

ANALYSIS OF READERS' COMMENTS AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON INSTAGRAM DURING NIGERIA'S 2023 ELECTIONEERING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nature, slant, and dominant themes of Instagram readers' comments on political issues during Nigeria's 2023 electioneering period. Existing election coverage studies focus on media framing, bias, and agenda-setting, but rarely on audience responses in online comments. Using a qualitative method, the study analysed 879 comments from Instagram posts by *The Punch*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *Pulse Nigeria*. Two political stories—

“Obasanjo Endorses Peter Obi for Presidency” and “National Rescue Movement Seeks Obi's Disqualification over Dual Citizenship”—were selected. Most comments had an unserious tone, using humour, sarcasm, and satire, and were largely negative. Thematic analysis showed patterns of endorsement, criticism of dominant parties, scepticism about the electoral process, ethnic and religious sentiments, and electoral apathy. Online readers' comments were mostly unserious and negative, indicating that political content was treated more as entertainment than as discussion. Media organisations should use readers' comments as feedback and develop strategies to promote constructive online political discourse.

Keywords: Electioneering, Political Issues, Political Discourse, Readers' comments, social media

Introduction

Social media platforms have transformed political communication and public engagement, especially during elections (Castells, 2012; Chadwick, 2017). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube now serve as interactive spaces. Here, political actors send campaign messages and citizens respond, debate, and challenge political ideas (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Unlike traditional media, which position audiences as passive recipients, social media enable real-time interaction and support participatory political discourse (Jenkins, 2006; Dahlgren, 2013). During electioneering, social media platforms serve as key arenas for mobilisation, persuasion, and shaping opinions (Enli, 2017). Political actors use these platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speak directly to voters. Citizens use comment sections to show approval, dissatisfaction, humour, scepticism, and resistance (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). These online comments form user-generated content that reflects public sentiment, frames of interpretation, and reactions to political events (Papacharissi, 2015). In Nigeria, rising internet access and social media usage have intensified online political debate during election cycles (Ojebuyi & Adegbola, 2020). Comment sections on news stories now serve as forums for feedback,

deliberation, and confrontation. Readers' comments reveal both personal views and broader sociopolitical attitudes marked by ethnic, religious, and ideological factors (Adesina, 2019). As Wahl-Jorgensen (2001) observes, online platforms broaden audience participation beyond traditional letters to the editor, granting citizens new avenues to engage with political content.

Despite the importance of online comments in shaping political discourse, research in Nigeria focuses mainly on media coverage, framing, bias, and agenda-setting during elections (Oso, 2012; Ojebuyi, 2018). There is little attention to how audiences interpret and respond to news through online comments. Yet, these responses reveal how political messages are received, challenged, or reinterpreted in the public sphere (Livingstone, 2004). Against this backdrop, this study examines readers' comments on selected political stories shared on Instagram by leading Nigerian news platforms during the 2023 electioneering period.

Statement of the Problem:

Social media plays an increasingly important role in Nigerian political engagement, yet there is little empirical evidence on audience responses to political content (Papacharissi, 2015; Dahlgren, 2013). Digital media encourage participation through features like comment sections, yet the nature and quality of participation remain unclear. It is not clear whether comments show meaningful, issue-based engagement or arise from emotion, humour, sarcasm, or partisanship, especially during elections. Existing Nigerian political communication research mainly examines media framing, agenda-setting, and bias in election coverage (Ojebuyi, 2018; McQuail, 1997). These studies help us understand how political content is constructed, but often miss the audience perspective. They do not always show how individuals interpret, react to, and reshape messages in online environments. Even studies of online discourse focus on identity factors such as ethnicity and religion. Few analyse the tone, slant, and themes of audience

responses to political issues. This study addresses this gap by examining the nature, slant, and themes of readers' comments on Instagram political stories during the 2023 electioneering period. The study aims to determine whether these interactions help or hinder informed democratic debate in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What is the nature of comments made by online readers under stories on topical political issues during the 2023 electioneering?
2. What is the slant used by online readers under stories on topical political issues during the 2023 electioneering?
3. What are the themes of the comments by online readers made under stories on topical political issues during the 2023 electioneering?

Review of Related Literature

Online Political Discourse and Social Media

Social media have redefined political communication, becoming key channels for information sharing, opinion expression, and political mobilisation. Researchers argue that these platforms boost democratic participation by lowering barriers to engagement and amplifying marginalised voices (Dutton, 2009). Through likes, shares, and comments, citizens engage with political content in ways previously unavailable through traditional media. Nevertheless, online political exchanges often foster polarisation, emotional intensity, and incivility. Jibril & Mohammed (2022) report that Nigerian social media debates frequently expose entrenched ethnic, religious, and regional divides. Instead of fostering thoughtful deliberation, these forums often reinforce divisive “us versus them” narratives, fracturing national unity.

Readers' Comments as Audience Feedback

Readers' comments on news platforms serve as vital forms of audience feedback and participatory journalism. Chung (2008) characterises comment sections as interactive venues where readers challenge news content, contest journalistic narratives, and interact with peers. These comments offer insight into public opinion, interpretive framing, and emotional reaction to political issues. Research suggests that comments can influence how other readers perceive news stories, thereby shaping broader public opinion (Lee & Yoon, 2010). Ajiboye (2013) argues that online commenters function as social actors who actively construct discursive communities to influence attitudes and beliefs. Through strategies such as exaggeration, sarcasm, and polarisation, commenters negotiate meaning and power within online political spaces. However, comments should not be mistaken for the views of the broader population. While they offer a window into public sentiment, commenters are often a self-selected group with intense perspectives. Nonetheless, the volume and immediacy of online comments make them valuable for understanding patterns in audience engagement and discourse.

Electioneering and Audience Reception of Media Messages

Electioneering encompasses the diverse campaign efforts by political actors and institutions to sway voters during elections (Arowolo & Alako, 2010; Rasheed, 2016). In today's digital landscape, electioneering increasingly unfolds online, where political messages rapidly circulate and attract public scrutiny through comments and reactions. Reception analysis emphasises audiences' active role in decoding media within specific sociocultural contexts (McQuail, 1997). Audiences do not merely receive messages—they interpret and reframe content based on their knowledge, beliefs, and experience. This interpretive process is particularly evident in online comment sections, where readers publicly articulate their judgments

on political news. Ortiz et al. (2017), in their review of X during Brazil's 2014 presidential debate, found that users gravitated toward sensational and humorous content over policy issues. This suggests that online political engagement may privilege entertainment and emotion above substantive debate—an observation reflected in Nigerian online discourse.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in framing theory, as coined by Goffman (1973). The theory posits that the media and communicators shape public perception by selecting, emphasising, and presenting specific aspects of reality while excluding others, thus defining how an issue is interpreted. It suggests that how information is packaged (the frame) dictates how audiences process, understand, and react to it. Framing theory highlights that, because humans are cognitive misers who prefer easy information processing, they rely heavily on preconstructed frames to make sense of the world. The relevance of this theory to the study lies in its ability to explain political information and structure it in a way the audience can relate to and interpret. For example, the media platforms mentioned in the study used frames to construct political stories and meanings through headlines, visuals, and narrative patterns to clarify the message for audiences. These frames influence how readers understand political issues even before they engage in the comment section.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-content analysis design, combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis to examine readers' comments on Instagram news platforms during the 2023 Nigerian electioneering period. Content analysis was considered appropriate because it allows for systematic, replicable examination of textual data in digital environments, while thematic analysis enables deeper interpretation of

meanings and patterns within user-generated content. The study population comprised user comments on selected Instagram news pages, specifically *Pulse Nigeria*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *Punch Newspaper*. These platforms were purposively selected for their high audience engagement and relevance to political news dissemination in Nigeria. A purposive and systematic sampling technique was employed to extract comments on political news posts during the electioneering period. Only posts with high engagement (significant comment activity) were included to ensure analytical richness. In total, 879 comments constituted the final dataset. Inclusion criteria are: comments must relate directly to political content and be written in English or Nigerian Pidgin English. Emoji-only or irrelevant spam comments were excluded. The unit of analysis was the individual Instagram comment. Each comment was treated as a discrete communicative act and coded independently. A structured coding framework was developed in two stages: Deductive coding was guided by literature on political communication, sentiment analysis, and digital discourse, which informed predefined categories such as: Positive, Neutral, Negative (sentiment slant), Serious vs Unserious engagement. Inductive coding was used to allow additional themes to emerge naturally from the data, particularly in the qualitative phase. Emoji-only comments were excluded to ensure clear and reliable text-based analysis (while retaining emojis within contextual comments), duplicate posts were filtered during data cleaning, and deleted comments were unavoidably absent due to the time-bound nature of data collection, thereby preserving the study's overall validity and consistency.

Table 1

Distribution of Readers' Comments by Nature Across Instagram News Platforms

News Platform	Serious n (%)	Comments Unserious n (%)	Comments Total n (%)
<i>Pulse Nigeria</i>	51 (25.8%)	147 (74.2%)	198 (100%)
<i>Sahara Reporters</i>	22 (13.4%)	142 (86.6%)	164 (100%)
<i>Punch Newspaper</i>	70 (13.5%)	447 (86.5%)	517 (100%)
Total	143 (16.3%)	736 (83.7%)	879 (100%)

Authors' analysis of Instagram comments (2026)

Table 1 shows that readers' comments on topical political issues during the 2023 electioneering were predominantly unserious. Overall, 83.7% of the comments were categorised as unserious, while only 16.3% were serious. This pattern was consistent across the three platforms.

Unserious comments were largely characterised by humour, sarcasm, satire, exaggerated expressions, and the extensive use of emojis. Examples include:

1 "Lol, they will come from every angle, but we shall defeat them 🤪" (C400)

1 "abegabeg make una leave me" (C367)

1 "Group don finally find gist, Just dey play 🤪" (C93)

These comments trivialise political issues and reflect a playful or mocking engagement with political content rather than substantive debate.

In contrast, serious comments were fewer and demonstrated analytical reasoning, legal considerations, and concern for political outcomes. Examples include:

1 "I think the courts need to throw out this case. It has no grounds at all..." (C328)

1 "Let's be honest... Labour Party has no governor or chairman in most states..." (C80)

Such comments reflect rational engagement and critical evaluation of political realities.

Table 2

News Platform	Positive n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Negative n (%)	Total n (%)
<i>Pulse Nigeria</i>	66 (33.3%)	52 (26.3%)	80 (40.4%)	198 (100%)
<i>Sahara Reporters</i>	28 (17.1%)	66 (40.2%)	70 (42.7%)	164 (100%)
<i>Punch Newspaper</i>	154 (29.8%)	194 (37.5%)	169 (32.7%)	517 (100%)
Total	248 (28.2%)	312 (35.5%)	319 (36.3%)	879 (100%)

Authors' analysis of Instagram comments (2026)

Table 2 indicates that negative comments constituted the dominant slant (36.3%) across the platforms, followed by neutral (35.5%) and positive comments (28.6%). This suggests a general atmosphere of dissatisfaction and scepticism among online readers during the electioneering period.

Positive comments expressed support, optimism, and admiration toward political actors, particularly Peter Obi. Examples include:

1 *"I am Yoruba, and I support Peter Obi"* (C199)

1 *"Every indication is saying this man would win the election"* (C156)

Negative comments reflected criticism, dismissal, and distrust toward political actors and endorsements:

1 *"OBJ's endorsement is always bad luck"* (C109)

1 *"Waste of time, waste of endorsement... irrelevant"* (C11)

Table 3:

Thematic Distribution of Readers' Comments

Theme	Description (brief)
Endorsement for Peter Obi	Supportive political alignment
Criticism of APC/PDP	Negative evaluation of ruling parties
Political Cynicism	Distrust of political system
Ethnic/Religious Sentiments	Identity-based political expression
Civic Participation Calls	Encouragement for voting/PVC collection
Personal Attacks & Polarization	Insults and hostile discourse
Electoral Apathy	Disengagement from politics
Others	Miscellaneous expressions

Authors' analysis of Instagram comments (2026)

Thematic Analysis of Readers' Comments

The qualitative analysis revealed eight dominant themes:

Endorsement and Support for Peter Obi

Many commenters expressed admiration and strong support for Peter Obi, often framing him as a symbol of change and national redemption. These comments frequently employed religious metaphors, slogans, and emotive language.

Criticism of APC and PDP

A substantial number of comments criticised Nigeria's dominant political parties, highlighting corruption, poor governance, and failed leadership. These comments reflect public fatigue with traditional party politics.

Scepticism and Cynicism

Several readers expressed distrust in the electoral process and scepticism about political endorsements, particularly questioning the influence of former President Obasanjo.

Tribal and Regional Sentiments

Some comments reflected ethnic and regional identities, either emphasising national unity or reinforcing divisive rhetoric based on ethnic affiliation.

Ethnic and Religious Considerations

A small number of comments revealed how religion and ethnicity influence political perceptions, including debates around Christian and Muslim leadership and ethnic dominance.

Call for Civic Participation

Despite prevailing negativity, some commenters encouraged voter participation by urging citizens to obtain Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and actively engage in the electoral process.

Personal Attacks and Polarisation

A minority of comments contained insults and derogatory language directed at political figures or fellow commenters, reflecting heightened polarisation in online political discourse.

Electoral Apathy

Some comments reflected disengagement and loss of faith in the political system. Expressions of distrust, disillusionment with past leaders, socioeconomic hardship, and perceptions of institutional failure contributed to this sentiment.

Discussion Of Findings

Nature of Readers' Comments on Instagram News Platforms

Findings from the study indicate that readers' comments on political news during the 2023 electioneering period were overwhelmingly characterised by unserious forms of engagement, accounting for 83.7% of all analysed comments. These comments were predominantly expressed through humour, sarcasm, satire, and emotive digital expressions such as emojis, suggesting that political communication in Instagram comment spaces is often reframed as entertainment rather than deliberative discourse. In this context, humour and sarcasm function as cognitive shortcuts that allow users to express political opinion without engaging in deeper evaluative reasoning. This aligns with the concept of low-effort cognition, in which social media environments encourage rapid, affect-driven responses rather than structured political argumentation. This finding is consistent with Ortiz et al. (2017), who observed a similar dominance of humour and satire in online political engagement during electoral cycles, suggesting that digital political participation increasingly blends civic discourse with entertainment culture. In the Nigerian context, it further supports Jibril and Mohammed (2022), who argue that online political communication is largely shaped by emotional expression, identity signalling, and participatory humour rather than deliberative rationality.

Slant of Readers' Comments and Political Perception

The study also reveals that negative sentiment was the dominant orientation in readers' comments (36.3%), followed by neutral (35.5%) and positive (28.6%). This suggests that political discourse within the sampled Instagram platforms is largely characterised by dissatisfaction, distrust, and critical evaluation of political actors and institutions. Framing theory provides a useful explanatory framework for this outcome. Individuals do not

interpret political messages neutrally; rather, interpretation is filtered through frames pre conceived, socio-political context, and entrenched beliefs. In the Nigerian political environment, repeated exposure to perceived governance failures, electoral controversies, and unmet political promises appears to have shaped a predominantly sceptical interpretive lens. As a result, even neutral political information is often decoded through a negative perceptual framework. This finding aligns with Abubakar and Adamu (2022), who found that Nigerian online political communication is marked by high levels of cynicism and polarisation. It also corroborates Ajiboye (2013), who notes that audience responses to political communication are strongly influenced by ideological predispositions and prior political dissatisfaction.

Thematic Structure of Readers' Political Discourse

The thematic analysis revealed eight major patterns of discourse: endorsement of political actors, criticism of dominant parties, political cynicism, ethnic and religious framing, civic participation advocacy, personal attacks, and electoral apathy. These themes reflect the cognitive organisation of political meaning within digital environments. From a cognitive standpoint, users rely on existing mental schemas to interpret political information. For instance, support for Peter Obi is often associated with reconstructed cognitive schemas of leadership, reform, and national renewal, while criticisms of APC and PDP reflect entrenched negative schemas associated with corruption and governance failure. Furthermore, identity-based themes such as ethnicity and religion demonstrate the role of perceptual filtering, where political meaning is shaped by group affiliation rather than policy substance. This reinforces earlier studies, which highlight the persistence of identity politics in Nigerian digital political communication (Jibril & Mohammed, 2022). Importantly, the presence of electoral apathy and civic disengagement indicates not only dissatisfaction but also cognitive withdrawal from political participation.

Such disengagement can be interpreted as a response to repeated negative reinforcement, where individuals perceive political participation as ineffective or inconsequential.

Electoral Apathy and Cognitive Disengagement

A notable finding is the presence of electoral apathy, reflected in expressions of disillusionment, withdrawal from political participation, and distrust of electoral institutions. From a cognitive perspective, this represents a form of learned political helplessness, where repeated exposure to perceived systemic failure reduces motivation for civic engagement. Perceptually, political actors and institutions are framed as ineffective and untrustworthy, reinforcing disengagement. This supports Abubakar and Adamu (2022), who argue that sustained political disillusionment in Nigeria contributes to declining civic enthusiasm in online political environments. It also aligns with broader democratic participation literature, which links perceived inefficacy to reduced political participation.

Implications for Online Political Communication

Overall, the findings demonstrate that political communication on Instagram during electioneering periods is shaped by an interplay of frame, perceptual bias, and digital platform affordances. The dominance of unserious engagement, negative sentiment, and identity-driven discourse suggests that online political space's function more as hybrid spaces of entertainment, emotional expression, and political contestation than as deliberative arenas. Theoretically, the framing theory demonstrates that audience interpretation is central to understanding digital political communication. Political messages are not passively received; rather, they are actively reinterpreted, reframed, and redistributed through filters shaped by experience, ideology, and emotion. These findings contribute to ongoing scholarly debates on the transformation of the public sphere in the digital age,

particularly within developing democracies where political trust remains fragile and social media platforms increasingly mediate political engagement.

Conclusion

The study concludes that online readers' comments during Nigeria's 2023 electioneering period were overwhelmingly unserious in tone and mostly negative in slant. The occurrence of humour, sarcasm, and satire shows how audiences often processed political content as entertainment rather than serious discussion. At the same time, the domination of negative comments emphasises widespread scepticism and discontentment with political actors, institutions, and processes. These findings reveal that while social media platforms provide spaces for participatory engagement, they also amplify cynicism, division, and emotional expression over rational argument. Beyond the quantitative patterns, the thematic analysis offers deeper insights into Nigeria's digital political discourse. Support for Peter Obi, criticism of dominant parties, ethnic and religious sentiments, and signs of electoral apathy illustrate how cognitive and perceptual filters shape audience reception of political messages, the study shows that online discourse is not merely reactive but is structured by media frames, identity affiliations, and emotional framing. Ultimately, the research underscores the need for media organisations to treat readers' comments as valuable feedback mechanisms and to increase more constructive, issue-based political conversations in Nigeria's evolving digital public sphere.

Recommendations

1. Media organisations should pay closer attention to readers' comments as a form of feedback.
2. Strategies should be adopted to encourage more constructive political discourse online.

3. Efforts should be made to reduce electoral apathy and polarisation.

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