity and observability of their Facebook and X content strategy and has achieved considerable success in this area.

Technological Determinism theory argues that technology determines how people behave in society, the way institutions work, and how they communicate with people (McLuhan, 1964). Therefore, understanding the key assumptions of this theory allows one to understand the way technology is designed and developed by Facebook and X to create specific behaviours for INEC in relation to the content strategy of its voter education through the content structure of Facebook and X (i.e., a heavy emphasis on multimedia posts, hashtags, metrics of engagement, and the complex algorithms that determine the visibility of their posts). This means that Facebook and X are not simply neutral vessels for delivering information; they are directly influencing the impact, format and schedule that INEC uses to deliver its voter education messages. According to this theory, the types of tools used for communication directly affect the types of people to whom an institution will communicate to and the types of messages that they create (Chandler, 1995).



Technology's power and influence over human communication are demonstrated in many ways. Winner (1986), therefore, examining the paper's findings, there are several technology-based constraints identified by the researchers (e.g., algorithmic delay, content visibility issues for example) as well as an additional problem/ constraint related to INEC's ability to produce political ads. All of these factors contribute to limiting INEC's ability to successfully use Facebook and Twitter for its voter education campaigns during the different electoral cycles.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed qualitative approaches to investigate a topic. The data was obtained from four (4) in-depth interviews with officials from the Voter Education and Publicity Department and the INEC Citizens Contact Centre (INEC), with 146 voter education posts from INEC's verified Facebook and X accounts for both 2019 and 2023 election cycles. It analyzed the steps taken by INEC to formulate, execute, and evaluate its engagement with the electorate on social media in order to capture the complexity of its strategic and administrative communicative processes. The interviews were conducted in person and discursive analysis was used to process the data, which reveals institutional logic, meaning, and ideology by analyzing the reasoning and discourse structures of related texts and speeches. This approach is concerned with the rational justification discourse of system action and institutional domains and, therefore, captures the strategic internal circulation and communication system of INEC.

DATA PRESENTATION

Table 1: Social media platforms

		Frequency	Percent
Social media platform	Facebook	84	57.5%
	Twitter	62	42.5%
	Total	146	100.0%

This section describes the distribution of posts on various platforms by INEC during the elections. INEC appeared more active on Facebook (57.5%) compared to X (42.5%) during the elections in 2019 and 2023 (as shown in Figure 1).

DATA ANALYSIS

INEC's communication strategies for voter education

INEC's Director of Voters Education and Publicity gave insights into what happened behind the scene - social media wise – in the 2019 and 2023 general election. According to him, “As part of



our strategies, we employed vendors to help retweet or share posts on the general elections in 2019 and 2023 and we paid them for the job done. Determined the messages to be shared and sometimes, designed the messages to be shared by ourselves before the vendors reshared or retweeted. Part of the strategies included the usage of multichannel communication integration as well as the managing and coordinating public interactions via the Commission's email portal, hotlines, SMS, and the INEC mobile app, ensuring seamless communication between INEC and citizens; they also involved information dissemination where the distribution of vital information such as press releases, updates, and election results using digital tools including SMS broadcasts, the INEC news website, and the INEC app were managed.” (Interview, 2025. (Interview, 2025).

The Deputy Director of Voter Education also corroborated the assertions of the Manager, ICCC on the social media strategies deployed during the last two elections thus:

Earlier at the commission, conventional media were mainly used; that's radio, television, and newspapers. However, we have understood that information management these days, especially that which has to do with youth interest, is actually harnessed and serviced by the platforms that are more or less for the youth; those are X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and the rest of them. Therefore, during the 2019 and 2023 general elections, the commission actually established what is called ICCC, that is, the INEC Citizen's Contact Centre, which dealt with information management and servicing WhatsApp links of the citizens, servicing the X handle and Facebook. The unit coordinated and accepted information based on the needs of those that used the platforms. (Interview, 2025)

In answering the first research question, therefore, it has been found that INEC officials employed different voter education strategies on Facebook and X between the 2019 and 2023 general elections. The data show further that the social media strategies differed in 2019 and 2023. In 2019, INEC used different hashtags such as #YourVoteMatters, #PVCCollection and #NigeriaDecides2019. But in 2023, the hashtags changed #NoPVCNovote, #YourVoteYourPower and #NigeriaDecides2019.

Opportunities of *Facebook* and *X*

From the submission of the interviewees, social media provided a number of opportunities for INEC to reach young voters in its voter education drive. For instance, the Deputy Director of Voter Education and Publicity explained:

Facebook and X provided opportunities for us to not only work but also made our work easier. They provided us with the opportunity to mobilize, sensitize and to discourage persons from doing those things that were not encouraged in the electoral process. With those two main platforms, we designed a multi-pronged approach. INEC did not dictate the message, they provided the platform and resources. That alone gave ample opportunity for INEC to send good messages and to reach out to a lot of people that are not even within its reach over a great distance.



The Manager of ICCC said, “In 2019 and again in 2023, INEC collaborated directly with Facebook to combat the spread of electoral misinformation. Through this partnership, Facebook provided technical assistance that enabled the Commission to identify and take down fake accounts impersonating INEC or spreading false information about the electoral process.”

Deputy Director’s remarks, both Facebook and X had opportunities for him in 2019 and 2023. In 2023, the Commission, through the Voter Education Department with the support of the appropriate authorities, recruited over 50 influencers to develop and promote voter education materials to Nigeria’s major indigenous languages of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. These influencers employed targeted Facebook ads to reach specific segments of the population, especially women and rural dwellers, through audience engagement.

The data show that in 2023, public confidence in INEC’s digital communication channels increased, particularly augmented by the Commission’s partnership with Facebook which facilitated quick removal of fake accounts and harmful content. Although no formal partnership existed with X, the platform was vital for instant reporting and observation of the issues as they arose. More and more, citizens sought out INEC’s verified accounts to crosscheck and report election-related disinformation, as well as to receive. This indicated the maturation of the INEC electorate and the growing use of primary sources as compared to previous cycles.

Limitations of Facebook and X in Voter Education

INEC faced several challenges using Facebook and X advertised voter education during the 2019 and 2023 general elections. Director Voter Education said 2019 was mainly characterized by a lack of engagement from our audience, limited digital workers, insufficient funding for ads, no collaboration with Facebook and X, complicated account verification, and so the absence of the collaboration with Facebook and X. Nevertheless, in 2023, many of our challenges were addressed as INEC refined the content and paid for the less restrictive collaborations with Facebook and Twitter...

For the Director of Voter Education, he narrated that, ‘Outdated equipment and inadequate staffing created challenges in social media voter education. Numerous campaign digital tools, such as computers, analytical tools, and content creation tools, were obsolete and/or dysfunctional. The Commission's ability to produce quality content for Facebook and Twitter was hindered by the technology, as was the ability to optimize voter outreach using responsive tools.’

DISCUSSIONS

The qualitative data were used to answer the research questions on the strategies, opportunities presented by Facebook and X for information sharing and the limitations encountered during the elections. The findings indicate that INEC deployed some strategies that could be described as effective in 2023 but failed in 2019. The failure of 2019 made it possible for it to re-strategise in 2023. It adopted strategies in 2023 that established differences in target audience (especially youth and first-time voters) for the purpose of using appropriate social media platforms. It used more vernacular languages, improved graphic design and it used analytics to guide its content



decisions. Message development was collaborative. More importantly, INEC worked with communication experts, civil society organisations (CSOs), and digital consultants. Content was informed by voter needs, media trends, and legal guidelines.

INEC also collaborated with CSOs, international partners like IFES and UNDP and private digital firms to shape contents and broaden its reach. Facebook and X served as the primary digital channels for real-time communication, myth-busting and public feedback. They were critical for awareness and engagement, especially with urban youth. Real-time engagement and outreach for social campaigns, like PVC collection drives, used to be rudimentary, particularly during their campaigns in 2019, especially, during #NigeriaDecides2019. However, in 2023, with increased promotion, the addition of other hashtags #YourVoteMatters, #GetYourPVC and #VoteNotFight, and initiatives aimed at promoting voter education content, social campaign efforts were amplified.

As far as opportunities, four social media platforms (Facebook and X/Twitter) were indicated in the findings as possible avenues for educating voters. INEC's Marketing and Communications Unit referred to X and Facebook as low-cost and quick means of reaching target audiences, particularly the young electorate. These are the platforms the election management body relies on for disseminating information, maintaining direct interaction, and addressing the misinformation in real-time and on the spot. During the mass voter engagement campaigns that were targeted at the youth, these channels enabled the election body to communicate with voters instantly and at a much lower cost than traditional media. During the campaigns for the collection of the PVC, registration of voters, and the target audiences of urban and semi-urban areas, partnerships with young influencers, artists, and media personalities were utilized to communicate with voters through sponsored posts, targeted advertisements, and other voter education materials.

In terms of limitations, the delays observed by INEC during the election peak season resulted in postponing campaign live broadcasts during fundamental periods anywhere from 24-48 hours by boosting posts during delayed campaign schedule blocking. Certain payments for Facebook Ads made with specific Nigerian bank cards were only resolved through long discussions with Meta's election integrity team. Scheduling organic cross-posted content in parallel became the only strategy usable by the digital team as backups due to operational and platform-specific restrictions.

CONCLUSION

The most prominent shift in INEC's strategies for digitally educating voters from 2019 to 2023 was the professionalism and refinement of language as opposed to the 2019 simplistic mass communication approach. Given the employment of social advocates, social scientists, and professional graphic designers for the 2023 elections, it is probably the first time in Nigeria the evidence-based strategic messaging of social relevance and the graphic advocacy theory of social science, coupled with social advocacy, was used. This strategy for the 2023 elections might also be the first time the advocacy theory of social and graphic advocacy, with a focus on social



media content and engagement analytics, was used in Nigeria. All these combined resulted in significant social engagement.

Using X and Facebook for civic education was the best way to use the limited resources to provide and access real time and low cost information, debunk info, promote civic activism, and provide information in both directions. INEC's partnerships with influencers, artistes, and other digital advocates for voter education also increased visibility for the campaign and enhanced the digital trust and participation in the elections for 2023. The digital campaign for voter education in 2023 that targeted the urban areas was also effective given the rapid spread of information related to how to obtain the PVC voter cards.

There were some concerns related to the Facebook content approval process which was time consuming as well as the restriction of X number of characters which was frustrating. INEC made use of the limited resources for Facebook and X as well as their internal organisation which consisted of a Facebook and X Integrity Team to minimize disruptions. The 2023 INEC's use of Facebook and X demonstrated a degree of flexibility and adaptability which contributed to the digital capability INEC was acquiring, while also further confirming the use of social media as a means of communicating with the citizen during the elections and enhancing democracy in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the findings:

1. Improvement in the analytics and audience targeting applied by INEC in 2023 increased the relevance and engagement levels of the content shared especially among the youth and first-time voters, thus INEC should institutionalise the use of analytics and audience segmentation in digital communication for voter education planning in order to improve precision, flexibility, and sustained engagement over the entire social network.
2. Collaboration with communication scholars and civil society organisations, as well as influencers, greatly increased the scope of the INEC outreach and enhanced the credibility of the messages broadcast in the 2023 elections. Therefore, INEC should formalise and deepen the collaboration with these constituencies within the framework of voter education in order to maintain active civic engagement at all levels and build trust in the communication surrounding elections.
3. Technical problems, for example, slow approval for ads on Facebook and the length limitation of posts on X, disrupted parts of the INEC campaigns. Hence, INEC should improve technical readiness by assigning direct contacts with the major social platforms and preparing backup solutions for seamless and timely execution of voter education campaigns.



Ethical Clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from all participants involved in this study. Participants were adequately informed that the study was conducted strictly for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships which could be interpreted as creating a conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

The study was conceived and designed by Ismaila Nurudeen Isah and Roseline Yacim, with Ismaila Nurudeen Isah compiling the data and performing the data analysis and interpretation, while Ismaila Nurudeen Isah and Roseline Yacim wrote and revised the original manuscript. All authors conducted a thorough review of the final manuscript and shared in the respective author's responsibility for the originality and content of the final manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets upon which the conclusions of this study were based are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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